



# THE EVOLUTION OF FRENCH POLITICAL COMMUNICATION: REACHING THE LIMITS OF PROFESSIONALISATION?

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Today, professionalisation of French political communication seems like a *fait accompli*. Whether during electoral campaigns or while carrying out day-to-day government or local government public relations, modern French political communication seems to be as sophisticated as it is in most democratic countries. All the main French politicians are now expected to possess a high degree of awareness and mastery of political communication skills, and even the Mayor of the smallest French town has now changed its logo, hired a Public Relations Officer and is keen on publishing a monthly or quarterly magazine.

Roughly thirty years ago the average citizen first took notice of this phenomenon when Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, a rather bourgeois liberal politician, successfully ran the 1974 presidential race by posing with his two daughters on his campaign posters, and by playing the ever-so traditional accordion in front of the television cameras. Just seven years later no French citizen could ignore the fact that political communication advisor Jacques Séguéla had conceived a winning slogan 'La force tranquille' (the quiet strength), which ignited François Mitterrand's 1981 presidential winning streak and had been plastered on most of the huge double advertising billboards placed all along French roads and highways.

We will establish here that the presence on the front page of professionalised political communication did not happen in a day; it has subtly and thoroughly penetrated the

French public sphere. But we will then try and assess if the cycle has not now come to an end: some legal measures have been enforced in order to contain the excesses of modern communication, while, in some cases, political communication might be seen as one of the causes of the defeat of some politicians.

We will also notice that professionalised political communication has not limited its effects to elections only, but has had an influence on the whole French democratic system, and on its balance of power.

### **PROFESSIONALISATION OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION SINCE THE SIXTIES: FIGHTING FOR THE BEST POLITICAL MARKETING CONSULTANT...**

*From 'Mister X' to Valéry Giscard d'Estaing: the increasing presence of professionalised political communication*

Some have forgotten the first true appearance of modern 'professionalised' political marketing techniques in France: in September 1963, journalist Jean Ferniot started a teasing campaign in the weekly magazine *L'Express* intended to put in orbit socialist politician Gaston Deferre for the presidential election to come two years later. Titled 'Monsieur X... contre De Gaulle' (Mister X... against de Gaulle), the paper started to elaborate on which qualities a politician should possess to be the best candidate against General de Gaulle, the then incumbent President of the French Republic. From week to week the news magazine deliberately kept composing the portrait of an 'ideal' political leader, who was in the end disclosed as being Gaston Deferre, Mayor of Marseilles.

Ultimately Deferre did not run in 1965, leaving room for François Mitterrand, and, probably because there was no concrete presidential candidacy outcome from this 'teasing', the introduction of modern political marketing techniques has become more often associated with the good results obtained by Jean Lecanuet, a then unknown centrist politician. He had hired, as his main advisor, a promising marketing consultant, Michel Bongrand, who had spent several months in Joe Napolitano's staff in the United States learning the new rules of the game. For the first time in modern history, French voters were presented with the image of a 'smiling' politician on political posters, with such a Hollywood-like grin that Jean Lecanuet was immediately nicknamed 'dents blanches' (white teeth) by journalists and opponents alike!

At the time, since French radio and television were still a State monopoly, it had been ruled that politicians competing for an election could not buy advertising spots, or any other kind of televised show, but would be granted free airtime on an equal basis within 'official campaign programmes'. Again advised by Bongrand to strongly differentiate himself from De Gaulle, Lecanuet kept building the same kind of image with his first statement in these programmes. His opening words were 'I am Jean Lecanuet, I am an ordinary French citizen, not a hero', and so on, in a familiar tone never before employed by French politicians.

Of course Lecanuet did not make it, and De Gaulle was re-elected. But most politicians and journalists have credited his dynamic and professionalised campaign with the fact that De Gaulle was not immediately re-elected and had to endure a second round of voting.

Two years later, the final recognition of this thunderous arrival in France of professionals in political marketing and communication came from the Gaullists themselves, campaigning for the 1967 parliamentary elections. They hired none other than...the same Michel Bongrand! He successfully fulfilled his task and dutifully helped their party, the UNR, to win, notably against his former centrist customers. His most clever accomplishment was to get the endorsement, so to speak, of the image of the *Sower* which had been present on one side of French coins for decades: he included its drawing on the visuals of most of the campaign material.

The same appraisal of Jean Lecanuet's ability to surround himself with the best possible political communication professionals was made some years later. Denis Beaudoin, the communications specialist he had appointed at the head of his party's first communications cell, was later lured away and hired by Jacques Chirac to become the Head of Communications at the Paris town hall when the latter was elected Mayor of the French capital.

Public opinion polls also burst noisily on the French scene, thanks to the 1965 presidential election. While most of politicians and journalists had been assuming that De Gaulle would easily be re-elected in just one round of voting, the main pollsters bravely advocated that their figures, against all odds, were predicting a second round. When the real outcome came to match the polls, their credibility was established. This probably explains why French politicians have been so blindly trusting of pollsters ever since, as we'll see later.

Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, winning the 1974 presidential campaign, contributed further to establishing professionalised political marketing as the core element of victory. Giscard d'Estaing knew that he was hindered by his well-established image of a rather bourgeois Finance Minister – the one who collects taxes in the eyes of the average voter. So he tried to soften this impression by introducing personal details about his life in his campaign. In one of the main campaign posters, he was for instance presented as a charismatic father alongside his daughter, with his name only mentioned at the side and with no political slogan: quite a 'first' for a French politician. For the first ever televised 'decisive debate' in France, on May 10th, Giscard d'Estaing's media training had been so intensive that he was able to deliver effortlessly many superb quotes, which are still fresh in the memory of the viewers and admired by politicians<sup>1</sup>. Twenty five million viewers witnessed the ease of the president-to-be in contrast to his obviously ill-prepared opponent: François Mitterrand looked as if he was seeking shelter behind the piles of notes he kept consulting to support his answers.

*François Mitterrand's era: triumph of political communication techniques*

After the first attempts by Jean Lecanuet, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing was one of the first prominent French politicians to systematically organise his campaigns and his communication according to modern professionalised political marketing. For instance, when he became President, he was the first to establish a polling cell within the presidential administration, located in the Palais de l'Élysée itself, the residence of the French presidents. The cell was in charge of regularly supervising the image of the President in French media and of ordering surveys from the pollsters whenever necessary.

In the 1981 presidential election, when François Mitterrand was again running against Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, he had learned his lesson and he did not make the same mistake of underestimating professionalised political communication. He hired one of the best political marketing consultants at the time, Jacques Séguéla, a founder of one of the most well-known advertising agencies, RSCG. He trusted him so much that he agreed to dental surgery in order to erase the tip of his canines, which allegedly gave him the look of a vampire when he opened his mouth too widely...

No campaign ever followed more closely the rules of professionalised political communication than Mitterrand's 1981 victory. His main slogan, 'La Force Tranquille' (The quiet strength), had been devised by Séguéla who had astutely taken into account sociological research led by polling institute Cofremca: their thesis was that the 'wild' generation that had thrown pavement stones at policemen in 1968 had now transformed into established bourgeois spouses with kids, enriched, furthermore, by twenty years of money inflation which had considerably alleviated their bank debts. This astute positioning proved right. It was supported by hundreds of posters all around France: billboards showing Mitterrand in front of a 'typical' French village, where the local church bell tower was prominently displayed, in order to symbolically summon traditional French values to the aid of the socialist leader.

Similarly, this time, the 1981 'decisive' debate was much better prepared for by Mitterrand. Weeks ahead, he had sent his communication advisors, including veteran television director Serge Moatti, to meet Giscard d'Estaing's team in order to agree on an easier format, which would prevent any form of mutual interruption while the politicians were speaking. The cameras were also constrained into scrupulously shooting only the candidate who was speaking, without any insert of the face of his opponent. The show's director was not even allowed to change the live camera angle without the authorisation of the two candidates' own directors, who were sitting next to him in the control room! The two moderators, journalists Michèle Cotta and Jean Boissonnat, had also been chosen after agreement between the two teams. Comforted by these precautions, Mitterrand, for the first time, fared much better than Giscard, and the 'decisive' debate was one of the cornerstones of his presidential victory.

During the fourteen years of François Mitterrand's era, professionalisation of electoral campaigning was not an isolated phenomenon. As ruling President, he extensively used all the range of professionalised political communication, not only to help enforce his policy, but also, in a deliberate and systematic way, to build and sustain his image. In 1984, he was the first French President to permanently employ a political communication consultant, Jacques Pilhan, who guided even his most insignificant public appearance. In particular, within a year of being hired, Pilhan conceived for Mitterrand a memorable image-building televised show 'Ca nous interesse monsieur le Président' ('It's of interest to us, Mister President') where he had Mitterrand capitalising on the popularity of Yves Mourousi, one of the most popular television journalists and host at the time, in order to start rebuilding his image after the socialist party defeat in the 1986 parliamentary election. Here, Mitterrand was presented as knowing how youngsters really talk and what interested them, as a first step of a long-run image-building strategy intended to help his re-election in 1988 and to obliterate the fact that, by then, he would be much older than most of his probable opponents.

This professionalisation of the Presidential public relations and communication went down to every level of his administration. The 'official' communication office of the Government was also reorganised as a strong taskforce by communication theorist and professional Jean-Louis Missika, who considerably strengthened the status of the Service d'Information et de Diffusion du Premier Ministre (Information and Diffusion Office of the Prime Minister), now known as the Service d'information du Gouvernement (Government Information Service). Similarly, directors of communications started to become high-ranking officers within the Ministers' staff.

The final stroke of the professionalisation of political communication during Mitterrand's era paradoxically happened right after it had ended. Such was Jacques Pilhan's ability in advising Mitterrand that as soon as his long time adversary Jacques Chirac had been elected President, in 1995, Pilhan was surprisingly asked to join Chirac's staff. This caused turmoil, notably among the socialists, who felt betrayed by Pilhan, though in truth the latter had never been a socialist activist. Surprisingly, this unexpected combination worked very well, and Jacques Pilhan got along quite nicely with Chirac's main political communication advisor, his daughter, Claude. Pilhan effortlessly advised Chirac in the same way as he had Mitterrand, for instance placing him on television in December 1996 in front of journalists who did not normally cover politics in order to sustain his popularity. So, in a way, Jacques Chirac has followed the lead of his former old-time adversary with regard to his use of the whole range of the routines of professionalised political communication. This collaboration was only broken by the premature death of Jacques Pilhan in June 1998.

Such was the grip of political communication consultants during Mitterrand's era that, in a bold move, Jacques Séguéla started right after the 1981 campaign to boast in television interviews about his 'part' in the victory, and somehow presented himself as

winner of the campaign as much as Mitterrand himself. This public 'backstage' exposure of the political campaigns has been constant since that period, and the fact that François Mitterrand never uttered any reproach to Séguéla (at least publicly) and, on the contrary, hired him again for this re-election campaign in 1988, somehow tacitly granted the consultant a special status among his peers, and also in the eyes of the average citizen.

An indirect, but not negligible consequence of this public exposure of political marketing techniques was an increasing awareness of the consultants' methods and their influence on politicians, a phenomenon which probably caused some disillusionment among the average citizen by making them look like manipulated puppets on a string, so to speak.

At the beginning of the 1988 presidential run, this public exposure had become so common that the same Séguéla was repeatedly invited onto the main televised evening newscasts in order to explain what kind of campaign he had prepared for the re-election of the incumbent President. He was even asked by journalists to comment publicly on how he had devised his new gimmick, the slogan 'Génération Mitterrand' (Mitterrand's generation), in order to defuse any attack on Mitterrand based on his old age, in comparison with the other politicians running.

For the first time, the limitation on candidates' use of free airtime on the public service television channels was also relaxed. This allowed Mitterrand to introduce into official television campaign programmes short spots presenting in a few seconds the most well-known events in French History, thus making him appear as heir of the Nation's past.

### **THE PAST DECADE: REACHING THE LIMITS OF PROFESSIONALISATION?**

*The failure of legal limitations: the paradoxical influence of the 1990 law*

The rise of professionalised political marketing pushed electoral advertising expenses to an extremely high level during the 1988 campaign<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, the funding of most of the campaigns was not really transparent, to say the least. So journalists and judges alike started to take an interest in the sources and methods of this funding, which soon provoked a media campaign denouncing the excesses. Consequently, politicians devised the first law to regulate campaign expenditures in 1988, which was not very thorough, and, in short, was intended rather to protect them from jail, since it also introduced an automatic amnesty for any past offences committed by the politicians. Hence soon after, on January 15th 1990, there was a new, stricter law, which still rules French electoral campaigns. It extended the former prohibition of buying advertising spots on radio and television to all kinds of paid advertising and similar ways of communication during the three months before any important election. Only the fact that the Internet did not exist in France in 1990 prevented it from following the same fate: its French forerunner, Minitel, was no longer allowed.

This means that not only television or radio commercials, but also billboard advertising, adverts in newspapers and magazines, and direct marketing (mailing, phone marketing, etc.) are now strictly prohibited to politicians at the peak of electoral campaigns, forcing them to be content with 'old fashion' media, like meetings, leaflets, canvassing and so on.

The only direct access to audiovisual media left is the very short airtime given free to candidates or political parties on Public broadcast channels, and of course, to the final 'decisive debates'. Naturally, politicians' campaigns are also reported, under strict equal access rules during newscasts or political programmes according to the newsrooms' electoral coverage decisions, but journalists being, in France like elsewhere, inclined to follow the 'horse race' story line, this coverage is quite deficient, both on issues and contents, and on the 'smaller' candidates' campaigns. The situation even worsened recently for the 2004 regional and European elections, when the French Audiovisual Supervising Board, the Conseil Supérieur de l'Audiovisuel (CSA) took the unprecedented step of ruling out any appearance of politicians during the same three month period on any kind of programme except the newscasts or specific political programmes dedicated to the campaign. No Arsenio Hall anymore, so to speak, or his French counterpart, Michel Drucker, the ever pleasant talk-show host, for French politicians during the three months before election day...

Political marketing consultants and specialists immediately complained, and are still complaining, alleging limitations to freedom of speech caused by the new law. Fifteen years later, they are still trying to get rid of some of the limitations of this law, with some partial results coming from their persistent lobbying, but without changes to the main rules. For instance in 2004, they have managed to get a decision from the CSA granting some leeway in the preparation of the free time allocated on official television campaign programmes: for the first time, during that year's European parliamentary elections, the French audiovisual regulatory board allowed political parties to shoot any kind of spots they wanted for the free airtime given on the Public broadcast channels, where they were previously forced to limit themselves to the restricted technical means put at their disposal by the CSA.

But political marketing consultants did not really obtain any major change in the 1990 Law for a simple reason: while it has indeed influenced the operating ways of the campaigns, it has in fact increased the need for professionalisation of the campaigns, and therefore the need for their help. While limiting the range of media that political campaigns can now use, the application of the 1990 Law has led to more thorough and organised campaigns. It has even increased the level of professionalisation by forcing politicians to redesign their campaigns more thoroughly, in order to comply with the new Law.

In 1995 and 2002, two presidential campaigns have indeed unrolled with no real technical hassle (not counting a plethora of campaigns for parliamentary or local

government seats, for the European parliament, etc.). The only real hindrance has been to put a heavier load on the candidates themselves on a purely physical level. Instead of making a few limited appearances in a reduced number of mass meetings and getting a lot of television coverage, including talk-shows, they now have to canvass in their constituencies much more extensively than before: the only way now, to reach citizens directly, or indirectly through the newscasts that report these contacts. Of course, this means running around the whole of France for Presidential elections, a lesson Edouard Balladur, then incumbent Prime Minister, learned the hard way when his 1995 campaign sank in disarray because of the lack of meetings and canvassing.

Conversely, crowd pleasers like Jacques Chirac, who personally enjoys canvassing and shaking hands, have clearly benefited from the new law. But this leads to a much tighter campaign organisation: having the main politicians crossing France and speaking in two or three different towns a day means having a stronger than ever campaign manager or field coordinator. Speeches have to be written on time and to be punctually in the politicians' hands (or on their prompters) two or three times a day, with variations according to the time and place, or according to the kind of crowds expected. Previously, an appearance on a popular talk show demanded only a few specialists for some days of media training.

Another side effect of the new prohibitions coming from the 1990 law has been the increase of pressure on media and journalists by politicians and their press agents in order to obtain access to the regular newscasts, since here the law only requires an equal access under the supervision of the CSA. So public relations events, orchestrated by the candidate's campaign organisation in order to get media attention, have been purposely escalating in order to compete for the journalists' attention – another breakthrough for increased professionalisation in the candidates' public relations.

To give one example from the 2002 Presidential race: Lionel Jospin's campaign management, understanding at some point that he seemed to be lacking popular support, organised a huge meeting in Lille, a town in the North of France, inhabited for historical reasons by many socialist activists and sympathisers (it is the capital of a former mining region). Jospin's entrance into the meeting room was very carefully planned. Instead of going directly to the stage, he was shown in at the very far end of the meeting room, thus needing quite a lot of time to cross the floor. Those attending were very happy to be able to reach the socialist leader so easily and to shake his hand; so it took him nearly one hour to get to the stage through the crowd. The scene was effectively televised in the evening news by most of the journalists, duped by the so-called 'popularity' of the politician so evidently exposed... Here, a not so subtle trick of day to day political marketing fared well, not unlike what happened two years later in the United States when, to boost his popularity, John Kerry's campaign management begged him to drop his jacket during his meetings.



Another interesting consequence of the 1990 law was an increased need to recruit new party militants and activists on a more regular basis. Before its enforcement, direct marketing had rather loosened the link between parties and political activists and militants: the 'direct communication' between campaigning politicians and the citizen apparently established by modern media had by-passed them and had been discouraging them by making them somehow redundant. In contrast, the 1990 law, by forcing politicians to organise more meetings across their constituencies, has amplified the need to get the support of strong local networks of local militants able to greet campaigners, to bring sympathisers to the meetings, to help organise them and also to give clues of local specificities so that the politicians' speeches appear to address the needs of each particular audience. This has remotivated political activism and strengthened parties or politicians to try to benefit from a dense network of local supporters.

These attempts to revitalise the militant structures were even more obvious at the beginning of 2005 when three of the main political parties, the Socialist Party, the UDF (Union pour la Démocratie Française) and the UMP (Union pour un Mouvement Populaire) started a campaign to recruit a new kind of 'temporary' militant<sup>3</sup>. For the Socialist Party, the 'projects members' should be allowed to enroll without any previous screening by established militants cells, and even to do so online on the Socialist Party Website. They would just need to pay a symbolic flat fee instead of the high fee in proportion to income paid by the 'regular' party activists. But they will only be able to take part in the elaboration of the Socialist Party's new electoral programme, and won't be able to vote for the choice of the Socialist Party candidates in the future elections, for instance, unless they decide to become 'full' militants and are accepted as such. In the same way, the UMP plans to establish a new category of 'partner militants', exempt from dues, and only able to take part in the debates on issues and programmes. Finally, the UDF plans to stabilise some of its non-affiliated 'companions' by enrolling them, in a similar pattern, as 'associated militants'.

By increasing the number of public meetings, the 1990 Law has also forced politicians to return to a stricter application of the old method of the 'Unique Selling Proposition or Point' (USP) transposed from the marketing techniques: when all is said and done, the USP is the best way of maintaining a clear and strong image. Jacques Chirac's 1995 campaign, led by his daughter, Claude Chirac, has clearly demonstrated this. She devised a clever targeting of the left with a political programme mainly intended to reduce the so-called 'fracture sociale', (social breach) between rich and poor. It worked by being incessantly repeated to the crowds, as perfectly as Bill Clinton had done for his two campaigns' USP on economics.

*Lionel Jospin's unexpected 2002 debacle: too much professionalisation?*

While the Law had not really managed to constrain political communication, even if it was without any doubt influencing its ways, professionalisation probably came to find

its own limits in 2002. That year, the presidential race led to a surprise as great as the unexpected difficulties of re-election met by De Gaulle in 1965. The first round of voting eliminated the incumbent Socialist Prime Minister, Lionel Jospin, competing again, though he was thought to possess all the necessary skills and weapons to push incumbent opponent President Jacques Chirac into early retirement. What came as a shock was not only that Lionel Jospin could not make it to the second round of voting, but that in failing to do so he gave way to the far-right extremist leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen.

Lionel Jospin had put up a very sophisticated and professionalised campaign, even taking the time to think twice about the nickname of his campaign headquarters: instead of calling it the 'Headquarters', or any similar banal name, he had it baptised 'L'atelier de campagne' (The campaign workshop), a subtle effort to try and distance himself from the professional political marketing techniques he was paradoxically obeying in doing so.

More importantly, as soon as his campaign started, in his first interview during one of the main evening television newscasts, Jospin exposed an extremely bold target, which most probably put off more than one of his potential supporters on voting day. He made an unexpected statement: 'Le projet que je propose au pays n'est pas un projet socialiste' ('The project I am advocating for the country is not a socialist one'). In the following days of his campaign, he consequently outlined campaign issues that were quite far from what was expected of a socialist candidate: for instance, he insisted on the question of the personal security of the citizen, in the streets, in their home, or for their children at school, thus choosing to expose himself by trying to take his adversaries' field, but proving ill at ease with that choice<sup>4</sup>.

It seems that this targeting strategy had been mainly conceived by his main political campaigning advisor, the ever present Jacques Séguéla, with the help of his younger protégé, Stéphane Fouks, a new star in the political marketing business and at the helm of one of Séguéla's company subsidiaries, Euro-RSCG Public. They were thinking that Jospin, like Mitterrand in 1981, could only win the race if he could attract citizens inclined to vote for the centre or even for the right. This choice proved wrong: the targeted new social category of *Bourgeois Bohêmes* (Bohemian Bourgeois), now inhabiting the main towns, and notably the French capital (leading to the arrival of a socialist mayor at its helm for the first time), was clearly not in a majority in France. Also, this targeting might have fared better for the second round of the race, but was not suitable for an initial round, when citizens mainly cast their vote for the politician they most favour, before deciding in the second round which one is less distant from them, so to speak.

A confirmation of this mistake came two years later, with the local government and European parliamentary election results, which saw the Socialist Party regain its usual

results by a plain repositioning on the left side of the political chessboard. While the two far-left competitors of Jospin in 2002, Arlette Laguiller from Lutte Ouvrière (LO) and unknown newcomer Olivier Besancenot, from the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR), had managed to attract about 10% of the voters, an unusually high figure, and double their 'normal' result, they returned to the norm in 2004, leading once more to a socialist party in full power, even when still bereft of the former leader.

So the 2002 Jospin campaign, which was meant as a 'conquest campaign' as demonstrated in political marketing books, clearly misfired – probably because of mistaken field analysis. Not only did Jospin not convince his own to vote for him by denying his socialist past, but he had also failed to convince his new target. By not even defending his left wing mandate achievements at the start of the campaign, somehow Jospin appeared insincere – quite an image problem for someone whose posters were claiming that he would be 'a better President'.

These campaigning mistakes were obvious to the average citizen because a new phenomenon had appeared and clearly impeded Jospin. French media coverage is now more and more focused on the campaign itself. Somehow, the accomplishment of the professionalisation of the political communication process in France has been that campaigning and campaigning techniques by themselves have become news items, and, in particular, have benefited from a strong agenda effect during the 2002 campaign, thus immediately exposing the slightest mistake of the competing politicians – and here Jospin was a first-rate target because his targeting choice had put him on a wrong foot. This came as a logical consequence of the 'coming out' of political marketing consultants. Led by Jacques Séguéla's bold media exposure in the past two decades, it had been followed by most of his main competitors, who wrote numerous books based on the past campaigns, insisting on their 'part' in the election of the politicians they had been working for, and therefore increasing the public awareness of campaigning techniques.

In a way, Lionel Jospin had gone over the line by over-excessively professionalising his campaign: following too exclusively the precepts of well-organised political marketing techniques, he had lost his authenticity in the eyes of his potential voters, and therefore their support

*An excessive trust for the pollsters: professionals also make mistakes...*

A final factor that can be noticed about French political communication is the enormous confidence politicians and media alike are still giving to public opinion polls in spite of several severe mishaps. At least twice in recent years front runners have been severely beaten because of an ill-placed trust in public opinion polls, and this on-going blindness raises questions about their ability to work without a safety net.

The first case of an excessive trust in the public opinion polls occurred in 1997, when President Jacques Chirac decided with his then Prime Minister, Alain Juppé, to call a

parliamentary election for an anticipated date. His opponents from the socialist party easily led a winning coalition, which forced him to endure five years of near-passivity in front of his new oppositional Prime Minister, Lionel Jospin. As it happens, the February (1997) polls results had been so favourable towards Jacques Chirac that he assumed that this support would remain constant for the next three months and thus was prepared to wait for the anticipated election date. This deadly mistake cost the job of the polling company director, Jérôme Jaffré. This appears extremely over-confident, especially since it is now a well-known fact that undecided voters are making their decisions later and later, sometimes even at the last moment as they enter the polling stations.

Another recurrent problem of French pollsters is the constant underestimation of the results of far-right politicians, and notably those of the notorious leader of the Front National, Jean-Marie Le Pen. Compared to countries where only two or three main parties exist, and thus encompass the majority of the votes, France has always had a variety of smaller parties, and also of parties representing the whole range of the political spectrum, from the communists and the Trotskyites to the far-right. As a consequence, many French citizens, and notably those who are close to the 'extremes', do not publicise their political beliefs, and even deliberately lie, even when questioned by pollsters guaranteeing anonymity. Two decades ago, when the National Front and other extreme parties were hardly getting any votes, this phenomenon did not matter. But since the mid-eighties, Jean-Marie Le Pen and his party have been regularly getting between 12% to 15% of the votes, even 17% in 2002<sup>5</sup>. This means that, during the past twenty years, pollsters have been forced to 'manually' modify their own results in trying to assess how many 'wrong' answers during the surveys had been given by people who would then vote for the far right. Even with these empirical corrections, the number of untruthful answers is still usually underestimated, probably because pollsters do not dare to over correct the figures they obtain.

In spite of this knowledge, in 2002, Lionel Jospin and his team trusted the poll results as much as Jacques Chirac had wrongly done in 1997. Since the polls' results had been similar for many months before the start of the campaign, clearly showing himself and Jacques Chirac holding the two top positions for the first round, Jospin and his team never thought that it could be otherwise, and thus never really took proper notice of their 'minor' first round opponents, nor their two competing far-left neighbours, Arlette Laguillet and Olivier Besancenot, nor the National Front leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen. This made a pathway for Le Pen, as we now know. It must be noted here that the danger had been correctly spotted by a few people in the final weeks of the campaign, notably by Jospin's main public opinion polls specialist, advisor Gérard le Gall, who was discourteously dismissed by the candidate himself and by his team<sup>6</sup>. If Jospin's campaigning team had listened to these warnings and not given preference to the pollsters, they may have realised the urgent need for a strong communication 'blitz' in the closing weeks of the first round in order to change its outcome. Most of the

'professional' communicators advising Jospin had made a lethal mistake, 'wishful thinking' so to speak, in believing the polls that satisfied them.

### **CONCLUSION: DIRECT AND INDIRECT EFFECTS OF PROFESSIONALISATION OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION**

Some say that when General de Gaulle was extensively using BBC airwaves during the Second World War to enunciate that the Free French would once more proudly brandish the French flag on French soil, he was already and spontaneously the utmost political communicator. To come back to a less heroic use of media by politicians, we can clearly conclude that French Political Communication has without any doubt taken its toll on French Politics since the mid-sixties – as in many similar democracies – following more or less willingly the American role model of the use of modern media.

The French variation has probably been owed to the lesser amount of technical freedom allowed by law to political communication professionals. But these regulations have, paradoxically, even increased the role of the political communication advisors, whose help is even more needed by campaigning politicians. The 1990 law, which was trying to limit the excesses of modern media use by banning paid advertising during the three last months of the campaigns, pushed professionalisation in the same way, since the campaigns had then to be led more rigorously than ever.

But the danger of putting too much trust in professionalised political communication ways and means is two-fold and has been clearly seen in the recent years in France.

First, since modern 'marketed' campaigns have been trying to reach the undecided or non 'politicised' voters, or their opponents 'fragile' supporters, political campaigning advisors have asked candidates to 'depoliticise' their communication in order to reach them. The resulting insistence on personality instead of issue positioning, for instance evidenced by appearance on non-political television shows, or by a public exposure of mundane family activities and private life, has led to a significant loss of symbolic strength for political life which can be linked to the decrease of participation. Here, one cannot help thinking about the wrong example given by Adlai Stevenson unnecessarily exposing himself in a 1956 advertising television spot – he was shown coming back from a shopping mall with huge paper shopping bags and trying to keep his composure...

Secondly, professionalism can also fail, especially in France where public opinion polls are less and less dependable – due to the extreme versatility of French voters, tempted by the presence of a wider range of political parties than in many other democracies. Campaigns are more often lost than won: 'Beware of helping professionals', perhaps.

Lionel Jospin was then a double victim of professionalisation failures in 2002, while Jacques Chirac, a victim in the 1997 parliamentary elections, won two consecutive

Presidential elections, in 1995 and 2002, thanks to very thorough campaigns led by the best possible professional one could get: a daughter, able to carve the utmost personally-designed campaign thanks to her extensive knowledge of her father-politician and by her easy access to him.

As a final remark, we should note that these changes in political communication and campaigning have had effects other than their direct consequences on election results. They have indirectly considerably influenced the whole French political system and modified the balance of power towards a considerable increase, in many respects, of the President's role.

Already the keystone of the French democratic system, the presidential election has given a greater influence to the elected presidents. By inducing a stronger and stronger personalisation of politics in the election process, the professionalisation of political communication has considerably strengthened them, not only in regards to their losing opponents, but also in relation to their own fellow party members. Political parties have been considerably weakened; they are now in some way 'anonymous' in the media to the eyes of the voters since they have no tangible existence in regards to the faces and words of the politicians who dominate and represent them. Therefore, they have quite clearly lost a lot of their ideological input value and are more and more used only as tools to achieve better election results.

The clear proof of this first effect is the way that the past two French presidents have been able to build their parties into very efficient electoral machines without much opposition. The socialist party was never as well disciplined as during the Mitterrand's era, and the RPR was very clearly assembled since its foundation in 1976 by Jacques Chirac to help him achieve his goal of becoming president. More recently, in taking control of the UMP, the party which succeeded the RPR, former economy and finance Minister Nicolas Sarkozy is following the same path.

This personal ascent of politicians who can endorse the ways and means of modern professionalised political communication has not been limited to a power struggle between those politicians and their parties. It has given an unheard of prominence in policy making to the elected Presidents, whose constitutional powers had already been strengthened by the 1958 Constitution of the 5th Republic. Ironically, this phenomenon has never been as obvious as during François Mitterrand's era. The same politician who had rejected the Constitution of the 5th Republic and called it a 'Coup d'Etat permanent' (A permanent Coup) in his famous book published right before the 1965 presidential election, has moulded himself quite easily in the seat of a quasi royal figure, changing Prime Ministers as he wished, and imposing most of his whims, without any opposition, thanks to the aura given to him by his two presidential victories. The loss of the 1986 parliamentary elections was not even enough to stop him playing a prominent role in French politics during the so-called 'cohabitation'. Similarly, Prime

Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin's rather long stay at the helm of the French Government, despite an extremely low popularity rating in the polls, has clearly shown that only the will of President Jacques Chirac kept him in the job, another proof of the very strong grip on the whole political system given to French Presidents by the professionalisation of political communication.

In a way, when De Gaulle had devised the Constitution of the 5th Republic to strengthen the President, he had probably not imagined that the professionalisation of political communication was later going to give a much more definite support to his ideas. It does not only single out the President in regards to political parties, which was De Gaulle's plan, but also allows him to enforce his policies with little opposition... unless, of course, his supporters lose the parliamentary elections. But the recent constitutional change that links parliamentary and presidential mandates makes this option now less likely.

## NOTES

1. His 'Monsieur Mitterrand, vous n'avez pas le monopole du Coeur' (Mister Mitterrand, you do not have a monopoly on the heart) is still vivid for that generation of French voters
2. Mitterrand's 'official' spending came to 99 million francs, and Jacques Chirac 95 million, but experts estimate both their campaigns to have cost about five times more if the hidden costs are included – whether by choice of hiding some expenses or just in adding the militants' work costs, invisible 'gifts to the cause', and so on.
3. in *Le Monde*, January 23–24, 2005
4. He even admitted once during an interview that he had not properly dealt with personal security issues while at the helm of Government, and probably had been too 'naïve' in thinking that solving the unemployment problem would also improve the citizen's personal security...
5. This latter relative rise in percentage was mainly caused by the rise of abstentions for the first round of the 2002 presidential election: Le Pen had only convinced about 233.000 more voters than for the 1995 election, but the participation decrease made him climb from 15% to 16.86% of the expressed votes.
6. A television crew was allowed to follow the Jospin campaign from within, so everyone has been able to see Gérard Le Gall brutally – and wrongly! – reprimanded in one of the campaign's management meetings by the Socialist Party Parliamentary Group Leader, Jean-Marc Ayrault (Maarek, 2004a).

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