



**European Parties Elections
and Referendums Network**

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THE FRENCH LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS OF 10 AND 17 JUNE 2007

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Key Points

- Sarkozy's centre-right Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) did not win the predicted landslide but retained an absolute majority in the National Assembly.
- For the first time since 1978, an incumbent party was returned to government.
- Turnout in both rounds was the lowest ever recorded in French legislative elections at 60%.
- The Socialists did better than expected but the party remains divided and its leadership is contested.
- The elections confirmed the trend towards greater bipolarisation and the dominance of the Union for a Popular Movement and the Socialist Party.
- There was a reconfiguration of the centre ground with two new formations but Bayrou's Democratic Movement made little impact.
- The decline of the smaller parties continued.

The Context and the Campaign

The 2007 legislative elections were held little more than a month after Nicolas Sarkozy's convincing victory over Ségolène Royal in the second round of the presidential election on 6 May¹. In the immediate aftermath of the election, there was a loss of political momentum as Royal took a holiday and François Bayrou withdrew to his constituency. The legislative campaign, launched on 20 May, was brief and low-key, and neither Sarkozy nor Royal ran for election to the National Assembly. The centre-right Union for a Popular Movement (*Union pour un mouvement*

¹ See S. Marthaler, 'The French Presidential Election of 22 April and 6 May 2007', *EPERN Election Briefing Paper No 33*

populaire - UMP) campaign was led by the prime minister, François Fillon, and although Sarkozy was very much in the media spotlight, this was more as a result of his activities on the world stage (at the G8 summit and in the run-up to the EU summit) than in the domestic arena. The Socialist Party (*Parti socialiste* - PS) campaign was led by the party leader, François Hollande, but the active role played by Royal in the campaign gave the impression of a dual leadership and created tensions within the Socialist camp.

For all intents and purposes parliamentary elections in France that follow presidential elections are generally devoid of a real campaign in the sense that we would understand elsewhere. As all the issues tend to have been examined in the presidential election in great detail, the main issue in legislative elections is effectively who fares well or badly in the elections themselves.

The UMP campaign centred on domestic issues, primarily employment, health, pensions, taxation and law and order, and the party set out as its main objective securing a comfortable majority for Sarkozy which would enable him to carry out the programme on which he was elected to the presidency. The Socialists, with the slogan 'Act and Protect' (*Agir et Protéger*), built their campaign around the themes of employment and purchasing power, social protection (pensions, health and public services), Europe (with the emphasis again on employment and public services) and democracy (decentralisation and social dialogue). The Socialist Party programme reflected very accurately the main preoccupations of the public, for 54% of whom employment was the issue which counted most in these elections, followed by social protection (48%) and purchasing power (42%)². European construction was cited by only 14%, and was more salient for voters on the right than the left. As in the presidential election, Europe featured very little in the campaign or media debates, despite the fact that these elections took place in the run-up to the crucial negotiations at the European Council on the constitutional treaty which had aroused such controversy in France during the 2005 referendum. Only the National Front gave prominence to the issue in its familiar portrayal of itself as the defender of national sovereignty against the Brussels 'eurocracy'. For the most part, the main interest of both politicians and the media was in the future composition of the parliament and the implications of this for the two major parties in terms of the ultimate balance of power.

All the indications were that the Union for a Popular Movement would have an overwhelming majority in the National Assembly and the socialists appeared to be resigned to this outcome. In the days leading up to the first round, polling organisations were predicting that Sarkozy's party would win between 366 and 460 seats, although polls in the early stages of the campaign had in fact predicted Socialist Party gains³. It was not, then, a question of if the Union for a Popular Movement would win but by how much, although the party attempted, not entirely convincingly, to play down assumptions about a landslide victory and Fillon warned against triumphalism. It was nonetheless clear that it had set itself a target of winning at least 400 seats and that anything less would be a disappointment.

² OpinionWay poll, June 7 2007; see also LH2 poll, 11 June 2007

³ *Le Monde* 20-21 May 2007

The Socialist Party's strategy, on the other hand, was one of damage limitation. Its key objective was not to fall below its performance in the presidential election, when it won 25.9% in the first round and 47% in the second. According to Hollande, anything above 120 seats would be a 'respectable' result. Both parties were aware of the danger of voter apathy after the record participation in the presidential election and Fillon called for 'total mobilisation'. However, it was hard to dispel the impression that the outcome was a foregone conclusion and the level of interest in the election campaign was low, both in the media and among the public. Only 32% of those intending to vote expressed an interest in the campaign, compared with 62% of those who had voted in the first round of the presidential election⁴.

Results of the first round

The first-round results confirmed expectations. The Union for a Popular Movement won almost 40% of the national vote compared with the socialists' 25%. Of the other parties, François Bayrou's newly-formed Democratic Movement (*Mouvement démocrate* or MoDem), performed best with 7.6% of votes, still falling a long way short of the 18.6% Bayrou had polled in the presidential election. Moreover, since most of the candidates of the former Union for French Democracy (*Union pour la démocratie française* - UDF) had formed a new party, the New Centre (*Nouveau centre* - NC) and allied themselves with Sarkozy's Union for a Popular Movement, the party was unlikely to win the twenty seats required to form a group in the National Assembly, thus depriving it of parliamentary privileges and funding. The Communist Party (*Parti communiste* - PC), the Greens and the National Front (*Front national* – FN) all polled less than 5% of the vote. For the National Front, this represented less than half of Le Pen's vote in the presidential election and the party's worst result since it broke onto the national political scene in 1986. For the communists and the Greens, however, this was a better performance than that achieved by their presidential candidates (see Table 1 below).

In the two-round majoritarian electoral system used for French legislative elections, the two leading candidates in the first round automatically go through to the second, together with any candidate winning at least 12.5% of the votes of the registered electorate. In these elections, there was only one three-way contest in the second round and a potential *triangulaire* between the Union for a Popular Movement, Socialist Party and MoDem was avoided in François Bayrou's constituency when Sarkozy instructed the Union for a Popular Movement candidate to stand down, leaving Bayrou in a run-off with the Socialist Party candidate, which he won. This was presented as a generous gesture on the part of the new president, although it also pre-empted the possibility of an alliance between the socialists and the centrist party against the Union for a Popular Movement. On the other hand, Jean-Pierre Chevènement (Republican and Citizen Movement⁵), whose reward for not running against Royal in the presidential campaign was the backing of the Socialist Party in the legislative elections, was defeated. A high number of Union for a Popular Movement candidates (109, representing almost a fifth of seats in the National Assembly) won the 50% of the vote required to be elected outright in the first round,

⁴ CSA poll, 10 June 2007

⁵ *Mouvement républicain et citoyen* - MRC

compared with only one Socialist Party candidate. All of this underlined the dominance of Sarkozy's party.

Table 1 1st-round vote in 2007 French legislative and presidential elections

POLITICAL PARTY/ GROUPING	1 st round legislative elections		1 st round presidential election	
	% votes cast	Number of votes	% votes cast	Number of votes
Far left ⁶	3.41	888,234	5.75	2,109,978
PC	4.29	1,115,663	1.93	707,268
PS	24.73	6,436,521	25.87	9,500,112
Les Verts	3.25	845,977	1.57	576,666
MoDem	7.61	1,981,107	18.57	6,820,119
Nouveau centre ⁷	2.37	616,440	■	■
UMP	39.54	10,289,737	31.18	11,448,663
MPF ⁸	1.2	312,581	1.84	818,407
CPNT ⁹	0.82	213,427	1.15	420,645
FN	4.29	1,116,136	10.44	3,834,530
Others	8.49	2,210,643	1.7	483,008
TOTAL	100	26,026,466	100	36,719,396

Source: French Ministry of the Interior

After the record turnout in the presidential elections, abstention in the first round hit a new high for legislative elections under the Fifth Republic (39.6%). Seventeen million voters abstained, ten million more than in the first round of the presidential election (see Figure 1 below).

A number of factors contributed to this record low turnout. The lack of suspense about the outcome of this first round clearly played an important role. The electorate was uninspired by the prospect of voting in what were effectively the third and fourth rounds of the presidential election. In part, this was due to voter fatigue after a period of election campaigning which had begun in January and a series of four ballots between April and June. Equally, when legislative elections immediately follow a presidential election, voters have the feeling that they have already stated their preference and that this election is simply a confirmation of the previous vote. Particularly now that the presidential term has been reduced from seven to five years so that it is concurrent with the parliamentary term, legislative elections have become a process of ratifying the choice of president which has just been made. In these circumstances, abstention does not necessarily indicate a significant loss of interest in politics or represent a protest vote. Although turnout was particularly low among Bayrou's MoDem electorate (42%), the profile of those abstaining was on the whole a

⁶ LO: Lutte ouvrière / Workers' Struggle; LCR: Ligue communiste révolutionnaire / Communist Revolutionary League; PT: Parti des travailleurs / Workers' Party

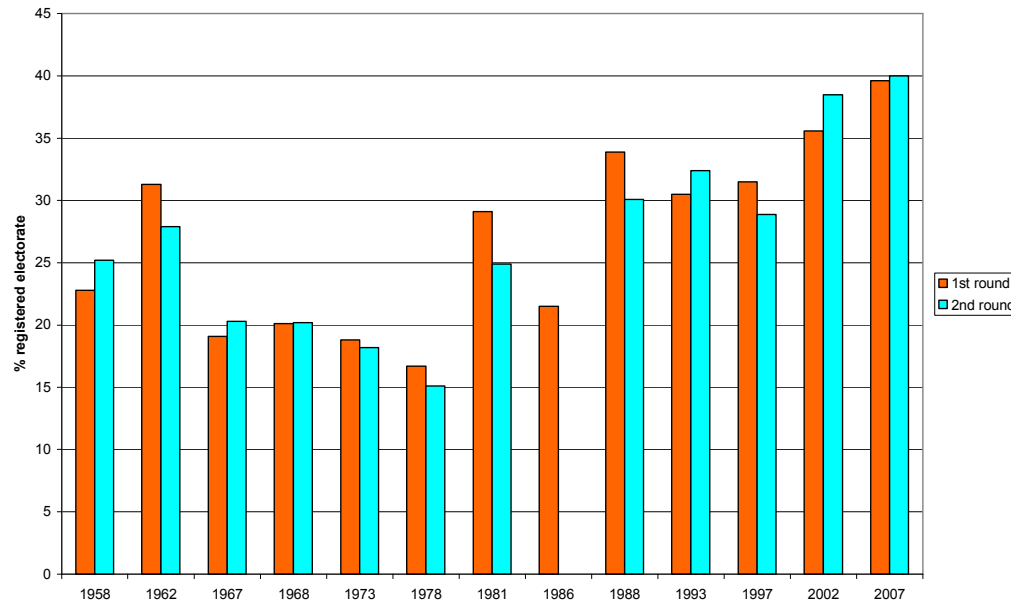
⁷ Nouveau centre (New Centre) candidates ran as members of the PSLE (Parti social libéral européen / Social Liberal European Party) since the new party will not have a formal status until it holds a constitutive congress.

⁸ MPF: Mouvement pour la France (Movement for France)

⁹ CPNT: Chasse, Pêche, Nature et Traditions (Hunting, Fishing, Nature and Traditions)

traditional one: younger voters, blue-collar workers, those on lower incomes and more left-wing (33%) than right-wing (28%) partisans¹⁰.

Figure 1 Abstention in French legislative elections, 1958-2007



For the parties, the low turnout in the first round meant that there were large reserves of voters which could potentially be mobilised for the second. In a televised declaration on the evening of 10 June, Ségolène Royal immediately called on socialist supporters who had abstained to turn out in the second round. On the following day, acting independently of her party, as she had done after the first round of the presidential election, she made an appeal to François Bayrou to support the left in order to avoid a humiliating defeat by the right, but her call went unanswered.

However, the dynamics of the campaign changed quite dramatically on the evening of the first round, when Laurent Fabius, taking part in an election night panel on TF1, raised the question of the government's financing of its proposed tax cuts and forced an admission from the Minister of Finance, Jean-Louis Borloo, that nothing would be ruled out, including a rise in VAT. This so-called 'social VAT', some of which would offset employers' social security contributions with a view to reducing the need for outsourcing (*délocalisation*), became a major issue in the campaign, dominating the debate between the two rounds and presenting the socialists with an unexpected opportunity which they gratefully exploited to the full. Sarkozy was forced into making a declaration in a televised speech that the measure would be tested first and implemented more widely only if it proved successful. This did nothing to allay the concerns of the public which, combined with the ubiquitous predictions in the media and the polls of a landslide victory for the right (a 'blue wave' or *vague bleue*), appear to have motivated left-wing voters to turn out in the second round, while mobilisation on the right declined.

¹⁰ Ipsos, 11 June 2007

Results of the Second Round

Despite the fact that the second round gave the Union for a Popular Movement an absolute majority with 313 seats in the 577-seat National Assembly and, moreover, that for the first time since 1978 an incumbent party had been returned to office, this was a disappointing victory. The president's party had failed to inflict the crushing defeat on the opposition that had been anticipated, and had not even managed to achieve its 400-seat target. The Union for a Popular Movement actually won fewer seats than in the 2002 legislative elections, while the socialists, to their evident surprise and delight, made gains (see Table 2 below). This was a far cry from the Socialist Party's catastrophic performance in 1993 when it was reduced to 57 MPs and, as in the presidential election, allowed the result to be presented more as a victory than a defeat.

Table 2 Composition of National Assembly, June 2007 (*and June 2002*)

POLITICAL PARTY/GROUPING	Seats in National Assembly	
	2007	2002
PC	15	21
PS	186	138
Other left	22	8
Les Verts	4	3
MoDem	3	29 ¹¹
Nouveau centre	22	
UMP	313	350
MPF	1	0
Other right	9	9
Other	2	19
TOTAL	577	

Source: French Ministry of the Interior

The demise of Alain Juppé, the number two in the newly-formed government, who had headed up the 'super' Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development which had been custom-built for him, also rubbed some of the shine off the Union for a Popular Movement victory. Fillon had said before the election that any ministers who lost their parliamentary seats would have to resign from the government and this led to an early and unwanted cabinet re-shuffle.

Clearly, the controversy over the social VAT played an important part in the result. Although turnout at 60% was even lower than in the first round, breaking all previous records for legislative elections, the left was boosted by a greater mobilisation of its supporters. In addition, the Socialist Party benefited from a significant transfer of votes in the second round from MoDem supporters, 55% of whom voted for a left-wing candidate, while 28% transferred their vote to the right and 17% either did not vote or cast a blank or spoilt ballot 55%¹². However, this does not mean that the MoDem electorate want an alliance between their party and the left. On the contrary,

¹¹ 2002 seats for Union for French Democracy

¹² CSA poll, 17 June 2007

a majority want the new party to remain independent. It seems that their vote for the socialists was used as a tactic to ensure greater pluralism in the National Assembly.

In contrast, on the right, fewer centrists or National Front voters transferred their vote to the Union for a Popular Movement in the second round, perhaps not wanting to contribute to a Union for a Popular Movement triumph. 54% of National Front voters abstained or cast a blank or spoilt ballot, only 27% voting for the right and 19% for the left¹³. The remaining hard core of the National Front electorate appears intent on maintaining its distinctiveness.

The presidential majority was given an absolute majority but not a ‘blank cheque’. There is a more even balance of power in the National Assembly than appeared likely after the first round, reflecting quite a significant adjustment of the vote (see Table 3 above). On 10 June, the left won 39% of votes cast compared with 51% on the right. This picture changed radically on 17 June when 49.1% of the vote went to left-wing candidates and 49.7% to the right. This suggests that the electorate want to see a viable opposition rather than a concentration of powers in the hands of one party. The result was also seen as a boost for the socialists (62% think that the Socialist Party has come out of the legislative elections stronger and only 27% that it is weaker) and to a lesser extent as a setback for Sarkozy (42% believe that he has been weakened by the legislative results and 41% that he has been strengthened)¹⁴.

Table 3 Results of French legislative elections 2007

POLITICAL PARTY/ GROUPING	1 st round		2 nd round	
	% votes cast	Number of votes	% votes cast	Number of votes
Far left	3.41	888,234	-	-
PC	4.29	1,115,663	2.28	464,739
PS	24.73	6,436,521	42.26	8,624,724
Other left	3.29	856,972	4.1	836,757
Les Verts	3.25	845,977	0.45	90,975
Other ecologists	0.80	208,477	-	-
CPNT	0.82	213,427	-	-
MoDem	7.61	1,981,107	0.49	100,106
Nouveau centre	2.37	616,440	2.12	433,057
UMP	39.54	10,289,737	46.36	9,461,330
MPF	1.20	312,581	-	-
Other right	2.47	641,842	1.17	238,585
FN	4.29	1,116,136	0.08	17,107
MNR	0.39	102,124	-	-
Other	1.54	401,228	0.68	139,552
TOTAL	100	26,026,466	100	20,406,932

Source: French Ministry of the Interior

¹³ CSA poll, 17 June 2007

¹⁴ CSA poll, 18 June 2007

Nonetheless, the socialists' better-than-expected performance could not mask the fact that the party was in considerable disarray, having suffered three consecutive defeats in presidential elections and two in legislative elections, and that there were divisions within the leadership over strategy and between the traditionalists and modernisers over the party's principles. Despite this, the Socialist Party first secretary, François Hollande, stood by his decision to lead the party into next year's municipal elections, although he would not stand for re-election at the 2008 congress. With the announcement by Hollande's partner, Ségolène Royal, on the evening of the second round vote, of their separation, the prospect of a power struggle for the leadership of the party resurfaced. The timing of the announcement drew some criticism, as it somewhat overshadowed the Socialist Party's good showing in the polls and dominated media coverage the following day rather than the election itself.

Royal will certainly make a bid for the leadership of the party. She is the most popular contender with left-wing voters but Dominique Strauss-Kahn, who favours a more social-democratic line, is slightly ahead with the electorate as a whole¹⁶. Royal is more popular with the anti-liberal left (the Communist Revolutionary League, Workers' Struggle and the Communist Party) whereas Strauss-Kahn draws more support from the centrist MoDem electorate.¹⁷ This could be a significant factor in the leadership battle if the Socialist Party decides to adopt a strategy of rapprochement with MoDem. Immediately after Royal's defeat in the presidential election, Hollande talked about a broader federation extending from the left to the centre but Strauss-Kahn is not himself in favour of an alliance with Bayrou's party.

Other younger contenders might include Arnaud Montebourg, Manuel Valls and Vincent Peillon, whom Montebourg has referred to as a new generation of 'young lions' eager to take over from the 'old elephants'. While some in the party, especially those who back Royal, want to move quickly to elect a new leader and a new team, others stress the need for the party to overcome its internal divisions, to draw the consequences of what happened in the polls and to take time to reflect on the party's future direction and identity. At a national council of the Socialist Party on 23 June, it was decided that a period of reappraisal would begin at the party's summer conference in August and conclude at the 2008 party congress after the municipal elections in March.

François Bayrou's future is also uncertain. With only three seats in the new National Assembly, MoDem will have no parliamentary group. While he has denounced the 'unbelievable injustice' of the electoral system, his decision to go it alone seems ill-judged. As a seasoned politician, he is well aware of the dangers of a strategy of independence in a majoritarian system which favours larger parties and alliances. His former Union for French Democracy colleagues had argued that a centrist political movement was only viable in alliance with the Union for a Popular Movement. With the creation of the New Centre, which won 22 seats, they will now have a

¹⁵ CSA poll, 18 June 2007

¹⁶ CSA poll, 17 June 2007; LH2 poll, 22-23 June 2007.

¹⁷ On 8 July, Sarkozy announced that Strauss-Kahn would be France's candidate to head the International Monetary Fund (IMF), although Strauss-Kahn himself has so far made no public comment.

parliamentary grouping under Hervé Morin, Minister of Defence in the new government. Nonetheless, 63% of electorate want MoDem to remain independent (76% of MoDem voters, 61% of left-wing voters, 53% of right-wing voters)¹⁸. This apparently paradoxical position, given the lack of electoral support for the party, is perhaps a reaction to the increasing bipolarisation of the French political space and the dominance of the two major players.

Three other parties survived into the second round¹⁹, the Communist Party, The Greens and the National Front, each of whom experienced a decline in support either as a result of abstention or a transfer of votes to the bigger parties. Although the Communist Party did, on the whole, rather better than expected after their performance in the presidential election, the party appears to be in a state of terminal decline. It is also in financial difficulties, partly as a result of falling membership but also because of its reduced access to public funding because of its poor showing in the polls. In order to maintain a parliamentary grouping, it has formed an alliance 'of the democratic and republican left' with the Greens.

On the far right, the National Front was another major loser in these elections, suffering a catastrophic collapse in the second round with less than 1% of the vote. Only Marine Le Pen got through to the second round, where she won 41.7% of the vote but lost to her Socialist Party opponent. The National Front appears increasingly marginalised, in part because of Sarkozy's success and the greater discipline on the moderate right, but also because Jean-Marie Le Pen is ageing and the party needs to consider a replacement for him as leader, with his daughter as the most likely successor, particularly in view of her performance in these elections. Bruno Mégret, leader of the other far right party, the MNR, has talked of an alliance with the National Front and the MPF. However, the leader of MPF, Philippe de Villiers, chastened by his poor result in the presidential election, seems to prefer his party's chances with Sarkozy's presidential majority and is therefore making moves towards the moderate right.

Conclusion and Future Prospects

The Union for a Popular Movement's disappointing performance in the second round does not appear to reflect dissatisfaction with Sarkozy, whose popularity has risen since his victory in the presidential election, even among left-wing supporters²⁰. It seems to indicate rather that the French electorate as a whole was unwilling to sanction a concentration of legislative power in the hands of the right and want to see an effective opposition. At the same time, they clearly do not want a return to cohabitation. On the other hand, Sarkozy's inclusion of ministers from the centre and left in the government is popular with the electorate as a whole, 66%²¹ of whom are in favour of this strategy.

¹⁸ CSA poll, 17 June 2007

¹⁹ The sovereigntist MPF had two MPs returned to the National Assembly in the first round of the elections

²⁰ LH2 poll, 22-23 June 2007

²¹ CSA poll, 17 June 2007

Voters have confirmed the result of the presidential election and given the new president and his government a strong mandate to carry out their radical programme which includes legislation on the 35-hour week, public services, universities, crime, immigration and tax reform. A majority of voters²² want Sarkozy and Fillon to press ahead quickly with these reforms and given the government's absolute majority and the difficulties facing the opposition, little appears to stand in their way.

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²² CSA poll, 18 June 2007