

# Wide popular interest, deep political tensions dominate French presidential election

Peter Schwarz in Paris  
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The French presidential election is dominated by a deep contradiction. Broad layers of the population reject the current state of society and are looking for a progressive alternative. The past ten years have witnessed a series of strikes and mass protests, often lasting for weeks and involving hundreds of thousands if not millions of people. Yet this popular oppositional sentiment finds no reflection in official politics. Without exception, France's political parties are moving inexorably to the right.

This contradiction lends the election campaign a highly tense, politicised and unpredictable character. Although the presidential election has dominated the media for many weeks, and will continue to do so right through the first round on April 22 and the second round on May 6, followed by parliamentary elections in mid-June, political interest remains high. The candidates speak to packed houses and there are high viewer ratings for the innumerable discussions broadcast on TV.

The volatile political situation is reflected in the opinion polls, which fluctuate violently. Many voters have yet to decide on a candidate. They tend to change their opinions on short notice, in large part because they sense that none of the candidates really represent their interests.

The high level of political interest is expressed in a record level of new voter registrations. Over the past year, 1.8 million people have registered to vote—the highest number in a quarter-century. Young people have registered in particularly large numbers in the cities and also in the working class and immigrant suburbs where violent clashes between youth and riot police occurred 18 months ago.

The newspaper *le Monde* has been conducting a survey of the opinions of 15 young people living in a suburb of Paris. Now the paper reports that the group's initial attitude of wariness has given way to fear at the prospect of a victory for the candidate of the Gaullist Union for a Popular Movement (UMP), Nicolas Sarkozy.

"An election victory for Sarkozy means we confront five years without hope," the newspaper quotes a 20-year-old student as saying. A 22-year-old small trader said, "As interior minister, Sarkozy gave free rein to the police. There will be no stopping him if he becomes president."

Vague hopes for an improvement in their situation, which are prompting these young people and other socially disadvantaged layers to participate in the election, are doomed to be disappointed. None of their hopes and desires will be fulfilled by any of the candidates for France's highest public office.

Over the past few weeks, the candidate of the Socialist Party, Ségolène Royal, has demonstrated her boundless opportunism. Buffeted by the opinion polls, she changes her campaign statements from week to week. While Sarkozy seeks to dominate the debate over law-and-order with the aggressiveness and obstinacy of a bulldog, Royal pads obediently behind him.

She began her election campaign under the banner of a "modernisation" program, à la Tony Blair. When she saw how unpopular this was, she added a few social demands—promising an increase in the minimum wage and a job guarantee for all young people, without, however, explaining how such measures are to be financed. She sought to give herself a social reformist gloss by bringing onto her campaign team well-known political veterans, the Socialist Party's so-called "elephants". Then a week later she ditched them and declared she would carry out her campaign on her own.

Last week she engaged in a bizarre competition with Sarkozy over which of them could demonstrate the most fervent nationalism. Following a call by the UMP candidate for the creation of a "Ministry for National Identity and Immigration," Royal sought to emphasise her own patriotism by recommending that every Frenchman have his own tricolour at home. For good measure, she had the national anthem played at all her election meetings. This eruption of chauvinism dominated the headlines for an entire week.

Now Royal has taken to reassuring representatives of small and middle-sized enterprises of her allegiance to the capitalist market economy. In an interview Thursday with the magazine *Challenges* she declared her opposition to an "ideology which seeks to punish profit," and said she wants "entrepreneurs to enjoy their success".

She continued: "I want France to reconcile itself to the entrepreneurial spirit so that it is once again prepared to take risks. It is not dishonourable to make money. Yes, I am even ready to say to businessmen: it is not dishonourable to make profits and increase your incomes."

One must anticipate further twists and turns from Royal in the coming days. She has already established herself as a candidate without any principles—as someone who responds in parrot fashion to what the media and ruling circles whisper in her ear.

The candidate of the right-wing liberal Union for French Democracy (UDF), François Bayrou, was able to temporarily profit from Royal's further tilt to the right. In opinion polls he drew even for a while with the Socialist Party candidate, but has

since dropped back.

Bayrou presents himself as a candidate of “unity” and the “centre,” who rejects the “party pigsty” and is seeking to unite the bigger parties in a common government. Should he make it to the second round of the election, Bayrou is thought to have a good chance of winning the presidency.

The 79-year-old leader of the extreme right-wing National Front, Jean Marie Le Pen, has also been able to exploit the right-wing course of Royal and Sarkozy for his own ends. Following the brutal intervention of police against youth at Paris’ Gare du Nord train station last Tuesday—an action that was fully supported by Sarkozy—Le Pen’s support rose to 15 percent for the first time. He is now behind Bayrou in fourth place. With 17 percent of the vote in 2002, Le Pen was able to challenge the Gaullist incumbent Jacques Chirac in the second round of voting.

The parties of the so-called “left” play an important role in the election campaign. It is noteworthy that six of the twelve candidates who have been certified to stand in the presidential election regard themselves as being to the left of the Socialist Party.

Compared with other countries, the French electoral system gives candidates of smaller parties a relatively broad opportunity to gain a hearing. If they are able to satisfy the conditions for candidacy, i.e., the sponsorship of 500 mayors or other elected representatives, they are entitled, at least theoretically, to as much television time as the candidates of the larger parties.

The main broadcasting companies are obliged to report on their campaigns. In addition, election campaign budgets of up to 800,000 euros are guaranteed to each party by the state treasury. If they receive more than 5 percent of the vote, this sum rises into the millions.

The participation in the election of so many nominally left parties is a distorted reflection of the mood of the population at large. On the extreme right just two candidates are standing against the established parties, Le Pen of the National Front and Philippe de Villiers of the Mouvement pour la France (MPF). The precise political orientation of Frédéric Nihous, the candidate of the Hunters Party (CNPT), is difficult to determine.

The “lefts”, however, are anything but an alternative to the establishment parties. They have taken up the task of diverting popular discontent behind one or another of the bourgeois parties. The French ruling elite has a great deal of experience and expertise in exploiting such tendencies, and has at its disposal a broad range of organisations, which make it difficult for workers and young people to challenge the political domination of the bourgeoisie.

Two “left” candidates, Marie George Buffet of the Communist Party and Dominique Voynet of the Greens, have years of experience in government. They both held ministerial posts in the Socialist Party-led government of Lionel Jospin. Both Buffet and Voynet want to maintain an alliance with the Socialists led by Royal.

Buffet’s central election slogan is: “Anyone but Sarkozy”—which can also be interpreted as support for Bayrou.

Daniel Cohn Bendit, who represents the French Greens in the European parliament, has even suggested a government alliance between the Greens, the Socialists and Bayrou’s UDF.

The farmers’ leader and candidate of the anti-globalisation movement, José Bové, represents a backwards-looking, nationalist-tainted program aimed at protecting rural France from the effects of globalisation. Gérard Schivardi, who is supported by the Worker’s Party (Parti des travailleurs) and calls himself the “candidate of the mayors,” defends a similar point of view.

The two remaining candidates are usually described as “extreme left”: Olivier Besancenot of the Revolutionary Communist League (Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire) and Arlette Laguiller of Workers Struggle (Lutte Ouvrière). They pose as more radical than Buffet, Voynet or Schivardi, but merely serve as a fig leaf for official bourgeois politics. Both avoid the central question that confronts the working class: the necessity to break with the former reformist parties and the trade unions.

It is not possible to defend a single social or political gain without the construction of an independent political movement of the working class that is directed against the bourgeois apparatuses of the Socialist Party and the unions. Clarification of the necessity for this step in the struggle for an internationalist and socialist orientation is the most important task in this election.

But Laguiller and Besancenot have absolutely nothing to say in this respect. They put forward their programs in the election campaign as if they were drawing up a menu for a good French restaurant. One can find all sorts of suggestions and social demands, but not a word about how they are to be achieved. In a restaurant this is usually the job of the cook, but which cook is available to convert the suggestions of Besancenot and Laguiller into practice?

Both candidates have obviously pinned their hopes on the Socialist Party, which they will either openly or tacitly support in the second round of the election. Five years ago the LCR even called for a vote for the Gaullist Jacques Chirac after the Socialist Party candidate Lionel Jospin was knocked out in the first round.



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