

Here's Looking At You

Jill Forbes reports from Paris on the attention-seeking tactics of the presidential contenders.

France goes to the polls on April 24 and May 8 to elect a president who will be in office until 1995. Only three of the many candidates are judged electable: a Socialist (most probably Francois Mitterrand or, failing him, Michel Rocard), Raymond Barre, candidate of the centre-Right UDF, and Jacques Chirac, presently prime minister and candidate of the Gaullist RPR. However, the campaign appears to turn so much on the presence or absence of Francois Mitterrand that the political differences between these three parties have been temporarily expunged and the campaign personalised to a degree unprecedented in France.

The Socialist U-turn of 1983, the election of the Right to a parliamentary majority in 1986, forcing the president to 'cohabit' with a prime minister of opposing views, the collapse of the Communist vote (currently under 10% of the electorate) and the simultaneous rise of the extreme Right (Jean-Marie Le Pen looks set to gain 11% of the vote in the first round of the presidential), have all pushed candidates inexorably towards the centre, incidentally confirming ex-president Giscard's dictum that this is where France 'wants to be governed'.

In addition, none of the three main candidates can or would wish to lay claim to the record of the last two years. While Barre mutters 'I told you so' from the sidelines, Mitterrand and Chirac cultivate a united front on foreign policy issues such as Europe, Nato and the Soviet Union, and conveniently neglect to draw attention to serious domestic issues such as unemployment, which continues to rise.

In 1981 it was clear that the French were electing a Socialist as president; if Mit-



Mitterrand: Still a potent force

terrand is returned in 1988 it will be the man rather than the party that has triumphed. Two years of cohabitation have modified the role of the president in such a way that he is now expected to *be* rather than to *do* - hence a preoccupation, as never before, with image, *le look* as it is known in French.

One can learn a lot about national values by looking at election posters. Mitterrand is now 71 years old. Other countries have had unfortunate experiences with elderly heads of state in recent times and I would have expected the French electorate to think twice before returning a pensioner for another seven years. The president's age and health are never explicitly referred to but they are certainly a sub-text in his media campaign, '*generation Mitterrand*', which is built around an adult hand stretching out to grasp that of a baby. This poster connotes not simply continuity and fecundity but also, more subtly, the tradition of the *roi thaumaturge*, the king as miracle-worker - a role in which Napoleon famously had himself painted. Whatever his age, it is implied, Mitterrand is still potent.

This conveniently locks into

Voting Intentions, Presidential Ballot First Round (%)	
Lajoinie (communist)	6.5
Juquin (independent communist)	2.5
Mitterrand (socialist)	35.5
Barre (conservative)	19
Chirac (Gaullist)	23
Le Pen (National Front)	11

Source: Paris Match, B VA poll 5 March 1988

a second tradition, which began as a joke and has since been embraced by the interested party, that of Mitterrand as '*ton-ton*', or 'uncle', a kind of benevolent national patriarch presiding over the great family of France. This happy marriage of genealogical perennality and geriatric masculinity is always a winner here: for every St Just and every Napoleon who was a general before he was 30 there is a De Gaulle and, above all, a Petain. Is this because, though the population in general is ageing, there remain in France a disproportionate number of elderly women?

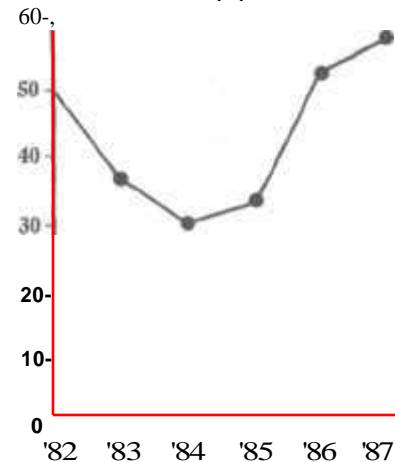
Chirac too is after the women's vote. He had the reputation of a gauleiter and a carpetbagger of whom it was unkindly said that he 'discovered Gaullism by counting the seats in the National Assembly'. But now that a recent study has shown that there is indeed a women's vote in France but, contrary to beliefs, it is not conservative, Jacques has turned seducer. His posters have a superfluous simplicity: 'Courage, strength, passion, that's Chirac' they proclaim while the man himself, his youthfulness signified by an open-necked Lacoste shirt, looks out with a smirk and, as one commentator put it, 'a touch of the Rudolph Valentino in his eyes'. Naturally, it all depends on the beholder.

Even so, it is impossible not to find Chirac more appealing than Raymond Barre who must be the living proof that you don't have to look good to succeed in politics. Correctly relying on the electorate to forget that as Giscard's last prime minister he was the architect of a huge rise in both unemployment and inflation, Barre makes his pitch as a man who 'speaks the truth, however unpalatable, and whose 'authenticity' brooks no distortion by the media which he holds in sovereign contempt. This did not prevent him appearing on tv in a tweed jacket and flowered tie which ill became his years and his physique but which, in their very absurdity, may have endeared him to a few floating voters. Chirac attends rock concerts and kisses Madonna to prove his youthful appeal; Barre is so much of a throw-

back - even his slogan ('confidence') recalls the early days of the fifth republic - that he makes Mitterrand look up to date.

Mitterrand has never been so popular and all the opinion polls show that he will win comfortably, whoever confronts him in the second round. The question is therefore less who wins than what happens next. For the '*ton-ton*' phenomenon disguises and postpones considerable political fragmentation. For

The Fall And Rise Of President Mitterrand 1982-87 (%)



example, what will happen to the PCF whose miserably reduced vote is being contested by two candidates, the official Andre Lajoinie and the renovator Pierre Juquin? How many working-class Communists, worried by the immigration and unemployment that obstinately refuse to surface as election issues, will secretly vote Le Pen? Will Chirac, if elected, do a deal with the National Front? And what would happen to the Socialist Party itself if Mitterrand, assuming Barre were his opponent in the second round, appointed a centrist prime minister?

In a world where appearances matter more than reality, the French are reluctant to explode the patriarchal myth - in curious contrast to Britain where the electorate, metaphorically, indulges in the exquisite masochism of being flayed by a strong woman. Another of Mitterrand's nicknames - a somewhat ill-judged reference to France's nuclear energy programme - is 'super phoenix'. We shall see.