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France: Institutional Change Under the Socialists



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A Research Paper

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May 1985

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A Research Paper

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European Analysis. Comments and queries are
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France: Institutional Change Under The Socialists

Key Judgments

*Information available
as of 1 April 1985
was used in this report.*

French Socialists have failed to carry out the sweeping institutional reforms that they promised when they won a massive presidential and legislative mandate in 1981. They have nationalized some industries, but other changes fall far short of revolutionizing basic French institutions—most of all government. Some attempts to change the system have failed; some have been severely watered down; others have merely continued policies begun under former President Giscard and even de Gaulle:

- President Mitterrand has devolved significant powers and responsibilities from the state-appointed prefects to local councils; much of the potential for greater local autonomy implicit in his reforms, however, remains unrealized for want of tax resources to back them up. We believe that budgetary constraints will prevent Mitterrand from following through in this area.
- Partisan maneuvering and the inertia of tradition have undermined announced Socialist intentions to free French television and radio from government control. Mitterrand's attempt to break up press trusts, moreover, miscarried when many leftists realized that the proposed laws endangered their own media interests.
- Socialist plans to reshape French education also have either languished or misfired; most important, massive public protests and opposition even within leftist ranks forced Mitterrand to retreat from efforts to secularize private schools—an emotion-charged and longstanding leftist goal.

In our view, French Socialists are unlikely to attempt further significant institutional reforms. Most leftists appear more interested in fine-tuning the modest changes already made—especially in the economy—in order to improve their record of success in time for the 1986 legislative elections and the 1988 presidential contest. The Socialists have already had a go at most of the reforms on their agenda, and those remaining would be controversial enough to distract the government's attention from bread-and-butter issues that Mitterrand knows will determine the outcome of the elections. Socialists are proposing a change in the national electoral system, but partisan calculations appear to have limited their efforts in this direction. The changes that Mitterrand recently proposed will probably not disrupt the stability of the political system as much as his opponents have speculated and will not improve significantly the prospects for the French Communist Party, Mitterrand's rival for votes on the left.

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Although conservatives stand a good chance of winning the legislative elections next year, we believe that they will back down on most of their threats to roll back the limited reforms the Socialists have enacted. Widespread public acceptance of government direction of the economy and the dearth of potential buyers for ailing national companies will, in our view, limit denationalizations. Other Socialist innovations, like decentralization, have built on the policies of centrist and conservative administrations and are popular even with rightwing voters.

Socialist exposure to the realities of government is likely to benefit the United States to the degree that it has forced the French left to jettison shopworn ideology and to adopt a more pragmatic attitude toward the problems of governing and management. In our view, the sobering impact of these failed attempts at institutional reform, together with the early economic failures, has pushed France's non-Communist left toward the center of the political spectrum and has discredited extremist rhetoric within Socialist ranks. This greater sense of moderation and realism may have positive repercussions, especially on France's sometimes difficult bilateral relations with the United States.

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France: Institutional Change Under the Socialists



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Introduction

French Socialists rolled to power in 1981 on a wave of promises to enact sweeping and fundamental institutional changes in French society. Long years in the political wilderness during the Fourth Republic and the Gaullist era had prompted them to devise a program of institutional reform that promised to give ordinary people greater control over government (*autogestion*). Many of the Socialists' proposals—such as secularization of education—sprang directly from long Socialist and Republican traditions; others derived from the decade-old Common Program that the Socialists had negotiated with the Communist Party (PCF) in 1972. A few were invented during the 1981 election campaign and reflected the personal predilections of Francois Mitterrand, the first Socialist president of postwar France. One month after Mitterrand ousted the centrists and Gaullists from the Elysee, National Assembly elections gave Socialists a legislative mandate to enact their ambitions.

This analysis focuses on four categories of institutional reform that figured prominently in Socialist plans and promises prior to the 1981 elections—decentralization, media, education, and the electoral and constitutional system. It examines the extent of some of the most important changes that they have made thus far, assesses prospects for further changes before the left faces crucial legislative elections in 1986 and the presidential contest in 1988, and speculates on how lasting the changes will be.

Socialist Promises

The French presidential election of May 1981 stimulated an unusual amount of debate, evoking numerous promises from both sides about the future of French society. Mitterrand and the Socialists shaped the election debate around a carefully prepared leftist agenda for change, forcing President Giscard d'Estaing to speak to these issues. Although Mitterrand

Socialist Nationalizations^a

The new Mitterrand government moved quickly to negotiate nationalization agreements with arms and steel companies in the fall of 1981 and secured legislation to absorb five major industrial groups, two financial holding companies, and several banks by early 1982. It also pushed through negotiations to take over French subsidiaries of ITT and Honeywell. By mid-1982, the government had doubled its share of the industrial sector to about 30 percent and well above this mark in such key industries as nonferrous metals (66 percent, compared with a previous 16 percent), chemicals (52 percent, up from 16 percent), and electronics (42 percent from less than 5 percent).



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The government also took over three cooperative and 36 private banks, and assumed the minority shares of three seminationalized banks (Credit Lyonnais, Banque Nationale de Paris, and Societe Generale)—bringing more than 90 percent of French banking under direct government ownership. Remaining private-sector domestic and foreign banks account for only 3.2 percent of deposits and 7.4 percent of loans.



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Socialists also passed legislation establishing worker councils in each factory. Although the councils are only advisory, companies must consult them on important matters such as reductions in the work force of various plants



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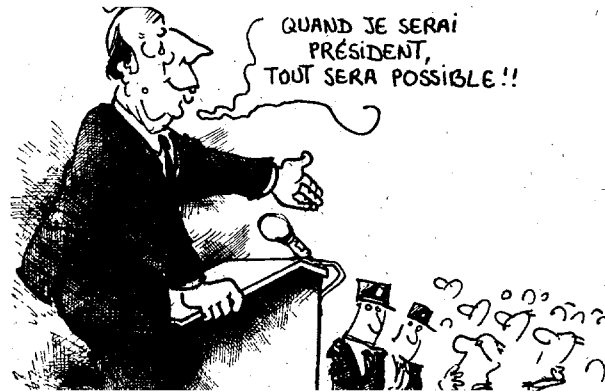
himself seldom spoke in specifics, party tracts concentrated on defining a detailed program for reforming France—especially its institutions.¹ Mitterrand succeeded in making “change” the focus of the election and in stirring enthusiasm—even among centrist voters—for the reforms his party promised. [redacted]

In their campaign for the legislative election one month later, Socialists called for a complete mandate to fulfill the popular desire for change implicit in Mitterrand’s victory. In both campaigns the Socialists promised to:

- Nationalize basic industries and introduce an unprecedented degree of worker participation in management.
- Decentralize government by transferring substantial power and fiscal resources to regional and departmental governments.
- Secularize the educational system, while opening admissions to all institutions—especially the universities and the professional training schools (*grandes ecoles*) that are favored recruiting grounds for government and commercial elites.
- Decentralize the media, opening the door to privately owned local radio stations and enforce the law against press conglomerates.
- Reform the political system to ensure greater voter control, largely by reducing the presidential term from seven to five years and by introducing a proportional voting system [redacted]

In assuming office, Mitterrand quickly set about nationalizing firms and implementing other elements of the Common Program adopted by the leftist coalition. Partisan rhetoric on both sides reinforced the impression that the Socialists really were out to change the institutional fabric of French life. Socialists, moreover, characteristically laced their post-election promises with extremist language: they condemned “collaboration” with “class enemies”;

¹ Two campaign documents recited virtually the entire litany of changes from the Socialist tradition: the party’s *Socialist Plan for France in the Eighties* (1980) and Mitterrand’s *110 Propositions for France* (1980). [redacted]



“When I’m President, everything will be possible.” [redacted]

Historic Centralization

France has been a highly centralized state since the mid-17th century, when Cardinal Richelieu—and, after him, Mazarin and Louis XIV—broke the power of the regional nobility and installed royal agents to supervise municipal and provincial governments. Successive regimes refined this administrative structure, and after the Revolution of 1789—which actually furthered centralization—Napoleon decreed the administrative apparatus based on prefects that France largely retains today. [redacted]

Municipal and regional councils of France’s 96 metropolitan departments are governed directly from Paris through a system of administrative guardianship. Prefects—civil servants of the Ministry of Interior—not only supervise the affairs of popularly elected local assemblies, but also have complete responsibility for maintaining public order and enforcing laws in their departments. Prefects and their staff supervise the financial affairs of local governments, whose budgets are submitted for Paris’s approval before they are considered in councils, and in recent years have provided badly needed technical-administrative expertise to local government. [redacted]

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respected voices within the party called not simply for social reforms but for “destroying” the existing oppressive institutions; others talked about “heads rolling.” [redacted]

Decentralization: The First Priority

Mitterrand made decentralization the first order of business of the new Parliament, declaring that France needed “a decentralized authority in order to preserve itself.” His determination to decentralize was partly a response to the frustrations of Socialist mayors and other local leaders who had often complained of being stymied by national governments. Decentralization also had resonance with the electorate, since opinion polls suggested that a solid majority of Frenchmen agree that France had become over centralized. Finally, it was also ideological; many Socialists in the 1970s developed the conviction that, whether in the factory or in politics, Socialism ought to push for greater self-management—more local control over local affairs. [redacted]

Blueprint for Change

The *loi Defferre*—named after Gaston Defferre, the powerful Socialist mayor of Marseille whom Mitterrand appointed to head the significantly renamed Ministry of Interior *and* Decentralization—was the first of nine laws and 50 decentralizing decrees enacted after the legislative election in 1981. Together they have partially dismantled the highly centralized administrative structure of the French state—a system of scrutiny and direction from Paris, popularly called *la tutelle*, that the French had accepted for over 200 years as a given of their political system. [redacted]

In essence, decentralization *a la* Mitterrand devolved power from the departmental and regional prefects to the local councils. It transformed prefects into more benign “Commissioners of the Republic” and designated them coordinators between Paris and the more powerful local entities. Commissioners also doubled as representatives of the government’s interests in the regional assemblies. Executive decisionmaking powers



Gaston Defferre, Former Minister of Interior and Decentralization. [redacted]

were transferred to the presidents of regional assemblies and to mayors. Without restructuring local government, the decentralization legislation:

- Expanded substantially areas of self-management enjoyed by municipalities, departments, and regions. Municipalities, for example, now have control over urbanization; they can issue building permits and devise their own comprehensive zoning and development plans. Regions, on the other hand, have gained greater budgetary oversight and some control over regional universities.
- Redirected lines of authority, giving the departments control over some communal affairs and giving regional assemblies some oversight of both. Departments, for example, gained important control over distribution of government block grants to municipalities.
- Made elections to regional assemblies direct and introduced a measure of proportional representation into communal elections (for cities with a population of over 5,000). Other measures restricted concurrent officeholding from a maximum of five to three offices.
- Refined the system of revenue sharing between Paris and local governments, most importantly by expanding the types of local projects for which shared funds are allocated and by increasing the allocations for some categories of projects. [redacted]

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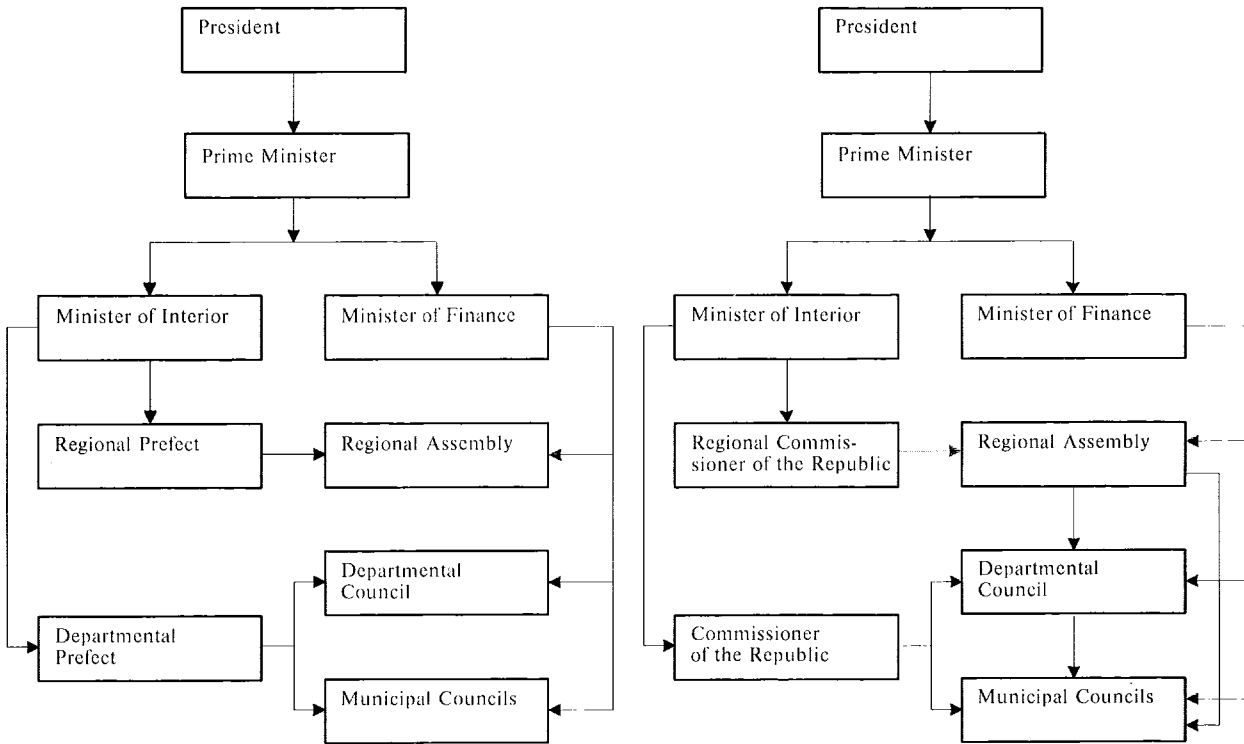
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Figure 1
French Administrative Structure

- Direct control of all functions
- Direct control of some functions
- No formal control (represents)

Before Socialist Decentralization

After Socialist Decentralization



[Redacted]

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Although the departmental Commissioners retained authority over local police and military affairs, the legislation generally freed municipal governments from a priori prefectural "tutelage" and, most important, gave local executives more authority over spending revenues earmarked for local use. [Redacted]

Tradition and Redtape
As is so often the case in France, however, laws alone do not provide a clear picture of what is really happening. Numerous press and US Embassy reports

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have pointed out that the Socialist experiment in decentralization is less revolutionary than it at first appears:

- The government has been forced to backtrack on some intended reforms.
- Other reforms do not represent dramatic change over past practice.
- Some reforms, moreover, have been severely watered down in practice. [redacted]

The most significant example of backtracking is the controversial and aborted effort to reform Parisian government. According to a wide variety of press reports, the Socialists intended to redistribute local power from the office of the mayor, where it was traditionally concentrated, to the city's district (*arrondissement*) councils. Popular Paris Mayor Jacques Chirac charged partisan politics and orchestrated so much local and national opposition that Mitterrand decided to shelve the proposal—which, in any case, would have enhanced the local power of the right.

[redacted]

Nor were the much-vaunted reforms in the prefectural system revolutionary. Although prefects certainly had more *potential* power in the past, they seldom used it as heavily as the reforms implied. According to local political officials cited in both the press and academic studies (based on the opinions of both rightist and leftist politicians), moreover, the new Commissioners do about the same things they did as prefects. *Le Monde* suggested early in the decentralization crusade that the prefects had been made "to disappear in order to better reappear." Numerous local officials in the Norman department of the Calvados—an industrialized area with several large towns and generally leftist governments—recently confirmed this view to academic interviewers.² [redacted]

Most tellingly, the Socialists have hesitated to turn over sufficient revenues to make the increased authority of local governments real, at least according to statements by many local officials. The Mitterrand

² "I can assure you," said the longtime mayor of an important Norman city, "that Caen has not suffered from the *tutelle* as long as I have been mayor. We have been able to do what we want. The only time the Prefect ever vetoed one of our projects came when we wanted to expand a building that would have destroyed the view from his private quarters." [redacted]

government has tried to hold down tax increases, while boosting nationally administered programs—such as military modernization, job retraining, and industrial research and development. This has meant that Paris has had to hang on to revenues that might have been turned over to local governments. Meanwhile, locally controlled sources of revenue remain as limited as under previous governments and shared revenues from Paris have lagged behind the transfer of responsibilities and functions. [redacted]

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Several additional features of the fiscal administration also call the radical character of the Socialist reforms into question:

- In the first place, the Socialists have merely followed through or expanded on the system of block grants that was planned and partly implemented by Giscard.³
- Government tax policies, meanwhile, have reduced locally designated and controlled sources of revenues, while increases in national taxes of various kinds have made it difficult for local governments to do the same. In particular, the government declared a 2-percent reduction in the professional license fee—which is the most important source of local revenue.
- Some officials also complain that the economic crisis—widely blamed on Paris—has further reduced the revenues for the professional license fee. [redacted]

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In replacing the bilateral relationship between local officials and Paris with a more complicated mix of relationships among four levels of government, moreover, the reformers have sown some confusion in intergovernmental relations, according to numerous press reports. Regional, departmental, and municipal authorities once had only to worry about their relations with Paris. Now, although they must still concern themselves primarily with managing relations

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³ It was under Giscard, moreover, that substantial central revenues were first redistributed, and that an equalization fund was introduced within the grant system to redress inequalities between the way municipalities are taxed and the way block grants are allocated. [redacted]

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with the central government ministries, they must also deal much more with each other. For example, the control and responsibilities that Paris alone once exercised over local planning and budgeting are now shared at least in part by both departmental and regional authorities, as well as by local councils themselves. Decrees that devolved power to local entities have left it to them to work out how best to cooperate in exercising them. The various levels will certainly take years to settle into a new balance of relations, and not without considerable push and tug.

[redacted]

A Significant First Step

Although the Socialists' record of decentralization is clearly not as revolutionary as it seems at first glance, Mitterrand has made some significant strides—initiating changes that almost certainly portend more than they have so far accomplished.⁴ By taking on powerful foes at both the local and national levels, Mitterrand has at least won support for the principle of decentralization, a battle that previous governments hesitated to fight. According to US Consulate reports, at a recent opposition-dominated meeting of regional assembly presidents, “no one contested the concept or desirability of decentralization.” [redacted]

The Media: Ending Government Dominance?

Having long considered themselves the victims of heavyhanded Gaullist manipulation of the state-controlled media, Socialists routinely punctuated party rallies and congresses with calls for radical reorganization and decentralization of television and radio. Over the years, Socialist Party militants demanded guaranteed leftist access, especially to managerial and programing responsibilities, and called for dismantling the government boards that supervise management appointments in the state-owned media companies.⁵ [redacted]

⁴ Two recent studies of decentralization both emphasize this point. See Gerard Belorgey, *La France decentralisee* (Paris : 1984), and a case study of Bordeaux, *Les pouvoirs locaux a l'epreuve de la decentralisation* (Paris : 1983), directed by Albert Mabilian. [redacted]

⁵ Early in his presidency, Giscard, too, had vowed to make radio and television independent of government. In 1974 he broke up the Gaullist media conglomerate known as the Office de Radiodiffusion Television Francaise (ORTF), substituting in its place seven media companies. These included three television networks that were supposed to be competitors. However, the functions assigned to each—one, for example, was required to carry large numbers of regionally oriented programs—soon modified direct competition. [redacted]

Mitterrand on Reforming the Media

Television and radio will be decentralized and pluralist. Local radio stations will be able to establish themselves freely as a public service. Their framework of activities will be established by the local authorities. A national audiovisual council will be created, with the representatives of the state in the minority. Creative activities will be encouraged. The rights of citizen-band broadcasters will be recognized.

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The independence of the French Press Agency vis-a-vis the State will be guaranteed.

All censoring of information . . . will be forbidden.

From *110 Propositions for France* (1980) [redacted]

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We do not want a purge, but nonetheless a certain number of command controls have to be held by men and women whose views correspond with those of the majority of the country. We must ensure the policies desired by that majority, which we are putting into practice, are really implemented.

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From a speech (September, 1981) [redacted]

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Freeing Television and Radio

In the presidential campaign, Mitterrand said specifically that his administration would make a priority of eliminating government domination of broadcasting media and breaking up the private press monopolies—reforms that together would almost certainly have led to a major restructuring of French media. As president, Mitterrand named a blue-ribbon committee—headed by Pierre Moinot, the former head of ORTF—to devise changes in French broadcasting. The Moinot Report eventually recommended creating a 60-member, nonpartisan “assembly”—drawn largely from business, the professions, and the arts—to supervise broadcasting management and to insulate it thoroughly from government interference. It also advised numerous other changes that one academic study characterized as amounting to “a complete reorganization of French broadcasting.” [redacted]

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Mitterrand's Man at Antenne 2

Jean-Claude Heberle replaced the independent-minded Pierre Desgraupes in December 1984 at the head of France's popular network, Antenne 2. Heberle gained powerful allies among Socialists by producing a friendly documentary about then opposition leader Mitterrand. His appointment, which was widely reported to be the result of strong government pressure on the Audiovisual High Authority, placed all three networks in the hands of government sympathizers.

Heberle has recently come under fire because of two, apparently forced, resignations at A2. First, longtime news director Albert du Roy quit to join the cable network, CANAL PLUS, amid speculation that political differences with Heberle figured prominently in his decision. Next, Christine Ockrent—popular anchorwoman of A2's top-rated evening news—resigned recently, fueling even more speculation that du Roy had been forced out for partisan reasons. Ockrent departed in such a swirl of accusations and intimations of political pressure that Heberle at one point threatened to sue her.

The independent leftist daily Liberation speculated recently that the Heberle shakeups reflected Mitterrand's displeasure with the independence of the A2 news team. Other informed observers have seen in them the opening salvos of a possible government effort to bring the network news more into its camp before the crucial elections in 1986 and 1988.

In the meantime, however, Socialists acted with partisan zeal worthy of their rightist predecessors to bring the broadcasting media under greater leftist control. Mitterrand and his ministers persuaded media company managers to resign and, with one or two exceptions, placed reliable Socialists at the helms. They also appointed Socialists to programing and management positions and ensured that leftist journalists found positions in the networks. Correct political or union credentials, rather than experience or competence, were often the basis for hiring or firing, according to the US Embassy in Paris. Jean-Claude Heberle, a close friend of Mitterrand, and Herve

Bourges, a Socialist militant described by one respected journal as an ardent supporter of UNESCO's repressive "new world information order," now head the two most important television networks. Under pressure from their junior partners in the leftist coalition, Socialists also named Communists to journalistic and management positions in television and radio and appointed a Communist to a new Audiovisual High Authority established as an intermediate board between ministers and management. The new High Authority, however, is strictly partisan in composition and, in any case, has little power to shield management from government or even to enforce its own demands.⁶

Despite partisan appointments and ineffectual attempts to insulate the audiovisual media from government influence, the Socialists have not intervened as blatantly or as often as their predecessors in broadcasting affairs. For example, according to academic studies, Giscard and Michel Poniatowski, his Interior Minister, intervened directly and on numerous occasions in the appointments of news personnel in the three networks. Mitterrand has also carried through legislation formally abolishing the government's audiovisual monopoly and in doing this has presided over two important innovations that probably presage a revolutionary change in French broadcasting:

- The Socialists have legalized and tried to police the behavior of the pirate radio stations that Giscard struggled unsuccessfully to close. Over 1,000 privately owned radio stations are now licensed, according to press reports (see map).

- The left has also permitted the privately owned, but strictly regulated, cable television service that was planned under the Giscard administration. Although the new network is in private hands, the state-owned publicity agency HAVAS owns 42 percent of it, and its president is a longtime Mitterrand

⁶ Mitterrand did establish a 56-member National Audiovisual Council, composed along lines suggested by the Moinot Report, but it has the right only to "consult" the High Authority.

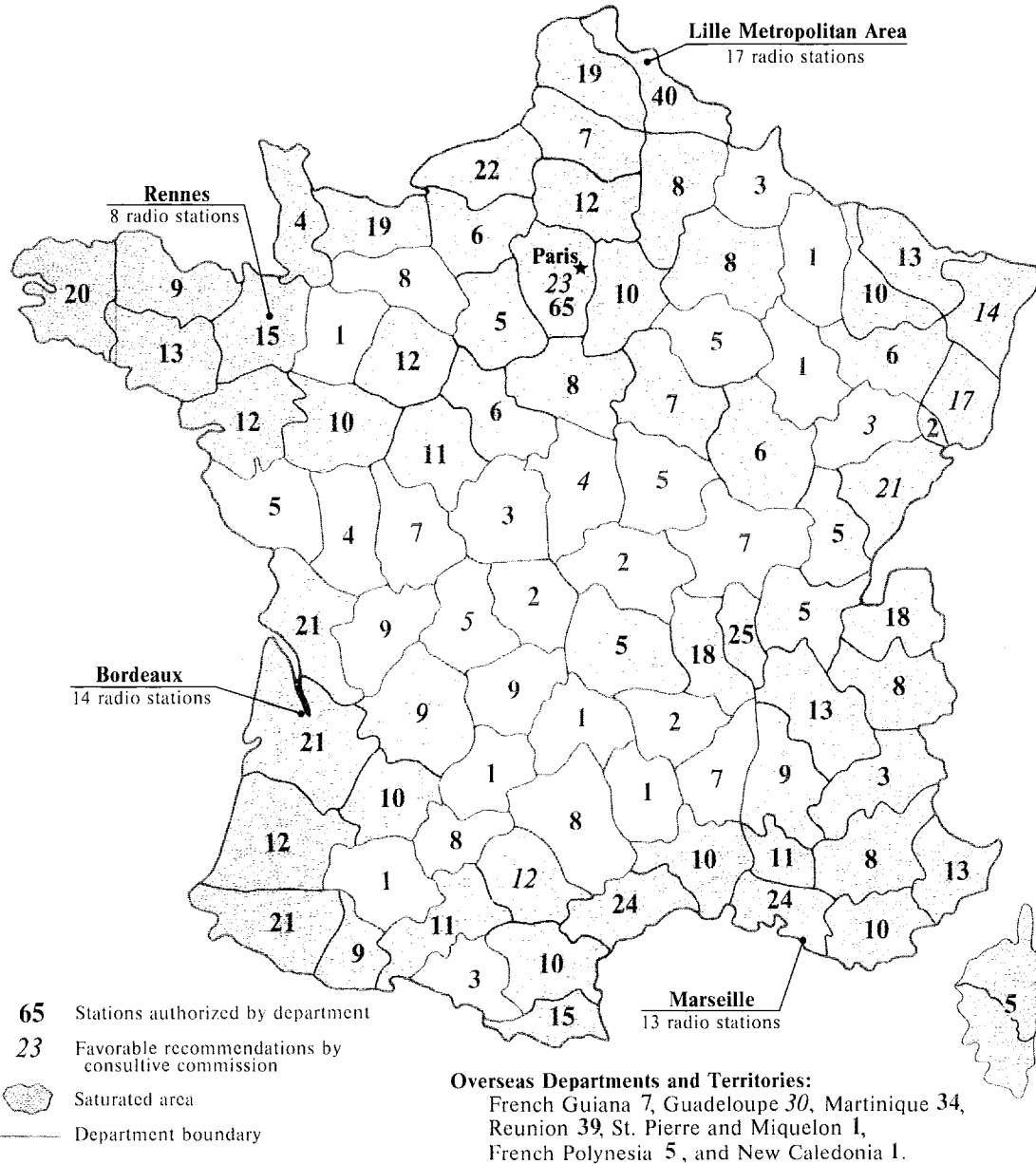
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Figure 2
Proliferation of Private Radio Stations in France



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supporter. Moreover, government officials have announced publicly that CANAL PLUS, as the new network is called, will be France's only cable network and have forbidden any advertising. [redacted]

These changes, however, resulted more from the government's decision to come to terms with technological innovations that were beyond its control than from Socialist desires to free the media. [redacted]

Newspaper Trustbusting

Despite preelection pledges, it was two full years after the leftist victory before Mitterrand offered legislation to enforce the 1944 statute against press monopolies. The bill he proposed—requiring individuals and groups owning more than one national daily to divest and precluding ownership of both national and regional dailies—was clearly aimed at Robert Hersant, rightwing press baron and Socialist *bete noir*. Hersant's three national and 15 regional dailies had attacked Socialist policies and Mitterrand personally with such verve and gusto that it came as no surprise when he led the conservative charge against the bill, accusing the government of partisan motives and anti-press bias. [redacted]

Debate on the bill made it obvious even to the left that the legislation threatened other miniempires—especially that of the French Communist Party,⁷ which was then junior partner in the leftist coalition government. The press bill emerged from 170 hours of brutal debate laden with over 2,000 crippling amendments. Opponents quickly dragged its limp carcass before France's supreme court, where it was mercifully euthanized as unconstitutional. No one, including the left, has mourned its passing. Hersant celebrated the victory by declaring publicly that the right would dismantle government control of the broadcasting media after its victory in the 1986 legislative elections. [redacted]

⁷ Various press reports have recently maintained that the cable network is in financial trouble, and this could result in pressure on the government to permit advertising. On a related matter, Prime Minister Fabius has promised a government report this spring on the advisability of privately owned TV stations. [redacted]

⁸ The PCF now owns only one national daily, *L'Humanite*, but it still controls several regional dailies, a national weekly, national magazines, a publicity agency, and several publishing houses—including one specializing in children's books. France's Communist-controlled General Confederation of Labor (CGT) also publishes a national daily. [redacted]



Robert Hersant, Conservative Press Baron. Speaking to the three rightwing presidential hopefuls—Giscard, Barre, and Chirac—Hersant announced recently, "I offer the Elysee to [the one] who will offer me [free] French television." [redacted]

Education: An Old Crusade

Since the Revolution of 1789, education has steadily replaced family as the key to elite status in France. Socialists set on reshaping French institutions have long since turned their reforming zeal to education, for the most part intoning variations on the theme that French education is exclusive rather than inclusive. In opposition, the left often charged that the essential problem of French education was restricted access to higher education, especially to the great training schools (*grandes ecoles*) for the French administrative elite. They promised to "open the schools." [redacted]

The Socialists also focused on secularization of the school system.⁹ Important sections of the leftist constituency, notably the Socialist-affiliated National Federation of Teachers, criticized the persistence of a private school system (mostly operated by the Catholic Church) that receives government financial aid but nevertheless remains insulated in most ways from direct government control. [redacted]

⁹ In France, educational reform is historically a synonym for attacking the power of the Catholic Church in education. For almost 200 years, such reform has been a constant in the political repertoire of the anticlerical French left, and in this century it has been generally accepted by a large segment of the center-right. Although secularization of education has advanced slowly, it has remained an emotion-charged issue. Conservative governments of the Fifth Republic have been content with a contractual relationship that has insulated private schools from most direct control by government. [redacted]

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Higher Education

Socialist attempts since 1981 to enact a number of reforms in the universities and training schools have met stiff resistance:

- They pushed through legislation opening professional schools and universities to more applicants—despite fierce opposition from university presidents, medical students (who rioted), and practicing physicians—and required more technical and career-oriented courses in the first two years of undergraduate study.
- Socialists also promised to make it easier for talented applicants from the working class to get into the *grandes ecoles*. They focused preselection criticism especially on the prestigious National School of Administration (ENA), which supplies top administrators to the French bureaucracy, and decreed new regulations opening admissions to qualified union officials and other professionals with 10 years of work experience in certain fields. It seems clear, however, that ENA graduates in positions of influence—some of them Socialists—have successfully shielded their alma mater from these reforms. Even under Communist Minister of Civil Service Anicet LePors, neither ENA nor any of the other *grandes ecoles* has admitted large numbers of nontraditional applicants.
- Socialists have managed to turn over to the regional assemblies some authority over the universities, as part of the government's decentralization program. So far, however, ministerial control from Paris still dwarfs this enhanced regional authority.

Some leftist critics maintain that the government's tinkering has overlooked the very reforms that are most needed. Socialist intellectuals such as Alain Touraine have recently argued that abolition of ministerial control over higher education would create "free universities" capable of forming new and more productive links to regional industry. Mitterrand himself has pointed to the relatively decentralized university system in the United States, in which institutions are free to form relationships with industry, as a model that France should consider. Thus far, however, he has done little to encourage such a trend.

Secularization Versus "Ecole Libre"

Socialist efforts to reform elementary and secondary education were halting and spectacularly unsuccessful. Inspired largely by the powerful influence of teachers unions within the Socialist Party, the Mitterrand government undertook a significant renovation of the government's relationship with private schools. Legislation introduced by Education Minister Savary would have brought private schools almost entirely under government control and, most important to the unions, would have integrated parochial school teachers into the state civil service where they would have had to join unions.

Savary's reforms, however, provoked a massive protest among parents and teachers in private schools who, with the organizational help of the Catholic Church and under the banner of "free school," turned out crowds of almost 1 million protesters in each of several French cities. Faced with extensive demonstrations, dwindling support even in the Socialist Party, and indications that the opposition was capitalizing on the "free school" issue, Mitterrand decided to compromise. After withdrawing the bill and replacing Savary in a government shakeup, he negotiated a face-saving settlement with opponents that amounted to almost no change at all.

Electoral and Constitutional Changes

Before the 1981 elections, Socialists also promised substantial changes in the French Constitution and electoral system, but so far Mitterrand has actually done little to alter either. In 1980, for example, he vowed to amend the Constitution to reduce the presidential term from seven to five years and to pass legislation implementing a proportional voting system in national elections. After their victories, however, few Socialists were willing to discuss reform of the presidential term. Meanwhile, a closer look at the possible implications of proportional representation has reportedly left many Socialist politicians worried

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Key Provisions of the Savary Law

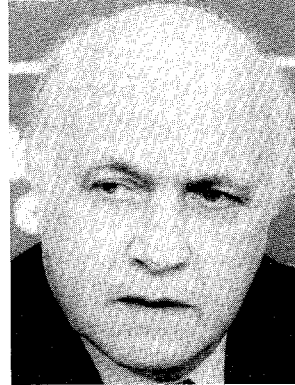
1. In all private schools that chose to accept public funding, lay teachers would be incorporated into the civil service, as is now the case with public school teachers. Clergy, who are very much in the minority, would continue to teach under contract.

2. Private schools would be included in the carte scolaire—the overall local zoning plan for the creation and location of schools.

3. Participating private schools, to be renamed “public interest establishments,” would be run by administrative councils representing the state and the local government, as well as the sponsoring association, (the Catholic Church, in most cases), which would remain owner of the buildings.

4. Families would be allowed to choose freely among all schools in their area, subject to review by a committee of school principals, teachers, and parents.

5. Each school would be allowed to select a particular focus, be it spiritual, cultural, or athletic.



Alain Savary, Former Minister of Education.

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that their proposals could substantially benefit the Communists and the extreme rightwing National Front, without saving their own party's bacon in the 1986 legislative elections. Mitterrand, nevertheless, has announced publicly that he intends to make good his promise and has proposed a controversial bill to establish proportional representation at the departmental (state) level in the present session of the National Assembly.

Thus far, Socialist attempts to reform the political rules have been limited to:

- Introduction of restricted proportional representation in municipal elections and direct and proportional balloting in regional elections. Both reforms have been widely applauded for ensuring greater participation in the local political system to members of small parties. Opponents, however, have accused Mitterrand of trying to factionalize the political system.

- A halfhearted and unsuccessful attempt last summer to pass a constitutional amendment expanding the president's authority to call referendums on matters of civil liberties.

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Conclusions and Outlook

It is hard to point to a single reason for the Socialists' failure to carry out promised institutional reforms. In most instances, they apparently misjudged the strength of opposition forces, even within their own ranks. In some cases—like press and media reform—they probably decided that they really did not believe strongly enough in the proposed changes to sacrifice self-interest. Above all, their long sojourn in the opposition had permitted Socialists the luxury of

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wallowing for over 40 years in their leftist ideology, untroubled by the realities of power. Buoyed by a massive majority in parliament, they were unprepared for the bureaucratic and extragovernmental impediments to change. In the final analysis, they frequently revised plans and backtracked because their idealistic solutions simply did not work. [redacted]

Near-Term Prospects

Although we expect some further limited adjustments, we believe Mitterrand is now even less likely than in the past to initiate significant institutional reforms. Remaining items in the Socialist agenda, such as constitutional revision of the presidential term or a possible amendment to synchronize legislative and presidential elections, would elicit opposition charges of partisan machinations in preparation for 1986 and would probably founder. Such battles in the past, moreover, have failed to distract voter attention from the bread-and-butter issues of unemployment and economic growth, and Mitterrand may calculate that further attempted reforms would distract the government's attention from needed concentration on those very issues. In the near term, except for a possible battle over proportional representation, Socialists seem more interested in buttressing changes that they have already enacted and will probably hope that past reforms, along with some innovations in the economy—like the recently decreed modifications in state control of financial mechanisms—will produce results that will bolster their position in the elections of 1986 and 1988. [redacted]

On the decentralization issue, the key question is whether Paris will turn over to local governments the revenues necessary to make their enhanced powers effective. We doubt Mitterrand will take this step. Although Socialists can argue that they have returned more money to local authorities than previous governments, budgetary constraints and the demands of national programs—notably military modernization, industrial restructuring, and measures designed to solve the thorny problem of unemployment—limit their ability to do more. In our view, Mitterrand might propose a few minor additions to his decentralization program, but he and his constituents are probably prepared to declare “victory” and to run on the Socialist record in the next legislative and presidential elections. [redacted]

On other fronts, Mitterrand is likely to continue pursuing some modest objectives:

- His proposed electoral reform has sufficient support in the National Assembly to pass, but rightist opposition and some Socialist wavering may produce compromises. Press and US Embassy reports have already suggested, moreover, that proportional representation at the departmental level may not increase the clout of small parties as much as other variations of a proportional system, and therefore may not disrupt the centrifugal character of the present system as much as some opponents have maintained.
- He might also issue decrees that grant France's universities a significant amount of freedom from ministerial control.
- Mitterrand reportedly believes, moreover, the United States' success in high technology derives significantly from the relationship that exists between universities, such as Stanford and Carnegie-Mellon, and local entrepreneurs and small companies. Socialists could complement these reforms with legislation and administrative actions encouraging universities to establish formal relationships with industries—for example, by rechanneling a substantial proportion of funding for universities through state-owned industries.
- Mitterrand might follow through with his longtime pledge to limit the presidential term. If, as now seems increasingly likely, the legislative elections in 1986 return a National Assembly dominated by the opposition, Mitterrand may argue that a five-year presidential term, coincidental with the legislative term, would help forestall future conflict between a president of one party and a parliament of another. Opposition leaders, however, almost certainly would resist such a proposal, since none would want to weaken an office to which each aspires. [redacted]

Staying Power of Reforms

The opposition has promised to roll back a number of Mitterrand's institutional reforms, if it wins the 1986 legislative elections. Gaullist leaders have threatened

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President Mitterrand at Carnegie-Mellon University, 1984. [redacted]

substantial denationalizations, especially of financial institutions. Many of these threats are, in our view, exaggerated; French conservatives have long since come to terms with a heavy dose of government control of the economy. Denationalization, moreover, is easier to promise than to deliver. Differences among the center-right parties that would have to form a coalition in order for conservatives to have a majority might force a compromise. Giscardians, for instance, may differ significantly with Gaullists on the extent of rollbacks—a difference that Mitterrand might exploit to his advantage. Some nationalized companies, moreover, amount to little more than commercial ghettos, and we suspect the French Government would have as much trouble selling them as the British Conservatives have had in selling long-nationalized industries. [redacted]

We believe, however, that the opposition would unite on one significant issue: the need to denationalize some banks. This would provide a convenient symbol to rightwing supporters, and the government would retain sufficient means through existing laws to control the banking system. It would also satisfy the right's important business constituency, which probably believes that privatization would ensure more competition in domestic financial markets. [redacted]

The opposition is not likely to reverse decentralization. Conservatives, who control most regions and departments, have benefited significantly from reforms that have increased the power of local officials.

Proportional Representation

The proportional voting system that President Mitterrand proposed in April would allocate seats in the National Assembly on the basis of the percentage of vote gained in each department (state) of France. The plan would require a 5-percent threshold in order to gain at least one seat, and the number of deputies would be reapportioned to take population shifts into account. If the plan is enacted, each National Assembly deputy would represent about 108,000 constituents. [redacted]

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Proportional representation generally favors small parties with strong local organizations and usually diminishes the attraction of large, conglomerate parties. Published studies and US Embassy reports predict that the system that Mitterrand has proposed would:

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- Maximize the number of seats that the Socialist party would win, without necessarily limiting Gaullist-Giscardian strength as much as other variations of a proportional system would.
- Allow the extreme-right National Front to enter the National Assembly, but probably without enough deputies to play the role of linchpin in a conservative majority.
- Still permit the Gaullist-Giscardian parties to win a clear majority in the National Assembly.
- And limit expected Communist losses, which would nevertheless be substantial (from its present number of 44 to 31).

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Computer simulations done by the private French Institute of Public Opinion (IFOP) show that President Mitterrand's scheme would yield the following results:

Party	National Assembly Seats
Gaullist-Centrists	264
Socialists	158
Communists	31
National Front	18

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[redacted]

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Mitterrand's reforms also enjoy wide public support, even among conservative voters. In any event, the center-right—especially Giscardians—made some important steps in the same direction when they were in power. [redacted]

The right will probably attempt to repeal the proportional representation system Mitterrand has introduced on a limited scale at the local level and would similarly attack a national system, if enacted. With growing strains between Socialists and Communists reducing prospects for a leftist coalition, conservatives would probably calculate that their relative prospects can only improve by a return to winner-take-all elections. Both Gaullists and Giscardians would find two additional reasons for repealing proportional representation: to reduce the influence of the National Front—thus freeing them from the necessity of embarrassing cooperation with the extreme right—and also to diminish the vote-getting power of the Communist Party.¹⁰ [redacted]

Implications for the United States

In our view, the Socialist failure to fulfill grandiose traditional schemes has already had a sobering effect throughout French Government. We believe the United States stands to benefit from this, especially to the degree that the Socialists have been forced to jettison shopworn ideology and to adopt what is already reported to be a more pragmatic attitude toward the problems of policy and management. The impact of the failed attempts at institutional reform—together with failed economic policies of their first year in power—has pushed France's non-Communist left toward the center of the political spectrum and has discredited extremist positions and radical rhetoric within Socialist ranks. At a recent leadership conference on modernization, for example, leftwing Socialists of the CERES faction, who made speeches laden with tired ideological platitudes and attacks on the influence of the United States, were either ignored or considered ludicrous by most delegates. On the other hand, a bevy of recent press reports and opinion polls indicate that former Agriculture Minister Rocard,

¹⁰ Gaullists have already charged that Mitterrand's proposal is cynically designed to elevate the status of the National Front so as to embarrass the traditional rightist parties. They have also predicted that, if enacted, it would re-create the political instability of the Fourth Republic. [redacted]

The Decline of Socialist Rhetoric^a

In June 1983, Jean-Marie Cotteret of the Institut Infometrie (Paris) made a computer-assisted content analysis of President Mitterrand's television rhetoric. He compared the words used in three long interviews—the first in December 1981 (six months after the Socialist victory), the second in January 1983 (more than six months after the introduction of austerity measures that marked the failure of expansionary Socialist economics), and the third in June 1983 (several months after the left was repudiated in national municipal elections). Cotteret's analysis revealed that Mitterrand's 1983 interviews were devoid of leftist catchwords that had appeared frequently in 1981. Mitterrand did not even refer once to "Socialism" or "the left." Instead, in the later interviews he talked about what he personally intended to do to solve problems and appealed to a sense of national pride and commitment with the frequent use of words like "France," "Country," "the Republic," and "the State"—in short, he sounded remarkably like de Gaulle. [redacted]

^a Source: Le Point, 13 June 1983, p. 55. [redacted]

leader of the more centrist and pragmatic wing of the PS, and Prime Minister Fabius are the rising stars in the party and are likely to play a key role in any attempt by Mitterrand to engineer a parliamentary alliance with opposition centrists. [redacted]

This greater sense of moderation and realism may also have an important impact on France's foreign relations, especially on the quality of its sometimes difficult bilateral relations with the United States. It is already evident in the appointment of Roland Dumas to replace Claude Cheysson, whose penchant for ideologically charged US baiting had become an embarrassment to an increasingly practical Socialist administration. The voices of other high-profile radicals who have reputations for maligning the United States—such as Regis Debray and Antoine Blanca—have also waned under the influence of the new practicality. If this trend continues, as we believe it will, it could lessen the intrusions of rancor that have sometimes troubled Paris's relations with Washington. [redacted]

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