

**OPINION POLLING IN FRANCE AT
THE END OF THE '80S**

**By Michel Brulé and
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The 1980s saw a spectacular growth of polling in France, to the point where observers don't hesitate to call France the world recordholder in this field. Over the past decade, the number of public opinion surveys conducted for the national press in France doubled, from 373 in 1980 to 714 in 1989, according to *The French Review of Polling*. How can this huge increase be explained?

First, by the shift in political power. The election of François Mitterrand as president in May 1981, following 23 years of governments of the Right under the successive presidencies of Charles DeGaulle, Georges Pompidou and Valéry Giscard D'Estaing, sent shockwaves through public opinion and the media alike. This contributed to an immediate 50 percent rise in opinion polls from 1980 to 1981 alone. The abrupt break with the past, signified by the socialists coming to power—with their slogan "change life"—contributed to this veritable polling epidemic, with much of the work designed to determine the extent to which the French people gave their blessings to the call for change.

This accounts for the great upsurge in France at the beginning of the '80s. The appetite for polling didn't fall off a bit, however, as France acclimated itself to the big shift symbolized by Mitterrand's election. Since 1982, the number of polls taken annually has never dropped below 500 and has instead gradually moved upward, to more than 700 in 1989. Part of the reason for this seems to be that interest in the competition of the Right and Left remained keen, spurred especially by the legislative elections of March 1986—when the Right regained a majority in the National Assembly—and the presidential election of May 1988, which saw Mitterrand re-elected. So it was heightened political interest, centered around who would win in hotly contested elections, that legitimized the work of the survey firms. People really wanted to know how the competition was going.

This general legitimization of their work, based on survey firms' records in national elections, has had some less attractive consequences. A certain number of the public polls have proved of

little value so far as advancing political understanding is concerned. This is a direct consequence of a decision by certain of the media to view polling largely as a means of generating publicity.

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Other problems involve methodology. During the last elections for the European parliament in June 1989, pre-election surveys generated all kinds of controversy. It focused on a series of methodological difficulties, involving an inability to measure vote intentions very precisely. Certain characteristics of the European elections heightened these problems.

Difficulty In Predicting Voter Turnout

Levels of turnout are, of course, a major factor in election surveys — especially critical in an election like that for the European parliament, where in France only 50 percent of those eligible actually turned out. American polling organizations have always confronted problems of estimating the vote distribution in a low-turnout environment, but it's a new situation for France. Many French citizens were just not very interested in the European elections, whose implications never appeared very clear. In addition, the low turnout was prompted by the unusually large number of elections — ten in all — that France had had since April 1988, the date of the last presidential balloting. Again, this is an old story for Americans. When you have a lot of elections, no one of them seems as big a deal, hence turnout drops, hence greater difficulties for pollsters in trying to determine who among their respondents will actually vote.

**Trying to Measure the Potential Strength of
New Political Forces**

In 1984, during that year's European elections, French survey organizations had trouble estimating what vote totals the extreme Right (the National Front, led by Jean-Marie Le Pen) would achieve. This particular formation had no track record. Le Pen's extremely weak performance in 1981 in the first round of the presidential election—when he got less than 1 percent of the vote—simply gave no indication of how various groups might respond in 1984, when the National Front had obviously gained strength.

Polls Abroad-Brulé and Giacometti-continued

The position of the extreme Right presented fewer difficulties in 1989. But new problems were presented as to the electoral potential of the centrist group led by Simone Veil and to a lesser degree that of the environmental movement. In neither case did we have a good basis for assessing how their strength might actually hold up. The electoral effects of splits in the French Right and the development of the environmental movement are among the main challenges facing French polling.

Electoral Fluidity

High degrees of indecision on how to vote, which we at BVA probed in various pre-election surveys, reveal the extreme fluidity which distinguishes the contemporary French electoral environment. The extent of the potential for volatility was underscored by the fact of many of these undecided voters said they were certain that they were going to vote—they just weren't sure for whom.

With the exception of the Communist party and the National Front, the four principal groups in 1989 (the socialists, centrists, liberals, and environmentalists) emphasized consensual themes in their campaign appeals. Their common commitment to European integration didn't accentuate old cleavages or mobilize old loyalties. The more the base on which past differences was weakened, the greater were the risks that one would see almost random shifts in vote intentions showing up in the polls. Thus a greatly changed political landscape contributed to electoral volatility. The polls were at once the first witnesses and the first "victims" of this fluidity, something new to France.

Other Spurs to Polling

Along with the strong interest in the new electoral politics, the emergence of new issues contributed to the growth of polls. Among them: immigration and the prejudice it spurred; the drug problem; heightened environmental concerns; crime and personal security; and education.

For the 1980s as a whole, questions of international relations were not the subject of very much polling attention. During the last two years, however, we saw a sharp rise in interest in this area—especially in the growing debate over European integration after 1992, and in the upheavals throughout Eastern Europe that began last fall. A weekly poll that BVA conducts for the television network TF1 has since last October asked respondents what events of the past week they consider the

most important. Weeks when international events didn't get top billing have been rare. This return in full force of international issues and concerns cuts into the primacy of domestic issues, which had been dominant since the economic crisis that followed upon the oil "shocks" of the 1970s.

Polling and the Press

The great frequency of polls over the past decade has made journalists quite conversant with and supportive of poll taking. A survey taken by *The French Review of Polling* of print journalists and those who work for radio and television shows that a majority of them think that polls are valid and a useful instrument in news reporting. At the same time, French journalists are conscious of variations in the quality of work among the various polling firms, probably basing their judgments on how accurate the respective election surveys are. Media professionals don't think the upsurge in polling amounts to overkill. A large majority of those surveyed by *The French Review of Polling* want the journalistic use of polls to be maintained at its present high level.

One big surprise in the survey of French journalists: A large majority of them say they want to *maintain* the 1977 law which bars the publication of surveys in the week preceding the vote. Two journalists out of every three believe that publication of late results could sway voters — seemingly not realizing that the same thing could be said about their articles and insensitive to the implications of this reasoning for press censorship.

This law doesn't block *conducting* polls just before an election, only *publishing* their results. It creates, then, two classes of citizens: Those who have the right to follow electoral shifts right up to the vote — a group that includes politicians, journalists, and the leaders of business corporations — and everyone else, who are denied access. The legislation in effect provides for a considerable body of last-minute polls which circulate undercover, creating among those with access to them the sense of belonging to a "happy few." We regret that some professionals have declared themselves in favor of maintaining their special access to "segregated knowledge."

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