

Nicolas Sarkozy: down but not out in the French elections

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The first round of France's presidential elections resulted in a narrow lead for Socialist leader François Hollande over the incumbent president Nicolas Sarkozy and an unexpectedly high result for the National Front candidate Marine Le Pen. As part of our [continuing series](#) on the French elections, [Maurice Fraser](#) looks forward to the second round of the election on 6 May, arguing that while the electoral odds are against him, Sarkozy may be able to use the Euro crisis to his advantage, by discrediting Hollande's economic plans.



After the first round of the French presidential elections Nicolas Sarkozy's prospects look slim but perhaps no longer forlorn. Hollande's 1.5% lead over Sarkozy tells us little in itself. Nor does the fact that the left-wing 'family' of parties achieved a reservoir of 44% of the vote and the right-wing parties 47%.

On the assumption that most of the 11% of voters who chose the far-left candidate Jean Luc Melenchon (who underperformed compared with the polls) will switch to Hollande, the key question is how the voters of the National Front candidate Marine Le Pen (with 18%, only 1% less than her father achieved in the shock result of 2002) will divide between Hollande and Sarkozy. Ditto the supporters of the centrist candidate Francois Bayrou, who, with just 9%, has lost half his voters since 2007. Polls are predicting that around 60% of National Front voters are likely to switch to Sarkozy, and around 20 to 25 % to Hollande. Bayrou's centrist voters seem to be evenly divided, with analysts suggesting that his remaining supporters lean more to the right ideologically, but have real problems with Sarkozy's personality.

All eyes now are on whom le Pen and Bayrou are likely to endorse for the second round on 6 May, but we shouldn't hold our breath: Le Pen is highly unlikely to endorse either of the front-runners. Quite simply, there is nothing in it for her. More significantly, her main strategy is to hope for the incumbent's defeat, on the assumption that this will prove a game-changer on the Right and lead to a split between its more liberal elements and a nationalist, populist, [Poujadist](#) Right on which she could capitalise.



For his part, Bayrou (who has, somewhat bravely, based his campaign on the need to restore the public finances) has indicated that he will set out his position on 3 May, having listened carefully to the two candidates, including their TV face-to-face on 2 May. But he is an implausible king-maker: he is having trouble keeping his own diminished tribe together, with several of his colleagues already declaring themselves publicly either for Hollande or for Sarkozy. In his case as well, there is no obvious strategic advantage in endorsing either candidate; nor is it likely that if he were to do so, he could actually 'deliver' many of his voters, a somewhat disparate and under-motivated part of the electorate.

The expectation now – fuelled by comments by the president himself, is that candidate Sarkozy will concentrate on winning over Le Pen's voters by hardening his tone on immigration, law and order, and the value of work – the theme of the big rally he has announced for Labour Day, 1 May, in Paris. He will leave it to some of his allies and lieutenants to court the more centrist voters of Francois Bayrou with talk of the 'humanist dimension' of the Right.

The science of fine-tuning and reconciling conflicting messages for different constituencies is an imperfect one at best – not least because voters do not sit in the neat ideological silos so beloved of commentators. But political success depends not just on capitalising on disaffection but in articulating a clear message and

narrative, and Sarkozy has made his choice. Just as the French Left have always insisted on 'No enemies on the Left', so Sarkozy will try to leave as few enemies as possible on the Right. Note that Hollande is not being too fastidious: he knows that he will need at least a sizeable number of National Front votes to carry the day on 6 May, and, like Sarkozy, he is being careful not to demonise those voters: the National Front vote is a 'crisis vote' not a protest vote, both candidates insist, and their concerns must be heeded. (Hollande might also ponder the fact that Le Pen secured three times more votes amongst industrial workers than Melenchon).

Predicting elections in France can, more than in most countries, be a bit of a mug's game, not only because French voters like to deliver shocks to elite and polite opinion, but because the multiplicity of ideological strands and political tribes makes for a confusing political landscape. Traditionally these differences are submerged – albeit temporarily – in the second round of elections: the key to the outcome lies in which of Left and Right can mobilise most effectively their 'vote utile'. In recent years the Right has been effective in this respect. This time, however, the Right is finding it harder than the Left to concentrate minds in its favour, so the odds must still be against Sarkozy. But let's not forget that Europe is still in crisis; apart from execution, there are few things better able to concentrate the mind of an anxious and brittle public. Sarkozy will exploit ruthlessly the perceived weaknesses of the Left's economic programme. Don't count him out just yet.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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