

# Sarko vs Juppé: Will the French right select a candidate who can stop Le Pen?

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15/11/2016

*On 20 and 27 November, the French right will select its candidate for the 2017 presidential election. While formally a seven candidate race, polls indicate that the real battle is between former president Nicolas Sarkozy and former prime minister and mayor of Bordeaux Alain Juppé. [Marta Lorimer](#) discusses the polls and the variables likely to shape the final result.*



The main French centre-right party, Les Républicains, alongside a number of other smaller parties, is set to select its candidate for the 2017 presidential election in two rounds of primary voting on 20 and 27 November. In the last year, and especially since the official candidates were announced in September, the polls have consistently told the same story: a two-horse race with Alain Juppé largely coming out ahead. With only two exceptions, Juppé has come across as the candidate to beat, hovering around the 35-40% mark in the first round. He is followed, more or less closely, by Nicolas Sarkozy, whose ratings have been oscillating in the 30% area. While the gap between the two has narrowed significantly in recent weeks, Juppé maintains the lead on his main opponent.

The real surprise of the last few weeks, however, has been François Fillon, who experienced a surge in the polls. Fillon is now predicted to receive around 18-20% of the vote, closing the gap between himself and Sarkozy. His surge is coming mostly at the expense of Juppé and Bruno Le Maire – the latter will probably fall below the 10% mark. The remaining candidates follow suit, with Nathalie Kosciusko-Morizet stable at 4%, Jean-Frédéric Poisson at 2% and Jean-François Copé at 1%. While the gap between Sarkozy and Juppé is closing in the first round, in the second round, Juppé is still expected to win hands down, with a majority of around 60% of votes. As a less divisive candidate, he is expected to benefit from the ‘anyone but Sarkozy’ effect.

## Uncertain turnout and the Trump effect

While the polls have been consistent in predicting a Juppé victory, it is important to note that there are several variables which still make polling quite uncertain. These concern in particular the question of who will vote. In fact,

this is the first open primary of the right: while the Socialist Party has held primaries in the past, the right has tended to select its candidates directly, without involving the voters. In the absence of a precedent, making predictions becomes more complicated, especially as far as turnout is concerned.

This is quite important as the number of voters is expected to be one of the main factors affecting the final result, with low turnout expected to favour Sarkozy, and high turnout likely to benefit Juppé and the other candidates. In a low turnout scenario, Sarkozy is likely to take advantage of the fact that he has a very faithful electorate, especially within the party. It is precisely this *'noyau dur'* that represents his main advantage: unlike other candidates, he has strong support in the party base which could hugely favour him if only motivated party members participated.

Alain Juppé's support, on the other hand, is much more brittle: while broadly popular with centre-right voters, he lacks a strong and motivated electorate, and this could make his victory less likely in a low-turnout scenario. In a high turnout scenario, he would have a reasonable advantage, in so far as it would suggest that it is not just Les Républicains party members voting, but also broader sections of the electorate. As a candidate appealing to voters who have been let down by other parties (the Socialists in particular, but he also called upon Front National voters to join him), Juppé hopes that a high turnout will give him the victory, and he has insisted strongly on mobilising and raising awareness among the electorate of the voting procedures.

Alongside Juppé, many of the other candidates would gain from a high turnout scenario, as this would likely reduce Sarkozy's advantage and grant them a stronger standing. Of course, a high turnout could cause controversy: Sarkozy has already accused Juppé of winning thanks to the vote of left-wing sympathisers rather than thanks to the backing of right wingers. Secondly, but perhaps less importantly, there is always the possibility of a 'Trump (or Brexit) effect' looming in the shadows: that polls may have been wrong and have underestimated voters' anti-establishment feelings. It is unclear which candidate would benefit from this, but Sarkozy appeared to suggest he could be the true representative of 'the people' against the elite – although it is ironic to say the least to see a former French president suggesting that he is the 'anti-establishment' candidate.

### **What happens after the primary?**

After the primary election, the losing candidates are expected to rally behind the winner. In programmatic terms, this should be relatively easy. In fact, while there are [some differences](#) between the candidates' programmes, their greatest differences lie in alliances and personalities rather than on the fundamentals of policy. However, some candidates have opposed each other quite strongly on a personal level, which could make things less straightforward. In any case, the winner will have five months to get their campaign for the presidency up and running.

Making predictions at this stage for the presidential election itself is extremely difficult: while candidates are starting to emerge, the final picture will not be clear until January and it is still difficult to know what issues the campaign will be fought on. What polls suggest is that this will be a race to beat Marine Le Pen: the leader of the Front National is almost certain to make it through the first round of the presidential election, although she is expected to lose to any right wing candidate in the second round. After a year of inaccurate predictions, however, more and more people are starting to wonder if Marine Le Pen could be the next surprise.

For the time being, she is still facing an uphill battle: unlike with Brexit and Trump, she remains the leader of a fringe party that is still negatively perceived by large segments of the electorate. Moreover, the two-round system puts her at a great disadvantage as mainstream parties in the French system tend to rally against extremist candidates. While [cracks have started to emerge](#) in this 'republican rally', it might be too soon to declare it dead. Finally, even if she did win the presidency, she would still have to win the following legislative election to gain real control. Failing this, she could be locked out of power by a difficult *'cohabitation'* with a hostile Parliament.

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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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