

Report from Paris by Laurent Rosenfeld

Destroying the Fifth Republic

The new election system announced on April 3 shows Mitterrand cutting off his nose to spite his face.

The French Socialist government of François Mitterrand decided on April 3 to change France's polling system for the legislative elections. Sure of losing the next elections by a wide margin, the government has done worse than simply decide to change the rules in order to try to save what could be saved. Rather than losing power to the adversary parties, it has preferred to destroy the very base of power; for fear that the winning opposition might undo what the Socialists have done (or, rather, re-do what the Socialists have undone), they have preferred to make the next government impotent; rather than letting the opposition seize the government, they have preferred to make the country ungovernable.

To understand what the reform means, one should first know how the previous system, set up by Charles de Gaulle, worked. The French polling system was based on the division of the country into about 450 voting districts, each sending one deputy to the National Assembly. To keep small parties from spoiling the results, the polling system had two rounds. An absolute majority in the polling district was necessary in the first round. In the second round, only those two or three candidates who were ahead in the first round could run, and the first one was elected.

This polling system tends to amplify the political trends, by favoring the winner. Suppose that a party got in the second round an absolutely even 55% in all polling districts—it would

take all the seats in the National Assembly. This was the basis for the rather sound political stability of France in the last 25 years, since the winning parties were usually not forced to make complicated deals with fringe parties to form a cabinet, as is the case in the highly unstable regimes of countries like Italy, Belgium, Israel, or France in the Fourth Republic, before de Gaulle's reform in 1958.

In the new system, the parties will run slates in each of the 95 departments, and the number of seats will be proportional to the number of votes. The Socialist Party claims that this proportional representation system will be fairer. But is it fair to change the rules just before an election in order not to lose? Is it fair to use the absolute majority that the Socialists have in the Assembly thanks to the previous system (they only got 37% of the votes) in order to prevent those who will win from getting a majority? But that, still, is a relatively minor issue, in essence not very different from the almost traditional gerrymandering of polling districts to get more seats.

It is ironic to note that the new system will allow the extreme right-wing and racist National Front (Front National) of Jean-Marie Le Pen to receive anywhere from 60 to 100 seats in the Assembly.

The bad thing about the new polling system is that it will quite naturally cause a return to Fourth Republic politics, on two counts: political instability and the "regime of the parties." President Franklin D. Roosevelt once

told de Gaulle (in 1944) that, before the war, the French government fell so often that he sometimes could not remember the name of the French premier. President Reagan and his successors might well have the same problem, insofar as cabinet stability will depend on complicated alliances and endless bargainings, in which no global policy can be firmly established.

Last but not least, this system deprives the voter of the chance to punish MPs who have acted contrary to the voters' will, and, also deprives the deputy from individual decision on important matters. In the case of elections, the deputies at the top of the large parties' slates are automatically sure of being reelected. In other words, it will be the party machines, and not the constituency, which will determine who is elected and who is not. The voters might determine *how many seats* one specific party gets, but not *who gets elected*. By the same token, the party machines will be able to impose "party discipline" in the votes of the Assembly, because those who would dare not to follow the instructions of the party will simply not be at the top of the slate at the next election. In that sense, this polling mode is strongly anti-republican (most other European countries with a proportional system at least keep a "preferential vote" giving the voters a chance to choose individuals and not simply parties).

The Socialists' absolute majority in the Assembly (once more, thanks to the former polling system) should allow the reform to go through smoothly, despite an almost total rejection of this in the population. However, there are a lot of Socialist deputies who are against this reform, including the Socialist Party number three, Jean Poperen, and Agriculture Minister Michel Rocard, who decided to resign his portfolio.