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The French Electoral Panel 2002

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The 2002 elections in France have been a unique occasion to study the French voter in a dynamic perspective. With two elections (presidential and legislative) in a few weeks sequence of time, the analysis of the dynamics of political choice and voting was requiring a special design. Two research teams (the CEVIPOF in Paris and the CIDSP in Grenoble) and a private political expertise agency (the CECOP) have joined their efforts to conduce the biggest electoral study ever done in France, the Panel électoral français 2002 (the “PEF 2002”). With a support from the Ministère de l’Intérieur and the Fondation nationale des Sciences Politiques, the PEF 2002 is a three waves panel study of the French voter in the context of the 2002 campaigns and elections. The overall sample of the French electorate is more than 10 000 individuals from which 1822 have been interviewed two times and 1413 three times. The paper presents an overview of this unique study.

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Most Western democracies provide public funding for regular electoral surveys or panels conducted after each national election, an essential tool to understand electoral behavior trends, voting turn-out, electoral volatility and party dealignment and realignment. There are the National Election Studies in the US, the British National Studies in the UK, the General election Studies in Belgium (Flemish and francophone), etc. However, it is not the case in France. Since the beginning of the Fifth Republic, the academic community managed to promote only four national surveys meeting international scientific standards (large-scale samples representative of the electoral population, a lengthy theory-driven questionnaire, control of data collection, etc.), in 1978 and 1997 (parliamentary elections), and 1988 and 1995 (presidential election). Unfortunately, no study was conducted after the decisive elections of 1981, which brought the Left in office after 23 years of right wing government, nor in

the 1986 elections, which ended the Left's *état de grâce*, and 1993 when it was severely defeated. This is why a group of scholars from CEVIPOF (Centre for Studies of French Political life — Paris, director Pascal Perrineau), CIDSP (Centre for Computerized Socio-political Databases — Grenoble, director Bruno Cautrès), and CECOP (Centre for Studies and Knowledge on Public Opinion, director Jérôme Jaffré), with the assistance of the FNSP (Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, scientific director Gérard Grunberg), attempted to raise funds for starting a regular electoral study in France in 2002 and convinced the Ministry of the Interior to support the project. The context was particularly interesting because there were two elections — presidential and parliamentary — taking place after an exceptionally long period of cohabitation (5 years).

A research committee was set up, associating French specialists of electoral sociology and also foreign experts such as André Blais (Canada), who contributed to the funding of the project, and Hermann Schmitt (Germany). A total of 20 people worked together for 6 months with regular Intranet communications and periodical meetings in Grenoble (CIDSP) and in Paris (CEVIPOF). It came to the following decisions:

- a panel study in three waves, to profit from the opportunity to study electoral change in the four rounds of the 2002 elections, with a large post-electoral survey (wave 2) to compare with the previous French post-electoral surveys (1978, 1988, 1995, 1997).
- quota sampling (by age, gender and occupation of head of household, region and size of city) because of the difficulties to implement a reliable random sample, giving special attention to the level of education of respondents and previous occupation of retired or unemployed respondents.
- a mix of face-to-face (first wave) and telephone (the two others) interviews to lower the costs.

After a public bid (*'appel d'offres'*) addressed to the main polling institutes, with a very detailed description of the methodology required, SOFRES was selected.

The first wave was a 35-min CAPI questionnaire, interviews conducted before the first round of the presidential election, by face-to-face interviews, from 8 April to 20 April, with 4,107 people representative of the French registered population (actually two samples of 2,000, one each week). In all, 55% gave a written agreement to be reinterviewed.

The second wave was a CATI 35-min questionnaire, interviews conducted over the phone, after the second round of the presidential election, between 15 and 31 May, with a national sample of 4,017 people, among which 1,822 panellists were already interviewed in the first wave (183 refusals, 8%).

The third wave was a CATI 20-min questionnaire, interviews conducted over the phone after the second round of the parliamentary election, 20–28 June, on a sample of 2,013 people, among which 1,417 panellists were already interviewed in the two first waves (50 refused, 5%).

On the whole, there were 10,137 interviews, with 6,898 people, 1,417 interviewed three times and 1,822 two times. They form an exceptional database that will provide clues to understand the spectacular electoral upheavals that occurred in France between April and June 2002. First results were presented to the press on 11 July: CEVIPOF, CIDSP, CECOP, 'Premiers résultats. Panel électoral français 2002', July 2002, available on the SOFRES website: http://www.sofres.com/etudes/pol/120702_elections_n.htm. The data should be available to the scientific community at CIDSP in July 2003.

Publications based on the 'PEF 2002' data

Mayer, N. (2002) *Ces Français qui votent Le Pen*, Paris: Flammarion.

Perrineau, P. and Ysmal, C. (eds.) (2003) *Le vote de tous les refus*, Paris: Presses de la FNSP.

Cautrès, B. and Mayer, N. (eds.) (forthcoming) *Le vote recomposé*.