

With the centre-right ahead, is next year's French presidential battle already over?

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France will hold presidential elections in 2017, which have taken on renewed significance in the aftermath of the UK's decision to leave the European Union. [Jocelyn Evans](#) and [Gilles Ivaldi](#) present a comprehensive look at the state of play ahead of the elections. They write that with the Socialist Party in disarray, the presidential election is the centre-right's to lose, with Alain Juppé or Nicolas Sarkozy likely to win the nomination. Meanwhile Marine Le Pen is well placed to secure a record share of the vote in the first round of the election, but will be hard pressed to beat the centre-right candidate in the second round.



With around a year to go until the 2017 presidential and legislative elections in France, the main pressure-points for the likely candidates and their presidential party machines are already emerging. The mainstream right increasingly appears to be the inevitable victor, with the Front National emerging as the second largest party, while the ruling socialists are heading for electoral annihilation. What remains to be seen is who leads the current opposition into the fray, and at what cost to the Socialist Party (PS).



The left's continental drift

Despite [some slow economic recovery](#) and [a slight improvement in unemployment figures](#), Presidential approval ratings hit rock-bottom at 16% in May. At the heart of the problem lies the forcing through by the government of a highly unpopular [labour bill](#), using article 49.3 of the Constitution to override the parliament's vote. This has provoked mass demonstrations, strikes and blockades of fuel depots by the CGT union, with the support of radical left parties. The bill, designed to address the rigidity of the French labour market, is opposed by [nearly half](#) (46%) of the French population.

Politically, the legislation has highlighted the ever growing divide between anti-liberal orthodox socialists, such as former Industrial Minister Arnaud Montebourg, and social-liberal modernists such as Economy Minister Emmanuel Macron who now threatens Hollande's reelection bid. This schism runs through the PS: last month, a proposed motion of no-confidence by radical leftist MPs which garnered 56 of the necessary 58 signatures (i.e. 10% of the National Assembly) included 28 socialists, amongst whom were former Ministers Aurélie Filippetti, Benoît Hamon and Thomas Thévenoud.

The labour bill has also further widened the gap between the ruling socialists and the other parties of the left. EELV's Greens have been in crisis for several months, the party split between those who prioritise their alliance with the PS and those who have moved into radical opposition to the Valls government. Moreover, a number of EELV MPs have recently decamped to the socialists, leading to [the dissolution of the party's Parliamentary group](#).

Further to the left, the Communist and Jean-Luc Mélenchon's Front de Gauche's opposition to the labour bill saw the former join with the centre-right Republicans (LR) in voting a motion of no-confidence last month, which gained 246 votes out of the 288 needed to defeat the government. Hoping for a 'Podemos'-like dynamic in French politics, Jean-Luc Mélenchon has already declared himself in the presidential race, once again adopting a strong populist stance and hard Eurosceptic positions in order to compete with Marine Le Pen's FN for the vast swathes of voters currently dissatisfied with the EU. Both parties have been recently invigorated by the 'Brexit' vote in the UK referendum.

Alain Juppé's lead

On the right, the LR opposition has a wait-and-see strategy, hoping to benefit from the current wave of discontent with the ruling socialists. The November presidential primary will help settle in-fighting over party leadership, strategy and programmes. The now 14 potential runners are showing little ideological divergence, with market liberal economic platforms and tough stances on immigration and national security. Only European integration is likely to remain a point of contention between pro-EU candidates such as Alain Juppé and those such as Nicolas Sarkozy who continue to [instrumentalise](#) the EU electorally to tap into FN support.



Alain Juppé. Credits: francediplomatie / Flickr

Former Prime Minister Alain Juppé is currently enjoying a political upswing, although the most recent polls suggest that the gap with his main challengers may be narrowing. With a nevertheless sizeable lead in presidential polls, he is the most popular candidate among right-wing voters and the incarnation of political change, despite his age (70) and already long career in French politics. As opposed to Sarkozy's hardline strategy, a Juppé candidacy would take the LR towards the centre, drawing support from both the left and the right. Juppé's endorsement would also permit a more cohesive alliance with centre-right and traditionally Europhile parties such as MODEM and the UDI, which have voted against taking part in the Republican primary in November.

In an attempt to confound all political forecasts, Sarkozy looks set on his current course of polarisation, aiming to mobilise the traditionalist core electorate of the French right in the primary. Juppé's position as frontrunner is also threatened by the recent rise in support for second-tier candidates such as Bruno Le Maire and François Fillon. The fate of Edouard Balladur's presidential bid in 1995, where the largely popular Prime Minister had won the polls but lost the first round to Jacques Chirac, is on the minds of many Juppé supporters.

Front national: up to the mainstream?

Since its unparalleled second-order electoral performances in the [2014 Europeans](#) and [2015 Regionals](#), the FN looks finally to have established itself as a stable party of support for a Presidential bid by Marine Le Pen. Previously prey to grassroots network weakness, the capacity of the party now to mobilise sufficient strength in its strongholds, and attract Republican defectors, to render even the famous *front républicain* of mainstream left and right ineffective in countering its challenge, points to a new high for Le Pen in the first round. The [latest polls give her 28% support](#) against 35% for Juppé or only 21% for Sarkozy, depending on who represents LR.

The socio-economic context plays to the party's strengths – unemployment remains significant; EU migration has renewed saliency; and the threat of Islamist terrorism has been concrete rather than hypothetical since the Charlie-Hebdo and Bataclan atrocities. Similarly, the international context of a close-run Austrian Presidency for the FPÖ and the Brexit vote in the UK referendum confirms the FN's rhetoric abroad.

The FN's problem is how to move beyond its current success. To strive to present itself as a credible party of government undermines its attacks on the parties of government. Moderation of policies which alienate 'middle France' risks demobilising the current faithful who respond to outspoken populist radicalism. Its economic policy continues to [fall short of costed credibility](#). Further [campaign finance woes](#) do not help the prospect of buying in the requisite policy expertise and even the apparently unified FN is not without its own fringe problems as Jean-Marie Le Pen continues to try to mobilise the old guard in protest at the direction his daughter has taken the party.

Into the 2017 race

With a left-wing incumbent subject to parlous public opinion ratings, and two right-wing blocs more coherent in their challenge, and enjoying better polling scores, the outcome of the Presidential poll, and subsequently the legislative race, already looks predictable. The FN should at least confirm its position as the third major political bloc in French politics: Marine Le Pen is expected to thrive in the presidentials and her party is likely to gain enough votes to increase its number of parliamentary seats, possibly forming its own group.

The repercussions of the Brexit vote are still unclear and may well boost further electoral support for the FN among moderately Eurosceptic voters and the undecided. Whichever presidential runoff materialises, the mainstream right will be the most likely winner in 2017. Unprecedented levels of fragmentation may also produce major shifts in the party sub-system of the left, as the Socialists seem ready to move into a perilous presidential primary, with a possibility that an ever more weakened and divided PS will effectively not survive the election.

The authors both blog on French politics and elections at [500 signatures](#).

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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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