

French presidential election

Sarkozy and Royal to compete in second round

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23 April 2007

Nicolas Sarkozy and Ségolène Royal will compete in the second round of the French presidential election on May 6.

Sarkozy, the candidate of the Gaullist Union for a Popular Movement (*Union pour un Mouvement Populaire*, UMP) won the most votes in yesterday's first round of the election with 31 percent of the ballots cast. Royal, the Socialist Party candidate, received 25.6 percent.

François Bayrou, the candidate of the Union for French Democracy (*Union pour la Démocratie Française*, UDF) got 18.5 percent, and Jean-Marie Le Pen, the candidate of the far-right National Front, 10.6 percent.

Bayrou, who postured as the candidate who would overcome the right-left divide in French politics, had previously been running close to Royal in the polls, because many voters opposed to Sarkozy considered him to have a better chance than Royal in the runoff against the Gaullist candidate. But eventually, he fell behind. Nevertheless, compared to the last election in 2002, when no candidate received more than 20 percent of the vote in the first round, his result is still relatively high.

Le Pen, who entered the second round by surprise in the 2002 election, did much worse than the polls predicted. He was continuously rated at 15 percent. His campaign manager and daughter Marine Le Pen held Sarkozy's campaign responsible for the decline in Le Pen's votes. Sarkozy, she said, had stolen the National Front's ideas and themes.

The turnout was exceptionally high. Eighty-five percent of eligible voters went to the polls, the highest figure since the Fifth Republic was founded in 1958.

Some 38 million voted this time, compared to 29 million in 2002. Particularly in the run-down suburbs, where violent battles between youth and police took place two years ago, a high number of young people had registered to vote.

This is a clear sign of a growing politicization of young people and within the working class as a whole. During the election campaign, even in smaller cities, meetings of the candidates regularly drew audiences of several thousand people. All the major candidates felt obliged to take this desire to change existing conditions by means of the ballot box into account. Sarkozy made the pledge of a "break" the centre of his campaign, Royal promised a "change" and Bayrou even an "orange revolution."

But it was left to the candidates of the misnamed "extreme left" to channel the groundswell of deep but unarticulated opposition behind the establishment candidates.

Five years ago, the candidates of the so-called radical left received a remarkably high number of votes. Arlette Laguiller of Workers Struggle (*Lutte Ouvrière*, LO), Olivier Besancenot of the Revolutionary Communist League (*Ligue Communiste révolutionnaire*, LCR) and Daniel Gluckstein of the Workers Party (*Parti des Travailleurs*, PT) together polled more than 10 percent of the vote. This was one of the factors that contributed to the defeat of Socialist Party candidate Lionel Jospin by Jean-Marie Le Pen of the National Front.

This time, the radical left made it clear from the beginning that they favoured a victory of Royal and regarded their own campaigns only as a means of pressuring the Socialist Party candidate to the left.

Discussions on a “useful vote”—i.e. voting for the candidate most likely to defeat Sarkozy in the second round—dominated the public debate in the last days before the election.

As a result, these “left” parties did much worse than in 2002. Marie-George Buffet, the candidate of the Communist Party, received 1.9 percent, by far the worst result in the party’s history. Green Party candidate Dominique Voynet did even worse with 1.6 percent. LO’s Arlette Laguiller, who was running her sixth presidential campaign, got only a quarter of her previous vote, with 1.4 percent. Anti-globalisation candidate José Bové received 1.3 percent, and PT-candidate Gérard Schivardi got 0.3 percent.

The only exception was Olivier Besancenot of the LCR, who improved his share to 4.2 percent. Besancenot, who is relatively young and an adept speaker, was able to make a certain superficial appeal to students and working class youth.

Within less than an hour after the polls closed, all the radical candidates were lining up behind Royal. Buffet, Voynet and Laguiller openly called for a vote for the Socialist Party candidate. In Laguiller’s case, this was a first. In previous elections LO had always refrained from openly supporting the Socialist Party and adapted a passive attitude. Besancenot, while stating his disagreement with Royal’s program, called for a vote for her in order to stop Sarkozy.

While the radicals are running after Royal, Royal is running after Sarkozy. This was the case during the campaign preceding the first round, when Royal tried to prove that she is as nationalistic and devoted to law and order as her right-wing opponent. And it was the case in the night after the election.

Sarkozy, who is aware that he might lose the election if he is seen as too much of a polarizing figure, paid respect to his adversary and called for a “dignified” campaign and a “debate on ideas,” while at the same time insisting that he and Royal represented two diametrically opposed perspectives.

In an attempt to widen his electoral base, Sarkozy appealed to the hard working poor: to “the France that gives a lot and receives nothing,” to “the France that suffers.” He presented himself as the guardian of those “who are afraid” and said he desired a France that is “like a family, where the weakest has the right to be loved as much as the strongest” (*la «France qui donne*

beaucoup et ne reçoit rien», la «France qui souffre,» / «comme une famille où le plus faible a droit à autant d’amour que le plus fort»).

Royal, who spoke almost an hour later, rattled off cliché after cliché, imitating many of the right-wing nostrums of her adversary and ending with the battle cry, “Long live France.” It is obvious that Royal’s continuous adaptation to Sarkozy, with whom she has no fundamental political disagreements, is improving the electoral fortunes of a man who is deeply hated and feared by wide sections of the population.

A first poll conducted after the election result was known gave Sarkozy a lead of 54 percent to Royal’s 46 percent.

Bayrou, whose electorate will hold the balance in the second round, has carefully avoided making any endorsement.



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