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# In France, political lines blur

## Main parties lean left on economics and right on crime

By Katrin Bennhold

**PARIS:** What is going on in French politics these days? As the autumn campaign season kicks off ahead of presidential elections next spring, tough law-and-order proposals from the leading Socialist contender have a rightist flavor, while some of the rhetoric from the right sounds positively leftist.

"Our duty is to better distribute the fruits of growth," Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin said Thursday at a press conference that was largely devoted to his center-right government's plans to increase state subsidies — usually a campaign plank of the left.

He was setting the stage for an end-of-summer gathering of the governing Union for a Popular Movement on Friday following a similar Socialist Party mini-convention last weekend.

A year ago, Villepin and Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy, the center-right party's leader, were talking aggressively about reforming France's cumbersome labor laws. But both now appear to have left such ambitions behind. Buoyed by signs of an economic turnaround, the government has instead focused on handouts to voters and companies.

Villepin, backed by Sarkozy, began this week by unveiling measures targeting low-income earners. Villepin promised to increase the minimum wage, which, at €1,254, or \$1,604, a month, is already one of the highest in the world. The proposal also is contained in the Socialists' electoral platform.

Villepin also pledged to double a tax

credit for those on the minimum wage, a measure originally introduced in 2001 by the veteran Socialist politician Laurent Fabius, when he was finance minister. Villepin also scheduled a conference on employment and wages in October to address voters' concerns about their cost of living, copying an idea floated by another high-profile Socialist, Jacques Delors.

On Thursday, the government's confidence increased with the publication of figures showing that the unemployment rate had dipped below 9 percent in July, for the first time in four years.

Villepin, clearly emboldened at his news conference, said the government would pay companies to train the unemployed if the companies promised to hire the trainees. He also announced plans to scrap payroll taxes for workers earning the minimum wage at companies with fewer than 20 employees, starting in July 2007. And he said the state would pay nonprofit organizations to hire workers over the age of 50 who no longer receive unemployment benefits.

The initiatives follow similarly surprising proposals from the left, with Ségolène Royal, who is outpacing her male rivals for the Socialist presidential candidacy, campaigning on a tough anti-crime platform.

Royal, who announced her campaign team Thursday, made waves this summer when she waded deeply into the traditional territory of the right on law and order. Following a brief bout of unrest in some suburbs of Paris in June, she proposed enrolling first-time young offenders in community service

programs run by the military to teach them discipline and citizenship.

"I see myself being overtaken on the right," Sarkozy quipped at the time.

Indeed, as the election nears, the lines between the two main parties are converging in key areas: Both have veered left on economic policy, especially since the government's fiasco in attempting to implement a youth employment program this spring, and both appear to be veering right on crime.

If the battle of ideas is turning somewhat confusing, it has been the battle of personalities that has, so far, dominated the campaign. At the Socialist conference last weekend, Royal's rivals accused her of lacking experience and scolded her for refusing to join a debate.

Former Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, who lost the 2002 presidential election in the first round but is hinting he may again be a candidate, had perhaps the harshest words, telling the party that "technique does not make substance."

The sniping caused Royal to slip seven points in the latest opinion poll. But the other contenders also declined, leaving her 26 points ahead of her closest Socialist rival, Jospin, according to the survey, conducted by the CSA institute for Le Parisien and published Thursday.

On the right, while Villepin and President Jacques Chirac have recovered somewhat from their record-low approval ratings since the Lebanon crisis, neither appears to be a serious challenger to Sarkozy in his bid to represent the right in elections beginning in April.

International Herald Tribune

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