

# Sarkozy's French local election victory sets the stage for the run up to the next presidential election

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*France held local elections on 22 and 29 March, with Nicolas Sarkozy's UMP receiving the largest share of the vote ahead of Marine Le Pen's Front National. [Françoise Boucek](#) writes that while there is still a long way to go, the UMP's success, combined with disappointing results for François Hollande's Socialist Party, sets the stage for the next French presidential election.*



The centre-right's sweeping victory in France's local elections on 29 March shows the value of intra-party unity and inter-party cooperation in an increasingly fragmented and polarised party system. The success of the [UMP](#) and its centrist allies may not foreshadow party alternation in power and the return of Nicolas Sarkozy to the presidency in 2017, but it does underscore the collapse of the divided left and voters' persistent disenchantment with François Hollande's Socialist government.

The ability to form inter-party coalitions and maintain intra-party unity is the key to success in French elections (presidential, parliamentary and local). The two round single-member plurality voting system forces political parties on the right and left to coordinate locally by forming strategic alliances with same-bloc parties in the second round of voting. This ability accounts for the success of the centre right this time round whereas its absence explains the crushing defeat of the left.

Still, these latest elections did have the game-changing breakthrough of the populist [Front National](#) (FN) led by Marine Le Pen into local government to reshape the landscape of party politics. The FN took 22.2 per cent of the vote and 62 councillor seats in 14 *départements*. It failed to gain outright control of any departmental councils but is clearly still building on recent advances.

The FN's astounding first place finish in the 2014 European Parliament elections, followed up by last September's two-seat wins in senate elections, gave Marine Le Pen remarkable momentum. She is now gearing up for the regional elections at the end of the year and, ultimately, the presidential race in 2017. She hopes to replicate her father's success in 2002 when Jean-Marie Le Pen made it to the second round against incumbent president Jacques Chirac, after eliminating the Socialist candidate and sitting Prime Minister Lionel Jospin.



Now, his daughter Marine needs to consolidate her grassroots organisation and differentiate her party from her closest rival, Sarkozy's UMP. The local elections' third round on April 2nd will see departmental councils select their presidents. Le Pen intends to assert the FN's presence in local politics by nominating a candidate in each of the 14 councils where the FN won representation. She has also just unveiled a 'departmental charter' to force the UMP to position itself against the FN for future contests. The UMP has already responded by threatening to disown any representatives who strike a programmatic agreement with the FN with whom it claims to have nothing in common.

By adding a third pole to the French party system, the FN has broken the traditional two-party/two-blocs pattern of party competition. Like the populist UK Independence Party (UKIP), the FN appeals to disaffected voters on both the left and right. They attract the young unemployed and workers who feel threatened by immigration, globalisation and European integration. However, both the FN and UKIP lack coalition potential due to their pariah status. In Le Pen's case, she refuses to bargain and compromise in order to better define her party's space in mainstream politics.

The victory of the centre-right is due to successfully building electoral coalitions locally, even for the first round. The UMP and centrist parties [UDI](#) (Union of Democrats and Independents) and [MoDem](#) (*Mouvement Democratique*) gained 37.6 per cent of the vote and control of two-thirds of the 101 *départements*, 28 of which swung from the left including several historic Socialist strongholds.

This was the first test of Sarkozy's popularity since his return to politics last November when he won the UMP leadership election. It will help establish his credentials as the official leader of the opposition, legitimise his authority over the UMP and improve his prospects for next year's primary election to select the right-of-centre presidential candidate for 2017.

So far, Sarkozy has given the UMP a façade of unity. The [internecine war](#) following his departure after his 2012 presidential defeat and the unrest upon his return to politics last autumn has abated. However, this is a fragile truce. He is likely to face two former allies and prime ministers Alain Juppé, the mayor of Bordeaux, and François Fillon who was his prime minister throughout his presidency (2007-12). Juppé says he will stay the course and is putting in place a grassroots organisation to contest the UMP primary elections in 2016. Meanwhile, Sarkozy is planning a party re-foundation congress in May 2016 to transform the UMP into a modern party of the right which will have a new name, new status and new local party cadres.

As for Hollande's Socialists, the main culprits in their defeat were intra-party division and failure to strike electoral alliances with former allies, notably [the Greens](#) and Jean-Luc Mélenchon's [Parti de Gauche](#). This latest electoral drubbing only adds to their string of defeats in 2014: municipal elections in March, European elections in May and Senate elections in September, when they lost control of the upper house.

Manuel Valls' spending cuts and business-friendly liberal reforms, forced through parliament by decree, have alienated the Socialist hard left and provided opportunities for legislative rebellions. More reforms are in the pipeline to comply with EU-macroeconomic policies, notably the budget deficit limits of three per cent of GDP. Ironically, Hollande's former Finance Minister Pierre Moscovici, now EU Commissioner for Economic and Financial Affairs, is the enforcer of these measures.

However, with the presidential election still two years away, there is still time for the Socialists to coalesce and the right to dissemble.

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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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**About the author**

**Françoise Boucek** – *Queen Mary University of London*

[Françoise Boucek](#) is a Lecturer in European Politics and Policy in the School of Politics and International Relations at Queen Mary University of London and an Associate of the LSE Public Policy Group. Her most recent book *Factional Politics: How Dominant Parties Implode or Stabilize* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) is currently reviewed in *Party Politics* (Sept 2014) and *Japanese Journal of Political Science* (June 2014).



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