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**European Parties Elections
and Referendums Network**

ELECTION BRIEFING No.33

THE FRENCH PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION OF 22 APRIL AND 6 MAY 2007

**Sally Marthaler
Sussex European Institute
University of Sussex
Email: s.a.marthaler@sussex.ac.uk**

Key Points

- Sarkozy won 31.2% of the first-round ballot, the highest vote for a centre-right candidate since Giscard d'Estaing polled 32.6% in 1974.
- The defeat of Ségolène Royal was the third consecutive defeat for a Socialist Party presidential candidate.
- The centrist François Bayrou presented a serious challenge to the two other mainstream contenders.
- There was a revival of support for the mainstream parties and a commensurate decline in support for the minor or anti-system parties.
- The first round turnout of 83.8% was the highest in any French presidential election since 1974.
- Twelve candidates ran for the presidency.

Background

The 2007 presidential election represented a turning point in French politics in three key respects. It marked a renewal of the French political class with the end of the 12-year term of office of the centre right's Jacques Chirac, who, having achieved the lowest popularity ratings of any president under the Fifth Republic, decided not to run again. It re-established the dominance of the mainstream parties over the minor and anti-system parties and demonstrated the potential for new forms of alliance between the mainstream parties. It signalled a revival of public engagement with the political process.

Chirac's twelve years in power left a bleak legacy of high youth employment, massive public debt and economic stagnation, and he signally failed to fulfil his 1995 campaign pledge to mend France's 'social fracture', most evident in the troubled *banlieues* (poor suburbs). His second term of office had got off to an uncomfortable start with his overwhelming but hollow victory in the second round of the 2002 presidential election when the left-wing electorate had reluctantly rallied behind him to defeat the far-right candidate, Jean-Marie Le Pen. The unforeseen elimination of the socialist Lionel Jospin by Le Pen in the first round on 21 April created a trauma which has left an indelible mark on France's political psyche¹. Indeed, the shadow of 2002, the so-called '21 April effect', hung over this election, influencing the behaviour of candidates and electorate alike in an effort to ensure that history did not repeat itself.

The Campaign

The presidential campaign took place against a background of continuing social malaise in the domestic arena and of concern about France's standing in the world. Conscious of the sense of crisis and popular malaise in the country, the candidates for the presidency were at pains to stress that they would represent a break (*rupture*) with the past and would 'do politics differently'. Twelve candidates stood in the first round, fewer than the record sixteen in 2002 but still spanning a broad political spectrum from far left to far right and including three Trotskyists, one Green candidate and one anti-globalisation candidate (José Bové). Of the twelve, however, only four were in serious contention: on the centre-left, Ségolène Royal (PS²); on the centre-right, Nicolas Sarkozy (UMP³) and François Bayrou (UDF⁴); and on the far right, the FN⁵ candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen.⁶

As the first female presidential candidate for a major party in France and the sole candidate of the moderate left (Jean-Pierre Chevènement, the infamous 'third man' in 2002, had joined her campaign team), Ségolène Royal was a strong contender. She had won an outright majority (61%) in the PS primary in November 2006 running against Dominique Strauss-Kahn and Laurent Fabius. Her election campaign placed a great emphasis on 'listening to the people' and before drawing up her manifesto she spent several weeks consulting French voters in 'citizen juries' as part of a process of

¹ See: C. Fieschi, 'Europe and the French Presidential and Legislative Elections of April/May 2002' *Opposing Europe Research Network/Royal Institute for International Affairs Election Briefing No 4*, Sussex European Institute, University of Sussex, 2002
at: <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/paper4france.pdf>.

² PS: Parti socialiste (Socialist Party)

³ UMP: Union pour un mouvement populaire (Union for a Popular Movement)

⁴ UDF: Union pour la démocratie française (Union for French Democracy)

⁵ FN: Front national (National Front)

⁶ The other eight presidential candidates were: Olivier Besancenot (LCR: Ligue communiste révolutionnaire / Communist Revolutionary League); Marie-George Buffet (PC: Parti communiste / Communist Party); Gérard Schivardi (PT: Parti des travailleurs / Workers' Party); José Bové (Altermondialiste / Anti-globalisation candidate); Dominique Voynet (Les Verts / The Greens); Philippe de Villiers (MPF: Mouvement pour la France / Movement for France); Frédéric Nihous (CPNT: Chasse, Pêche, Nature et Traditions / Hunting, Fishing, Nature and Traditions); Arlette Laguiller (LO: Lutte ouvrière / Workers' Struggle).

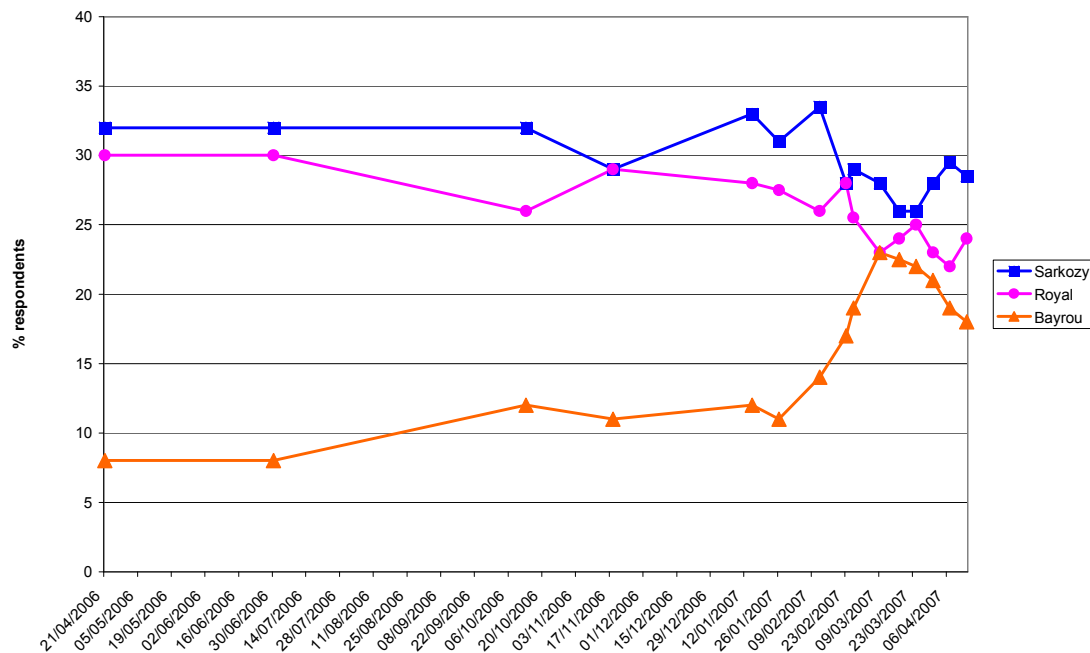
participative democracy. The 100-point programme which emerged from these consultations set out a combination of traditional socialist policies, highlighting social justice, public services and the integration of ethnic minorities, and elements which would appeal to the centre ground with references to modernising France and creating a more dynamic business environment. Indeed, both Royal and Sarkozy expressed an interest in adopting a more Blairist approach.

Nicolas Sarkozy presented an economically liberal programme which gave a prominent position to work and individual initiative, with a 35-hour week as a minimum rather than a maximum and a less regulated employment market in a more entrepreneurial, property-owning and Atlanticist France. Sarkozy has an image as a strong and charismatic leader but is also seen as divisive and provocative. Many of his economic reform plans caused alarm, especially among public sector workers. His tough stance on immigration and youth crime was also deeply unpopular with a section of the electorate and seen as a deliberate strategy to compete with the far right. Especially controversial was his proposal to create a new ministry of 'Immigration and National Identity'. Here he was clearly encroaching on FN terrain and pitching for Le Pen's electorate. The FN leader's appeal could not be underestimated: his propositions have found growing acceptance among the French public, a third of whom now say that they agree with his ideas. However, in this election he was the fourth man, running behind the UDF candidate, François Bayrou.

The sudden and spectacular rise in support for Bayrou was one of the most unexpected aspects of this election and injected welcome excitement into the later stages of the campaign. As leader of the centre-right UDF and a former education minister, Bayrou is a familiar and established player on the French political scene whose party has previously had electoral alliances with Chirac's neo-Gaullists but whose own electoral success has been limited. In the 2002 presidential elections, he polled a mere 6.8% of the vote and in the subsequent parliamentary elections his party won only 29 seats.

Despite being part of the political establishment, Bayrou has managed to distance himself from the two dominant mainstream parties, projecting the image of an 'outsider', and he has won a reputation for integrity and plain speaking. In this campaign, he developed a strategy of autonomy from the UMP and placed his party firmly on the centre ground. He also tapped into a public mood of disaffection with the traditional parties, blaming France's stagnation on the conflictual relationship between the mainstream left and right and emphasising the need to move beyond partisan confrontation. He pledged to introduce a form of coalition or 'unity' government composed of political figures from both the centre left and right (a strategy which he would in any case have been forced to adopt, given his small parliamentary base). His proposals clearly resonated, particularly with a section of the electorate sometimes referred to as the 'extreme centre' who were profoundly disillusioned with both the moderate left and right and highly sceptical about their ability to resolve the grave problems facing France.

Figure 1: 1st-round voting intentions for Sarkozy, Royal and Bayrou



Source: Ifop for *Journal du Dimanche*

Support for Bayrou took off towards the end of February (see Figure 1 above) at a time when disappointment with Royal’s campaign was growing. In particular, he inspired more confidence than Royal and was seen as having greater presidential stature than her. He also provided a refuge for those centre-right voters who found Sarkozy’s overtures to the far-right electorate unpalatable. Bayrou thus appealed to a highly diverse electorate, predominantly 25-34 year-olds and those with higher education and in higher income brackets, including previously Green voters (in fact he drew more support from the Green electorate than the Green candidate herself) and a large proportion of new voters with no partisan predisposition.

However, support for Bayrou was less committed than that for Sarkozy, Royal or Le Pen, with around 50% of his potential voters saying that they might change their mind. This suggested that one element of Bayrou’s support was the kind of ‘anti-system’ protest voting which the French have increasingly resorted to in recent elections to express their dissatisfaction with the political establishment. In polls, the main motivation given for a Bayrou vote was opposition to the traditional left-right divide rather than approval of any specific policy issue. Nonetheless, for several weeks voting intentions put him at over 20% of the vote, in strong contention with the two frontrunners, but drawing his support more from the left than the right and thus presenting a greater threat to Royal than Sarkozy. Bayrou’s presence meant that Sarkozy and Royal were both faced with a complex balancing act, competing not only with each other but also for votes at the extremes and the centre. Moreover, polls indicated that if Bayrou did get through to the second round, he would beat Sarkozy or Royal, and so a vote for him could also be used

for tactical purposes. All of this added to the unpredictability of the first round and contributed to the high level of interest in the campaign.

No one single theme stood out in this presidential campaign, unlike in 2002 when law and order (*sécurité*) dominated the agenda, particularly in the media. Indeed, perhaps in order to avoid accusations of having imposed the agenda as in 2002, the media appeared more restrained during this campaign, enabling citizens to play a more significant role in raising areas of concern during television discussion programmes and in websites and blogs. Voters gave priority to domestic economic and social matters, particularly unemployment, purchasing power and social exclusion, domains which are traditionally the preserve of the left.

Europe had little salience for voters as an issue in this election. Nonetheless, over half of the electorate said that a candidate's position on the European constitution would carry some or a lot of weight in their voting decision⁷. Given the strength of the No vote in the 2005 referendum on the EU constitutional treaty, each of the three main contenders set out their proposals for dealing with this contentious issue. Sarkozy favoured a 'simplified treaty' including Parts I and II of the original text which would be ratified by parliament rather than by referendum. Royal proposed a new treaty to be negotiated and put to a referendum, before or during the next European elections in 2009. Bayrou, the most pro-European of the three, wanted an IGC to draw up a shorter and more transparent treaty which would also be put to a new referendum in 2009. Both he and Sarkozy reaffirmed their outright opposition to Turkey joining the EU. Among the minor candidates, the most virulent opposition to Europe came from Schivardi (PT), who proposed a break with the Maastricht Treaty and a return to national sovereignty.

The Results of the First Round

Sarkozy's 31.18% was the highest vote for a mainstream right candidate since Valéry Giscard d'Estaing won 32.6% in 1974. This result was consistent with his position in the polls, where he had been ahead of Royal for most of the previous year, although there were times when they were running neck and neck, most recently in a CSA poll on 19 April.

⁷ CSA poll, 10-11 January 2007; Opinionway, Le Politoscope, Vague 11, 22 March 2007

Table 1: 1st-round results by candidate's party, 2007 and 2002

Candidate's party	2007		2002	
	% votes cast	Votes	% votes cast	Votes
UMP	31.18	11,448,663	19.88	5,665,855
PS	25.87	9,500,112	16.18	4,610,113
UDF	18.57	6,820,119	6.84	1,949,170
FN	10.44	3,834,530	16.86	4,804,713
LCR	4.08	1,498,581	4.25	1,210,562
PCF	1.93	707,268	3.37	960,480
Les Verts	1.57	576,666	5.25	1,495,724
LO	1.33	487,857	5.72	1,630,045
CPNT	1.15	420,645	4.23	1,204,689
PT	0.34	123,540	0.47	132,686
Other⁸	3.55	1,301,415	16.97	4,834,434

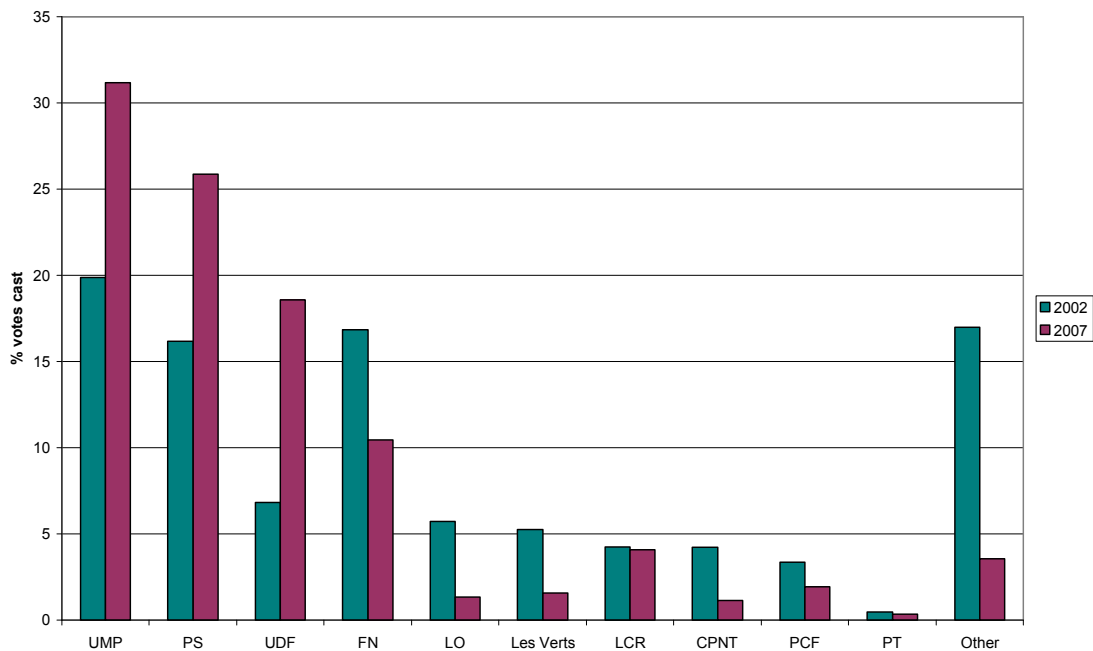
Source: French Ministry of the Interior

The most significant manifestation of the '21 April effect' was a concentration of votes on a few candidates to avoid the dispersal of the vote which had been a major factor in Jospin's elimination in 2002 (see Table 1 above and Figure 2 below). In the two-round electoral system, voters normally use the first round to cast a vote for the candidate to whom they feel closest, even if this candidate stands little chance of winning. The French axiom is that voters 'choose' in the first round and 'eliminate' in the second. This time, however, many voters on the left, eschewed this behaviour, resorting to a form of tactical voting (*le vote utile*) to ensure that the candidate with the best chance of becoming president would get through to the second round. This was clearly to the advantage of the Socialist Party candidate. More than half of Royal's supporters voted for her because they wanted her to get through to the second round rather than because she was their preferred candidate. In other words, they were voting for her in order to block Sarkozy. This strategy of 'anti-Sarkozyism', encouraging a vote for 'anyone but Sarkozy' (TSS or '*Tout sauf Sarkozy*'), was an important feature of the election both in the first and second rounds. Sarkozy's voters, on the other hand, appear to have voted for him out of conviction rather than for tactical reasons⁹. Although not a '*vote utile*', this more positive vote had a similar effect, reducing support for the minor parties on the right, notably the FN, with Le Pen being relegated to fourth place.

⁸ 2007: Bové, de Villiers; 2002: Boutin, Chevènement, Lepage, Madelin, Mégret, Taubira.

⁹ See Sofres poll, 26-27 April 2007, for details of voting motivations.

Figure 2: 1st-round vote in the Presidential election, 2002 and 2007



Source: French Ministry of the Interior

Nonetheless, the FN was the only one of the other nine parties to win more than 5% of the vote. Besancenot's LCR had the best result of the remaining minor or anti-system parties (4.08%) but no other candidate on the left or right passed the 2% threshold. This concentration of the vote thus reinforced the bipolarising dynamic of the French political system, with the PS and UMP candidates winning a combined total of 57% in 2007 compared with 37% in 2002. It was in stark contrast with the fragmentation of the vote in the previous presidential election, when the 12 candidates representing minor or anti-system parties won the major part of the vote (53.8%). This kind of protest voting was also a significant factor in the No vote in the 2005 referendum but was clearly shunned by the electorate on this occasion.

The second striking difference between 2002 and 2007 was the level of participation in the election (see Table 2 below). At 83.8%, the first round turnout was the highest since 1974. The dramatic increase in the level of voter registration (up by 3.3 million compared with 2002), notably among the 18-30 age-group, was an early indication of a revival of interest in politics. This reversed a long-term trend of falling turnout and contrasted with the record abstention in the first round in 2002 (when almost 30% of the electorate did not vote).

Table 2: 1st-round turnout in French presidential elections, 1965-2007

1965	1969	1974	1981	1988	1995	2002	2007
84.75	77.59	84.23	81.09	81.38	78.38	71.6	83.77

Source: French Ministry of the Interior

In many respects the 2007 election was a mirror image of 2002 and this appears to account in large part for the rise in turnout. Although the campaign was slow to take off, from late February on it generated a great deal of interest among the public and in the media. In part, this was due to the much larger amount of airtime devoted to discussion and debate in this election, which attracted large television audiences. Bayrou was also a major factor, adding considerable unpredictability to the first-round ballot, a reversal of the situation in 2002 when the outcome had seemed (wrongly as it turned out) to be assured.

There was also a sense that both voters and politicians had learned painful lessons from 21 April 2002. Having effectively had little choice about how to vote in the second round of the 2002 election, voters wanted to re-appropriate politics and to feel more in control of their country's political destiny. Royal also picked up on the public's desire for greater responsiveness from the political elite, very obviously 'listening to the people' and bringing citizens back into the political arena. Citizens were more involved in this election and in different ways, through their participation in discussion programmes on television and in the 'blogosphere'. This more constructive engagement replaced the protest voting seen in recent elections, and opinion polls identified a growing public perception that it was possible to change things through politics (71% in 2007 compared with 55% in 2002)¹⁰.

An important theme to emerge from this election was that of the renewal of the political class with power passing to a younger generation. This was the last presidential election for Arlette Laguiller, who has run in every campaign since 1974, and probably also for Jean-Marie Le Pen. Neither of the two frontrunners, Sarkozy and Royal, had held prime ministerial office or run in a presidential election before, unlike in 2002 when both candidates, Chirac and Jospin, had headed the executive as president and prime minister respectively during their five-year cohabitation. The cohabitation itself had led to confusion among the public about lines of responsibility for policymaking and the government's record. This time voters could see a clear distinction between the programmes of the two main contenders who appeared to be offering a choice between two different conceptions of politics.

Nevertheless, as a former Minister of Finance and current Minister of the Interior, Sarkozy had been part of the deeply unpopular outgoing government, a fact which might have played to his opponents' advantage. Yet he had managed to distance himself from Chirac and de Villepin, appearing more dynamic and courageous than them, prepared to break taboos and cross ideological lines in order to unite right-wing voters from the

¹⁰ Sofres poll, 21-22 March 2007.

centre to the far right. Following his resignation from office at the start of the campaign, Sarkozy presented himself as being liberated from the constraints imposed by his membership of the government and finally able to act decisively to implement the radical changes that the country needed.

The reasons for Sarkozy's lead over Royal in the first round (and his ultimate victory) appear to be multiple. One of his main achievements was to have united the right, winning back previously moderate voters who had moved to the far right, and he was helped in this by the overall rightward shift (*droitisation*) of the French electorate. Voters perceived him as having more the stature of a president (57%, compared with 16% for Royal), as having had the better campaign (36% compared with 20% for Royal), as being a more competent leader and better able to restore France's world standing. His programme was judged to be more coherent and to uphold the value most voters wanted the next president to prioritise, which was work. The biggest difference between Royal and Sarkozy was seen in their positions on immigration and law and order, with 61% feeling closer to Sarkozy than Royal on law and order, 56% on immigration, 46% on economic policy, 45% on foreign policy and 45% on work and employment. The electorate also saw Sarkozy as being better able to bring about the rapid implementation of the necessary reforms¹¹.

These perceptions appear to have been strengthened between the two rounds when Royal lost ground. While Sarkozy maintained the clarity and consistency of his discourse, the PS camp appeared less coherent. Royal's offer of a debate with Bayrou (which took place on 28 April) was interpreted by some as a tactical mistake. While she clearly needed to win over Bayrou's voters, she also risked appearing indecisive and opportunist. More significantly, she risked alienating her own more left-wing supporters, for although there was some convergence between Bayrou and the left, there were also substantial differences, particularly on economic policy.

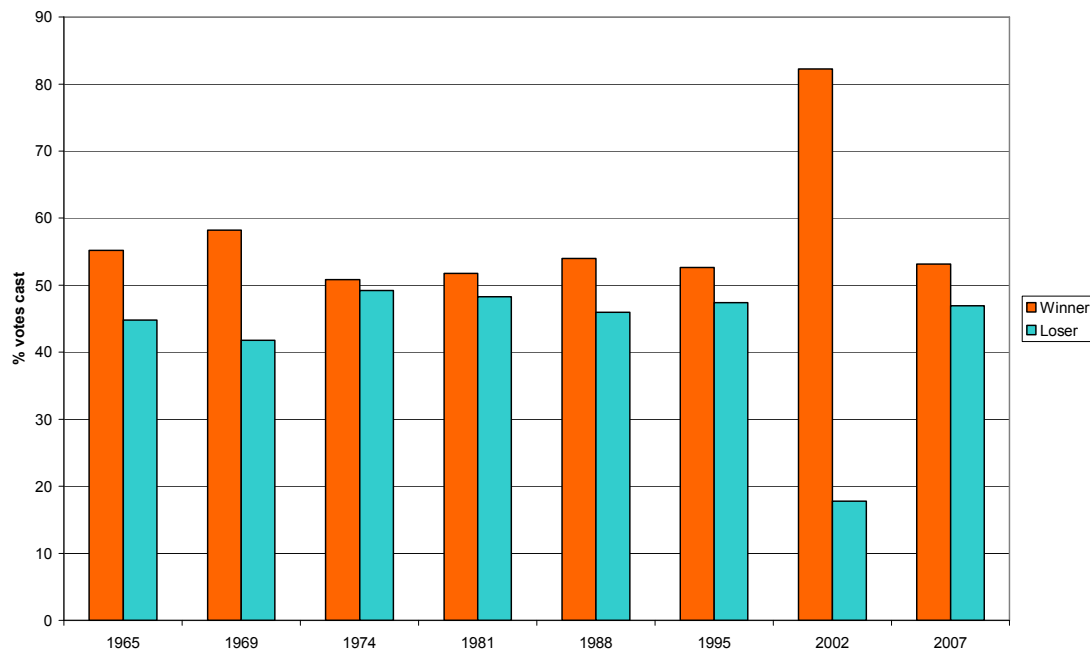
Polls also indicate that Royal lost the broadcast debate with Sarkozy on 2 May, when many found her performance disappointing¹². Immediately afterwards, most polls showed a rise in support for Sarkozy. The impact of the debate should not be overstated, however, since by this stage the vast majority of voters had made up their minds about who to vote for. Nonetheless, the competition for Bayrou's 18.5% share of the first round ballot (nearly 7 million votes), as well as for Le Pen's almost 4 million votes and Besancenot's 1.5 million, was intense and crucial.

¹¹ CSA poll, 25 April 2007.

¹² Sofres poll, 3 May 2007.

The Results of the Second Round

Figure 3: 2nd-round results in French presidential elections, 1965-2007



Source: French Ministry of the Interior

Sarkozy's victory was one of the most convincing in a left-right duel since that of de Gaulle over Mitterrand in 1965 (see Figure 3 above). However, his success also reflected the failure of Royal, who produced the worst second-round result for a socialist candidate since Mitterrand's 44.8% against de Gaulle, also in the 1965 election. This was the third successive presidential election defeat for the socialists, and although Royal polled 2.5 million votes more than Jospin in 2002, partly because of the level of turnout and new registrations, questions about the future of the party and its values resurfaced. In part the defeat represented a personal failure on the part of the candidate. Her lack of experience and competence, particularly in foreign affairs, raised doubts about her grasp of her brief and her fitness for presidential office. Royal's campaign seemed at times improvised and tactical rather than considered and coherent, and she was unable to capitalise on the advantage to the left of the electorate's prioritising issues such as unemployment and purchasing power. The prominence of attacks on Sarkozy may have added to the impression that she lacked a positive vision for France and the overtures made to Bayrou between the rounds were open to be interpreted as a sign of disorientation or even desperation.

These misgivings about Royal were reflected in the fact that many voted for her not because they thought she was a worthy candidate but because of their antipathy to Sarkozy. This was particularly the case among those who had voted for Bayrou in the first round and subsequently transferred their vote to her. Conversely, as in the first

round, a large proportion of Sarkozy's voters were voting for positive rather than negative reasons, 'choosing' rather than 'eliminating' the candidate. Analysis of the transfer of votes from the first to the second round indicates that slightly more of Bayrou's vote went to Sarkozy than to Royal with 20% abstaining. Sarkozy won around 70% of Le Pen's votes and Royal around 70% of Besancenot's, while Sarkozy also received about 20% of the far left and PCF vote¹³.

Table 3: 2nd-round turnout in French presidential elections, 1965-2007

1965	1969	1974	1981	1988	1995	2002	2007
84.32	68.85	87.33	85.85	84.07	79.67	79.71	83.97

Source: French Ministry of the Interior

Turnout was the highest in any second round since 1988 (see Table 3 above) and virtually identical to that in the first, despite the fact that this time there was a lack of suspense about the outcome, since Sarkozy was consistently ahead in the opinion polls, and that Le Pen had called for 'massive abstention' by his voters. This suggests that the left did mobilise to support Royal, as a low turnout would have favoured Sarkozy. However, blank and spoilt votes almost trebled, from 1.44% to 4.2%, suggesting a form of protest voting, possibly among voters on the far left who had been alienated by Royal's moves towards Bayrou and the centre.

In sociodemographic terms, age was the most important factor distinguishing the two electorates. Sarkozy's support was drawn predominantly from the over-60 age-group while Royal was ahead with 18-24 year-olds (58% compared with 42% for Sarkozy) and 45-59 year-olds (55% against Sarkozy's 45%). Sarkozy also won a majority of the female vote. As well as dominating the UMP's traditional electorate, Sarkozy also made significant inroads into the working-class vote, both on the left and the far right. It was only among the working class that Royal outvoted Sarkozy (with 54% against his 46%)¹⁴.

Conclusion and Future Prospects

Developments after the presidential election confirm the impression that French political life has indeed experienced a '*rupture*', a break with the past, and that there has been an important shift in the French political landscape, in generational, ideological and party-system terms. After Chirac's term ended on 16 May, Sarkozy presented his new government under prime minister François Fillon. His pared-down cabinet is composed of 15 ministers, eight men and seven women, thus respecting parity. It also steals some of Bayrou's and Royal's thunder by including non-UMP politicians, most notably the socialist Bernard Kouchner as Minister for Foreign Affairs.

¹³ Exit polls: CSA, 6 May 2007; Ipsos, 6 May 2007; Opinionway, 6 May 2007.

¹⁴ Ipsos exit poll, 6 May 2007

The new president has taken immediate steps to demonstrate his commitment to making Europe a top priority by meeting with the Presidents of the European Parliament and the European Commission to discuss his proposal for a simplified treaty. The question of Turkish accession to the EU, opposed by Sarkozy but supported by Kouchner, will be tackled at a later stage.

On 10 May, François Bayrou announced the formation of a new political party, the Democratic Movement (*Mouvement démocrate* or *MoDem*), which plans to contest most of the seats in the legislative elections on 10 and 17 June, even though the vast majority of outgoing UDF MPs supported Sarkozy in the second round with a view to ensuring their own political survival. The new party will also be faced with the challenge of carving out its own space in the bipolar French political system. Thus, despite the electorate's apparent enthusiasm for a centrist party, its viability as an autonomous political entity is uncertain.

The Socialist Party seems once again to be in crisis, ideologically and organisationally. It is intent on holding together in the run-up to the legislative elections but its fate thereafter is unclear. The French electorate's gravitation towards the centre ground suggests that the PS will need to move towards the more social-democratic stance favoured particularly by the moderniser Dominique Strauss-Kahn rather than making the leftward shift proposed by Laurent Fabius. These two socialist heavyweights ('*éléphants*'), who contested Royal's nomination for the presidential candidacy, will no doubt stand again in a future leadership battle. Since the party's two former allies in the *gauche plurielle* (coalition of the left), the Communist Party and the Greens, were both reduced to a rump in this election, the party may be forced for strategic reasons to consider an alliance with the centre.

Despite the incidents of car-burning across France on election night in protest at Sarkozy's victory, polls currently predict a convincing victory for the UMP in the legislative elections in June. If the polls prove correct, the party will have bucked a thirty-year trend, no incumbent government of either left or right having been returned to office since 1978. In that event, the presidential majority would have a strong mandate to carry out the radical changes that the French electorate appears now to acknowledge are necessary.

Publication Date: May 2007

This is the latest in a series of election and referendum briefings produced by the European Parties Elections and Referendums Network (EPERN). Based in the Sussex European Institute, EPERN is an international network of scholars that was originally established as the Opposing Europe Research Network (OERN) in June 2000 to chart the divisions over Europe that exist within party systems. In August 2003 it was re-launched as EPERN to reflect a widening of its objectives to consider the broader impact of the European issue on the domestic politics of EU member and candidate states. The Network retains an independent stance on the issues under consideration. For more information and copies of all our publications visit our website at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/1-4-2.html>