



In brief: French presidential elections 2012

Standard Note: 6236

Last updated: 28 February 2012

Author: Arabella Thorp

Section International Affairs and Defence Section

Presidential elections to be held in April/May

France is holding Presidential elections on 22 April 2012 (and 6 May if needed for a run-off). The current President, [Nicolas Sarkozy](#), is eligible to run for a second term but under 2008 changes to the constitution, he can have no more than two terms in office. The current favourite to win the elections is the Socialist Party's candidate, [Francois Hollande](#).

The President of the Republic is elected for five years by direct, universal suffrage. The election takes place between twenty and thirty-five days before the expiry of the incumbent President's term. It is held according to a two-round majority system. Only the first two candidates after the first round go forward to compete in the second round. The official election campaign lasts one month, opening two weeks before the first round and continuing during the two weeks which separate the two rounds. In practice, the debates begin well before the official opening of the campaign.

The President has considerable powers under the [constitution](#), including appointing the Prime Minister and dissolving the National Assembly.

Hollande's poll lead is narrowing

Hollande has been ahead of Sarkozy in [opinion polls](#) throughout, but that lead appears to be narrowing. According to the [latest Ifop poll](#) of voting intentions for round one, Hollande is on 27.5% and Sarkozy is one point behind on 26.5%, with Marine le Pen of the National Front in third place with 18%. The gap between the two front-runners was 7.5 points at the end of January. If the voting goes to a second round, voters' support for Hollande appears to be a little more constant, at around 57% to Sarkozy's 43%. However, many electors say they could still change their minds.

Francois Hollande

Hollande, who has styled himself 'Mr Normal', was chosen as the Socialist Party and Left Radical Party candidate in a novel series of 'open primaries' in October 2011, beating the Socialist Party leader Martine Aubry. The original front-runner was Dominique Strauss-Kahn, then managing director of the IMF, until he stood down following his arrest on suspicion of sexual assault in May 2011.

As well as his proposal for [75% tax for those earning over €1m](#), Hollande's [election manifesto](#) includes plans to tax those earning over €150,000 at 45% and impose higher levies on large companies to fund, among other things, the hiring of 60,000 new teachers and measures to increase youth employment. His aim is to balance France's budget by 2017. In Hollande's view, the European fiscal compact threatens France's sovereignty: even though it is due to be signed before the elections, if he becomes President he intends to [renegotiate](#) it before ratification.

Hollande has a 30-year career in left wing politics – he is an MP and the local council leader for Correze in south central France – but no ministerial or international experience. His then

partner, fellow Socialist politician Segolene Royal, was defeated by Sarkozy in the 2007 French presidential election. Royal has endorsed Hollande's candidacy for 2012.

The Socialists gained a significant boost in September 2011 when they captured a majority in the Senate for the first time since 1958; and in regional elections in March 2010 when they gained all but one of metropolitan France's 22 regions. This followed their collapse in the 2009 European elections and poor (but rising) results in the 2007 parliamentary elections.

Nicolas Sarkozy

President Sarkozy, of the centre-right Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) party, announced his official candidacy on 15 February 2012.

At the time of the 2007 presidential election, Sarkozy was perceived as wanting change and representing a series of values – authority, order, national identity and hard work – that proved highly attractive to a large part of the electorate. His popularity fell sharply in 2008, reaching a low of 33% in 2010. Unpopular policies included spending cuts and raising the pension age, and scandals included allegations of illicit donations to the UMP in return for political favours (the Lilliane Bettencourt case). During his presidency France's unemployment reached a 12-year high, and France lost its triple-A credit rating.

Sarkozy is presenting himself as the strong candidate who can save the country. Economically he has aligned himself with Germany (earning Chancellor Merkel's support for his presidential campaign), and he has indicated that there [would not be a referendum](#) on the fiscal treaty. His policies include deeper structural economic reforms to restore competitiveness, and using referendums to push through changes blocked by vested interests such as trade unions. On social issues, his proposals on immigration and withdrawing benefits are seen as reaching out to voters on the far right.

Sarkozy is reported as saying that if he loses, he will [quit politics](#).

Other challengers

[Marine le Pen](#), who succeeded her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen, as president of the National Front last year, is challenging the election from the far right and is currently in third place in the polls. Since being chosen as her party's official presidential candidate in May 2011, she has called for the abandonment of the euro, protectionist barriers and tough restrictions on immigrants. However, she does not yet have the signatures of 500 mayors and regional councillors she needs to sponsor her candidacy, and might have problems getting more: France's Constitutional Court has [rejected her argument](#) that the names of elected officials who endorse a presidential candidate should not be made public.

In fourth place in the polls is [Francois Bayrou](#), leader of the centrist Democratic Movement party. Other challengers include Jean-Luc Melenchon, representing both the Left Party and the Communist Party; the French-Norwegian former anti-corruption judge, Eva Joly (Green party); and former prime minister [Dominique de Villepin](#) (United Republic party).

This information is provided to Members of Parliament in support of their parliamentary duties and is not intended to address the specific circumstances of any particular individual. It should not be relied upon as being up to date; the law or policies may have changed since it was last updated; and it should not be relied upon as legal or professional advice or as a substitute for it. A suitably qualified professional should be consulted if specific advice or information is required.

This information is provided subject to [our general terms and conditions](#) which are available online or may be provided on request in hard copy. Authors are available to discuss the content of this briefing with Members and their staff, but not with the general public.