

Les Républicains primary: The runners and riders as the French centre-right selects its presidential candidate

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Several French parties, including France's largest centre-right party, Les Républicains, will select their candidate for the 2017 French presidential election in a primary to be held in November. With the official campaign set to kick-off on 21 September, [Marta Lorimer](#) discusses the main contenders and their programmes ahead of the vote.



As France's presidential election approaches, the main French parties are organising primary elections to designate their candidates. While the Socialist Party will not hold its own primary until January, the main centre-right party, Les Républicains (LR), the Parti chrétien-démocrate (PCD, centre) and the Centre National des Indépendants et Paysans (CNIP, right) will be selecting their respective candidate on 20 November (first round) and 27 November (second round).

While the contest is open in principle to all centre-right parties and has been billed as the 'primary of the right and the centre', the primary failed to gain the consensus of all forces on that side of the spectrum. After failing to find an agreement on the programme, the UDI and Alliance Centriste decided not to present candidates in the primary. The MoDem led by François Bayrou, on its side, has decided to endorse Alain Juppé. However, should the mayor of Bordeaux lose against Sarkozy, Bayrou has declared that he would be running separately in the presidential election.

In the months preceding the official closing date for candidacies (9 September), several prominent politicians announced their interest in running in the primary election. Les Républicains required each candidate to obtain the sponsorship (*parrainage*) of 20 MPs, 2,500 party members and 250 elected representatives. Overall, seven candidates from Les Républicains received the sufficient number of 'parrainages' to be allowed to take part in the election. Four members from other parties have also submitted applications, but three of them have been rejected, bringing the total to 8 candidates.

This is the first time that France's centre-right will have held an open primary, i.e. one where any citizen can vote. Those arriving at the polling station will be required to sign a 'statement of allegiance' to the values of the right and pay a small contribution of two euros in order to receive their ballot.

The favourites: Alain Juppé

Currently leading in the polls is Alain Juppé, mayor of Bordeaux and a former prime minister. A respected politician and very close to the parties of the centre, Juppé announced his candidature in 2014 and has since built a strong programmatic offer. In economic terms, his programme is strikingly liberal by French standards. His main objective is to return to full employment by reducing taxes for companies, but he has also pledged to reduce the public deficit, which he considers a source of intergenerational unfairness. In a move that is likely to be highly contested, he expressed the will to raise the retirement age to 65, and abolish the 35-hour work week in favor of a 39-hour week which would give companies more leeway.

Perhaps the most unique feature of Juppé's programme is his approach to the question of French identity, which is radically opposed to that of his main rival, Nicolas Sarkozy. A proponent of integration over assimilation, he emphasises the positive effects of diversity in society, an unusual position amongst the right. This, however, does not make him a supporter of open borders: Juppé is also in favour of restricting the number of immigrants allowed into France and pledges to set yearly quotas for each type of immigrant (students, workers, family reunion).

Recognising the extent to which the EU is indispensable for France, Juppé is pushing for a reform of the EU, in order to make it “less bureaucratic, more efficient and more legitimate”. At seventy-two years old, he has promised to complete only one mandate, stating that he would not be seeking re-election should he win. While this could be a disadvantage because it leaves him little time to complete his programme, it could also mean that he will be less reluctant to push forward unpopular measures.

Nicolas Sarkozy

On 22 August, Sarkozy surprised very few people when he announced that he would be taking part in the primary election. Having quit politics ‘for good’ after the 2012 presidential election, his return on the French political scene in 2014 suggested that he was ready to seek a second presidential mandate.

Sarkozy has outlined his presidential programme in the book “*Tout pour la France*” (Everything for France). Surfing the wave of terrorist attacks, Sarkozy’s campaign is focused on the issues of immigration and security. Sarkozy pledges to put a halt on family reunion migration, as well as economic migration. In addition, he has articulated a tough stance on citizenship rules, promising to make it much harder for people to acquire French citizenship.

What differentiates him the most from Juppé, however, is his approach to the debate on ‘national identity’. A supporter of assimilation, Sarkozy has never been a fan of multiculturalism, and has always been unsympathetic toward veils, which have become a major issue in France. Weighing in on the ‘Burkini ban’ controversy, [he has said](#) that as president, he would change the constitution to impose a national-level ban on burkinis.

More broadly, he has suggested that France should create a “French Islam”, training imams in France and abandoning the practice of “importing” imams from abroad, and he is in favour of the expulsion of radical imams. He has proposed the creation of a special anti-terrorism Court, and he has also repeated his plan to detain or put under house-arrest all individuals “fichées S” – that is, people who are suspected of terrorism.

As for the economic programme, Sarkozy’s approach has very few original points: alongside other candidates of the right he is in favour of a higher retirement age, as well as the abolition of the 35-hour week, and he also wants to reduce the number of officials. His most notable pledge in economic terms has been his suggestion to cut income tax by 10% – a measure likely to put serious strain on the French budget.

Overall, Sarkozy has very clearly revisited his ‘classic’ themes of immigration and security, treading on Front National ground on several occasions. Part of his strategy is to try and gain back the voters who have migrated to Marine Le Pen’s party. In this, he could not be more different from Juppé, who prefers to focus on the centre ground



Alain Juppé – Credits: [US Department of Defense](#)



Nicolas Sarkozy – Credits: [Aleph](#)

rather than the far right. It also remains to be seen if Sarkozy will manage to encourage voters to ‘forget’ his record as president, as well as his recent legal issues.

The contenders: Bruno Le Maire

Bruno Le Maire rose to prominence in 2014, when he challenged Sarkozy for the presidency of Les Républicains. While Sarkozy expected a triumphant return, Le Maire snatched around 30% of the votes, suggesting that the party was more divided than expected on the figure of the former president. The 47 year old presents himself as the candidate of change, playing on his relative inexperience with power and a mildly anti-elitist stance.

Unlike Sarkozy or Juppé, he has been neither prime minister, nor president – although he has been advisor to Dominique de Villepin when he was Minister of the Interior, and Minister for Agriculture under Sarkozy. His three priorities are: reinforcing the authority of the sovereign State; creating a more competitive setting for enterprises; and placing a strong focus on education. While unlikely to win, Le Maire probably represents the future of the party and is therefore a figure worth keeping an eye on.



Bruno Le Maire – Credits: [UMP](#)

François Fillon

François Fillon, former Prime Minister under Sarkozy, declared that he would be running in the primary election as far back as 2013, but has been lagging behind in the polls. Fillon’s programme is extensive and highly demanding. He has pledged no less than to liberalise the economy, refocus the State on its exclusive competences, invest in education and training, reinforce security and reform the Eurozone. Reducing public expenditure is central to Fillon’s plan: his aim is to first cut expenses, and then cut back on taxes by reducing the number of officials and bringing the working week in the public sector to 39 hours. He also pledges to bring the retirement age up to 65, and privatise certain sectors.



François Fillon – Credits: [Rama](#)

The rest

Based on pre-electoral polling, Juppé and Sarkozy appear to be the main actors in the primary, followed by Le Maire and Fillon. In this race, unless the High Authority detects irregularities or refuses candidates, they will be joined by another three contestants from within the party, and four from other parties of the centre-right. Jean-François Copé, Nathalie Kosciusko-Morizet and Hervé Mariton complete the offer from Les Républicains. They will feature alongside Jean-Frédéric Poisson, president of the Parti Chrétien-démocrate.

Three more candidates had presented themselves under the heading of ‘other parties’: Mourad Ghazli (UDI), lawyer Michel Guénaire and Frédéric Lefebvre, a member of Les Républicains, who having failed to collect a sufficient number of parrainages, has decided to present his candidature as president of the micro-party “New Horizons”. Their applications, however, were rejected by the High Authority.

Finally, Geoffroy Didier, Nadine Morano, Jacques Myard, and Henri Guaino, who had previously announced their candidature, did not manage to reach the sufficient number of ‘parrainages’ to take part in the primary.

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