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Nicolas Sarkozy and the Legacy of Bonapartism. The French Presidential and Parliamentary Elections of 2007

Nick Hewlett

The victory of Nicolas Sarkozy and his party in the elections of 2007 is best explained by reference to the notion of Bonapartism, which has a long history in French politics. Sarkozy's authoritarian populism, with its right- and far-right-leaning ideology and programme, nevertheless has eclectic references, which helped undermine other candidates and parties. In particular, the National Front was greatly weakened by Sarkozy, as he carefully incorporated into his campaign language and views which would appeal to FN voters. The Socialists, meanwhile, were fraught with divisions and despite Ségolène Royal emerging from the elections with a respectable result and the PS overall with an increased number of seats in the Assemblée nationale, they were well short of victory. This will produce further self-analysis for the PS and questions as to how to re-invent the party as a more credible governmental force. The elections were disappointing for the far left, particularly after the strong results in 2002, but voters were more cautious in 2007, keen to avoid the near-farce of the 2002 presidential second round.

Nicolas Sarkozy's resounding victory in the French presidential elections of April-May 2007 and his party's absolute majority after the parliamentary elections apparently gave him a strong mandate for far-reaching reforms which are designed, he says, to shock the nation out of crisis and into a new era of economic dynamism, political stability and respect for law and order.[1] Sarkozy frequently summed up his electoral programme in a single word: *rupture*.

The elections brought a number of remarkable developments, which are closely related to the Sarkozy phenomenon. These include: a historic defeat for the National Front, from which it will find it difficult to fully recover; an exceptionally high voter

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turnout in the presidential elections, breaking a trend of increasing abstention over the past three decades; an all-time low turnout, by contrast, in the parliamentary elections; the return to power of the outgoing parties of government for the first time since 1978; a greater proportion of votes cast for the mainstream parties than has been seen for many years; and a corresponding decrease in the proportion of votes for smaller parties, often thought of as parties of protest. Other, less surprising outcomes include the further decline of the Communist Party and the beginning of a period of profound, post-defeat introspection on the part of the Socialist Party, despite there being substantially more PS *députés* elected than had been predicted.

In this article I attempt to explain the major developments of the 2007 elections by arguing that there is a strong Bonapartist dynamic to Sarkozy's success in the presidential elections; we saw the victory of a candidate with the image of a tough, innovative leader, apparently prepared to say the previously unsayable and to embrace drastic measures with open arms where this is deemed necessary for the good of the nation. This dynamic continued into the parliamentary elections to the extent that these elections became far more a way of confirming Sarkozy and his programme than a process of decision-making about politics more generally. I argue that the relatively poor showing for left, far left, centre and extreme right candidates should be seen largely—though by no means entirely—as a consequence of Sarkozy's successful campaign.

Before looking at these contentions in more detail, let us briefly remind ourselves of what is meant by Bonapartism. Both Marxist and non-Marxist analysts have suggested that there is in French politics a long history of Bonapartism, running back to Napoleon I, but perhaps more particularly to Napoleon III. Marx suggests in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, first published in 1852, that Napoleon III ruled by concentrating power in the executive wing of the state, which he controlled, and weakening the legislative wing, particularly after the coup d'état of 2 December 1851 (Marx 1968). For both Marx and Engels (who also found Bonapartist elements in Bismarck's rule in Germany), Bonapartism is an exceptional form of political rule which results from an unstable situation where neither the ruling class nor the working class is able to assert sufficient authority, and where an authoritarian leader steps in and claims to speak for all classes. From a non-Marxist perspective, René Rémond suggests in his classic *Les Droites en France* that there are three main currents on the right in France, namely the liberal-conservative Orléanist, the extreme-right counter-revolutionary and the Bonapartist current. He argues that Gaullism is—or at least was—strongly imbued with elements of Bonapartism, which were, notably: a personalised cult of authority; a strong state; a claim to rally the French people as a whole, from whom its authority is derived via universal suffrage; a strong modernising impulse; national independence and grandeur, especially with regard to foreign policy; and an association of capital and labour (Rémond 1982, pp. 322–333).

In highly schematic and over-simplified fashion, we can summarise the main elements of Bonapartism in the following way. An authoritarian but charismatic leader is able to rule with an unusual degree of popularity for a relatively short period of time

within the framework of a strong state and with claims to being above party politics. He or she is populist, with electoral appeal across classes, a situation made possible in part by disarray amongst other political forces. The discourse of Bonapartism tends to be of nationalism and national unity, of modernisation and progress whilst conserving all that is seen as valuable in the past, and with nods in the direction of equality. The circumstances which bring a Bonapartist leader to power and allow them to rule are exceptional, or characterised by crisis, and the threat of return to crisis or instability if the leader departs. This was the case with the first two actual Bonapartes and with de Gaulle; Napoleon I came to power in the 18 Brumaire coup d'état of 1799 in the midst of military, financial and political crisis, Napoleon III came to power in the wake of the revolution of 1848. De Gaulle, meanwhile, came to power in the midst of political and military crisis over Algeria. He ruled with an authoritarian yet populist approach, notably warning of mayhem if his reforms put forward by referendum were rejected, which would, he warned, prompt his immediate departure (this finally happened after the No vote in a referendum in 1969).

I am not, of course, arguing that Sarkozy is reproducing the regime of Napoleon III, or, for that matter, of de Gaulle. I am, however, arguing that there are pronounced Bonapartist—or what Domenico Losurdo (1993) describes as *soft* Bonapartist[2]—elements to the present situation which help explain the nature of his and more generally the right's electoral victory in 2007.

An Exceptional Leader for a Nation in Crisis?

Sarkozy's analysis of the current condition of France, his image as a leader and his electoral programme all became intimately linked. For analysts who have watched France closely for some years, his portrayal of a country in turmoil is somewhat surprising, given the amount of discussion there has been since the mid-1980s of the apparent consensual stability of French political life and the modernisation of the economy, all of which contributes to the notion of the alleged 'end of French exceptionalism'. But there is indeed fairly widespread perception of crisis. First, many believe there are grave and lasting problems with regard to the economy (Tns-sofres 2007). Economic growth in 2006 was at 2 per cent, whereas the average for Eurozone countries was 2.7 per cent. There had been a structural budget deficit every year since 1980 and the level of public debt put France fourth from bottom in the league of indebted countries in Europe, after Italy, Belgium and Germany. Since 2003 (after a decade of surpluses) foreign trade has been going further and further into deficit. Unemployment remains at over 8 per cent of the active population according to the government's own figures (compared with a Eurozone average of 7.2 per cent and OECD average of 5.6 per cent) and unemployment amongst under-25-year-olds is over 20 per cent. Many mainstream economists suggest that France has failed to adapt to the increasingly European and globalised economy and that the French must, for example, learn to work harder, like their American counterparts (Le Boucher 2007; Faujas 2007; Ricard 2007).

As far as national politics is concerned, the period since 2002 has been overshadowed by the results of the presidential and parliamentary elections of that year. Most notably, Jean-Marie Le Pen went through to the second round of the presidential elections, because he beat the Socialist Party candidate, Lionel Jospin, in the first round. Voters were therefore obliged in the second round to choose between two candidates whom many strongly disliked (Le Pen and Jacques Chirac) or abstain, and the resulting 82 per cent for Chirac bore no resemblance to his actual level of popularity. Moreover, the level of abstentions was very high in both presidential and parliamentary elections, apparently reflecting a generalised disillusionment with political parties and politicians and therefore with the democratic credibility of elections. The level of support for non-mainstream parties of the left or right in the 2002 presidentials was just over 40 per cent of voters, and 30.6 per cent of all registered voters abstained or spoiled their ballots (Hewlett 2004). There has thus been, since 2002, something of a phoney-regime atmosphere in national politics. This was compounded after the May 2005 referendum on the proposed constitution of the European Union seemed to confirm the electorate's disenchantment with national political leaders and their programmes. Both President Chirac and his government were in favour of the constitution, whilst the opposition Socialist Party was deeply divided. The French rejected the proposed constitution with a No vote of nearly 55 per cent. Once again, it seemed that neither the President, who incidentally was widely believed to have a career built partly on corrupt activities, nor the parties of government, nor the main opposition party represented voters' wishes.

The final but certainly no less important aspect of perceived crisis in France concerns social problems, especially civil unrest in areas with a high proportion of people from ethnic minorities, high unemployment and poor housing. In October and November 2005 there was sustained and widespread rioting after two young men, Zyed Benna and Bouna Traoré, died in the Eastern Paris suburb Clichy-sous-Bois from electric shocks when they tried to hide from pursuing police in an electricity substation. Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin declared a state of emergency, subsequently approved by parliament and extended for three months, which permitted local authorities to impose curfews, conduct house-to-house searches and ban public gatherings. The situation in underprivileged suburbs of large towns and cities had, it seemed, reached crisis point.

It was in this climate that Sarkozy and his supporters attempted to create the image of an exceptional leader who was capable of solving France's problems. It was indeed precisely in relation to France's deprived suburbs that Sarkozy as Minister for the Interior (2002–04 and 2005–07) had made what became nationally and internationally well-known remarks, saying in June 2005 that the Courneuve suburb of Paris should be cleaned out with a *Kärcher* (high-pressure industrial cleaning equipment), and calling suburban youth *racaille*. He was indeed blamed by some for the subsequent widespread unrest. At any rate, he was already seen as an exceptionally tough and determined defender of law and order, which remained a key part of his image throughout the election campaigns, with little time for those who attempted

to understand deviance or perceived deviance by reference to social deprivation. Although Sarkozy has on occasion dwelled on the alleged context of the *Kärcher* and *racaille* remarks in order to make them seem less harsh, he has been careful never to apologise for them, still less to retract them. This populist gamble, reminiscent of some of Le Pen's barely ambiguous and widely condemned remarks (which he also refused to retract), was a calculated risk which could have backfired on him. But it apparently paid off, at least as far as attracting former Le Pen voters was concerned, as we shall see below.

Sarkozy has more generally gone out of his way to emphasise the importance of law and order. The suburban deprivation and associated unrest for which France is now so well known remained one of the main issues throughout the election campaign, and Sarkozy's promise was to be tough on any further rioting or more minor disturbances. His programme included increased sentences for repeat offenders, including minors, a zero tolerance approach to crime in some areas, similar to parts of the USA, and—a point related to law and order in some voters' eyes—stricter control on immigration, with for the first time a Ministry for Immigration and National Identity. As the campaign proceeded Sarkozy's rhetoric and positions became increasingly like Le Pen's, from damning remarks about work-shy cheaters to references to genetic explanation for paedophilia, and a general hardening of language and style. The notion of authority was omnipresent in the election campaign.

Sarkozy went out of his way to portray himself as a determined, ruthlessly ambitious, self-made man of action with boundless energy. This he makes clear in the opening passage of his best-selling book, *Témoignage*:

> D'aussi loin que je me souvienne, j'ai toujours voulu agir. Transformer le quotidien, rendre l'impossible envisageable, trouver des marges de manœuvre, m'a toujours passionné. La politique n'était pas une tradition familiale. Tout même aurait dû m'en éloigner: je n'avais ni relations ni fortune, je n'étais pas fonctionnaire et j'avais un nom qui, par sa consonance étrangère, en aurait convaincu plus d'un de se fondre dans l'anonymat. Mais la politique a cet intérêt unique et tellement exigeant de se faire avec les Français, pas contre eux, ni sans eux. J'aime l'idée d'une action commune, vers un même objectif, pour donner un espoir à des millions de gens. Je veux expliquer ici qu'il n'y a pas de fatalité pour celui qui veut bien oser, tenter, entreprendre. J'aime construire, agir, résoudre les problèmes. Je crois que tout se mérite et qu'au final l'effort est toujours payant. Voilà mes valeurs. Voilà pourquoi je fais de la politique, voilà ce qui justifie, à mes yeux, de vouloir conquérir les plus hautes responsabilités. Voilà ce que je viens vous dire. (Sarkozy 2006, p. 1)

This is a portrait of a powerful man who, crucially, has got where he is through hard work. Just as important, ambitious though he is, he is keen to bring others with him and allow them a share of the benefits of the common plan, as long as they work hard and remain loyal. Indeed the importance of hard work was another *leitmotif* of the campaign, informing one of its best-known (and much-ridiculed) slogans: 'Travailler plus pour gagner plus'.

Sarkozy's clean-sweep, modernising zeal was expressed more concretely in the core of his neo-liberal-inclined economic programme, designed supposedly to reverse and unblock France's stagnant economic state and be more business-friendly. It would cut taxes drastically, including tax breaks on mortgage payments, and relax the limiting 35-hour week by waiving social security contributions on overtime payments. Trade union powers were to be limited by, for example, introducing a guaranteed 'minimum service' during strikes in the public sector so the country could not be shut down during strikes, and the number of public sector workers would be reduced. Universities would be made more autonomous and therefore more entrepreneurial. All this, Sarkozy argued, would add up to a 'choc économique et fiscal pour que la France parte à la conquête de ce point de croissance qui lui manque' (Parmentier 2007, p. 2).

Unlike classic Bonapartist leaders in French history, and in keeping with trends in economic policy internationally, Sarkozy's economic policy is not so much one of leading by example from the public sector but one of arguing for the right of the private sector to make money and encouraging it to do so (although Sarkozy's programme is by no means a frontal attack on the state and the public sector). Again, this approach reflects Sarkozy's own career and personal inclinations, which include an unashamed desire to enrich himself and move in monied circles. He frequents some of the wealthiest people in France. Indeed, he celebrated his election victory at the exclusive Parisian restaurant Fouquet's before setting off for a few days' holiday aboard billionaire friend Vincent Bolloré's yacht. We should not forget that Sarkozy's connections with people in high places include media moguls, in keeping with the Bonapartist tradition of strong influence over the views expressed by the mass media.

Paradoxically, Sarkozy was very much part of the national politics presided over by Jacques Chirac, with whom he has famously fallen out and made his differences known. But this, in a way, reinforces his message that he needs to be an all-powerful leader in order to resolve France's problems, not a bit player in what he might see as a rather feeble, relatively consensual regime. By contrast with Chirac and Mitterrand before him, he might suggest, Sarkozy is prepared to be 'politically incorrect', addressing issues that Mitterrand and Chirac are said to have been too frightened to address, even taking over from Le Pen in being prepared to 'dire tout haut ce que les autres pensent tout bas'.

This and the project as a whole were made clear when, in his first speech after the presidential election results became known, he said:

> Le peuple français s'est exprimé. Il a choisi de rompre avec les idées, les habitudes et les comportements du passé. Je vais donc réhabiliter le travail, l'autorité, la morale, le respect. Je vais remettre à l'honneur la nation et l'identité nationale, je vais rendre aux Français la fierté de la France, je vais en finir avec la repentance qui est une forme de haine de soi et la concurrence des mémoires qui nourrit la haine des autres. Le peuple français a choisi le changement. Ce changement, je le mettrai en œuvre parce que c'est le mandat que j'ai reçu du peuple et parce que la France en a besoin. (Sarkozy 2007, p. 4)

The Defeated Parties and Candidates

If, as argued above, Sarkozy's success was in large part a result of a carefully constructed brand of authoritarian populism which struck a chord in the present political, economic and social circumstances, his success was also of course the result of other parties' and other candidates' failures. Most importantly, given the bi-polar logic of presidential elections in France, where in the second round there are only two candidates, we must look at the Socialist Party and its candidate, Ségolène Royal.

Since the death in 1996 of François Mitterrand, the historic re-builder of the Socialist Party and president for 14 years (1981–95), the party has struggled to find either a strategy or a leader able to offer lasting success. Although during its many years in government since 1981 the PS has—at least since 1983—been a highly pragmatic party of compromise, the positions of its various factions vying for control are still influenced by a rather notional dilemma between more traditional re-distributional socialism on the one hand and what might be described as post-socialist 'realism' on the other. Many are now calling for a 'social-democratisation' of the PS, by which they mean reforms making it more like the British Labour Party or the German SPD; in government the PS already behaves only a step or two to the left of what used to be called Third Way politics, but its rhetoric—in particular when out of national office—tends to be more to the left.

Profound dilemmas over ideology, strategy and leadership have thus been part of the party's public profile for over a decade and the dominant figures in the leadership were far from united behind Royal as presidential candidate. Indeed, the highly public personal differences and finally separation (announced almost simultaneously with the results of the second round of the parliamentary elections) between Royal and François Hollande—Royal's partner and father of their four children, as well as PS party chairman—seemed only to confirm the profound splits, rivalries and changing loyalties in the political domain within the PS. Disagreements abounded between the major figures including Royal, Hollande, Dominique Strauss-Kahn (who is a foremost advocate of a Blairised PS), and Laurent Fabius.

The Socialist current in France certainly has a problem regarding sociology and tactics. It re-emerged as a party of government during the 1970s by means of an alliance with the then-strong Communist Party, which meant that working class voters who tended to vote Communist were attracted to the left camp more generally, leading eventually to Mitterrand's victory in the presidential elections in 1981. Today, with the PCF attracting so few votes, such an alliance is of little use, and increasing numbers of blue-collar workers have over the past decade turned to the National Front as a party of protest. In order to win national elections, the PS, like any party, needs to capture both blue- and white-collar salaried workers in large numbers, which is something that Sarkozy understood well; whilst he talked of neo-liberal rupture in economic policy he also spoke, for example, of the necessary protective action of the state, and of Europe protecting France from the ravages of globalisation.

This historical and structural problem for the PS meant that after the first round of the presidential election an alliance with the centre was necessary if Royal was to have any chance of winning. Between the two rounds, then, Royal (to the dismay of some other PS leaders) attempted to elicit clear, public support from UDF candidate François Bayrou, whose help would have been arithmetically particularly useful given that he polled 18.6 per cent in the first round. She even offered ministerial positions to the UDF in return for their support, but Bayrou was not convinced. Royal could count on the support of the far left, Greens and Communists, but not from the UDF, and this did not add up to a Sarkozy-beating majority.

Turning now to Ségolène Royal as presidential candidate, she broke the PS mould to the extent that she was not an entrenched and long-running participant in the major power struggles within the party, or at least not as much as other key figures. Neither was she a man in a dark suit. Finally, rather than rehearsing well-worn themes, she expressed views that were eclectic and sometimes idiosyncratic. She had quickly won a great deal of support for her nomination within the party, easily beating the other two contenders for presidential candidate nomination, Dominique Strauss-Kahn and Laurent Fabius. In terms of campaigning and policies, Royal's emphasis on the experience of ordinary people was on the whole popular and she spoke often of family values, discipline, authority and the protection of children. But her programme was perceived by many as being vague and short on detail, with far less talk or in-depth knowledge of international relations or economic policy than might be expected from a presidential candidate.

The PS has now had three defeats in a row in presidential elections, which will certainly provoke further battles over ideological orientation, leadership and strategy. For example, should the party make a concerted attempt in the immediate future to open up to the centre? Should it, on the contrary, return to being a more militant, campaigning organisation with a stronger orientation towards the labour movement? Should the party firstly look to other forces with whom to ally, or get its own house in order before doing so?

The fact that the PS is still seen as a party of the left allowed François Bayrou, for the UDF (and then for Mouvement Démocrate from 10 May), to argue that he and his party occupied the real, all-important centre-ground. It seemed in early 2007 as if Bayrou's 'neither left nor right' approach might indeed pay off and his popularity rose fast, according to opinion polls. He advocated fiscal prudence with state interventionism and a drive against public debt. Again, it was perhaps in part the logic of presidential bi-polarity that meant Bayrou polled a substantial and surprising 18.6 per cent of the vote, which was of course insufficient by a wide margin in terms of progress through to the second round.

Compared with the 2002 presidential elections, when parties to the left of the Socialists and Communists received 10.0 per cent of the vote, the far left performed badly in 2007. Given the degree of disillusionment with mainstream politicians, together with high levels of public protest over issues such as proposed weakened employment protection and pay for younger employees, and the large No vote at the

referendum over the European constitution in May 2005, this is perhaps surprising. However, it seems voters were fearful that if they voted far left in the first round there would be a repeat of the 2002 elections, when the PS candidate Lionel Jospin failed to go through to the second round and the French were presented with a choice between the right and the extreme right. Perhaps more importantly, however, there was no agreement on the far left regarding a single candidate, confirming the widespread view that it is deeply factionalised and more concerned with in-fighting over small points of difference than with real change. There were, then, four different far left candidates: Olivier Besancenot (Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire), Arlette Laguiller (Lutte Ouvrière), José Bové (anti-globalisation movement) and Gérard Schivardi (Parti des Travailleurs). Between them they received only 7.1 per cent of the vote. Besancenot emerged as the most successful, with just over four per cent, probably in part because he had argued (unsuccessfully) for unity for many months. Laguiller, by contrast, in her sixth and last presidential elections, did very badly, with a historic low of 1.3 per cent. Dominique Voynet, for the Greens, also did very badly, similarly reflecting years of in-fighting between different ecologist parties, factions and individuals.

We will return to the plight of the National Front below. Suffice it to say here that Le Pen and his party were severely damaged by Sarkozy deliberately attempting to attract former FN voters to his own camp, as well as by the question of who will become leader after the departure of Jean-Marie Le Pen.

Interpreting the Results

Taking a closer look at the results themselves (Tables 1–4), we see that in the first round of the Presidential elections abstention was particularly low for the Fifth Republic, particularly by the standards of recent years, reinforcing Sarkozy's claim to legitimacy as the clear front-runner, with nearly two million more votes than Royal. Sarkozy's vote was the highest ever in the Fifth Republic in terms of actual votes cast, but not amongst the highest in terms of proportion of votes cast. It was, however, immediately clear that Sarkozy's aggressively right- and in parts extreme-right-oriented campaign and programme had won over many voters, leaving Le Pen with only 10.4 per cent of the total, compared with 16.9 per cent in 2002. Thus, with the far left vote also squeezed because of memories of the fiasco of 2002, many voters broke with the tradition of 'voting with their hearts' in the first round and 'with their heads' in the second, and voted with their heads—i.e. for parties of government—from the beginning.

In the second round of the presidentials, the rate of abstention was lower than in any presidential election since 1965, the year of the first presidential election by universal suffrage in the Fifth Republic. Sarkozy won with nearly 19 million votes—over two million more than Royal—or 53.1 per cent of the total. In terms of second rounds which were left-right run-offs, Sarkozy was approaching the record percentage score of de Gaulle, who received 54.5 percent in 1965 against Mitterrand. In terms of actual votes cast, Sarkozy won 3.2 million more than Chirac in 1995, and 2.2 million more

than Mitterrand in 1988, who at that time held the record number of votes in the Fifth Republic. Again, the very high rate of participation reinforces Sarkozy's claim to legitimacy and is interpreted as being a mandate for personalised power.

Looking at the breakdown by age and social class of Sarkozy and Royal's electorates in the second round, it seems that Sarkozy's populist image and assurances that he represented all French people did strike a certain chord. Table 3 shows this broad

Table 1 The french presidential elections of 22 April and 6 May 2007

First round, 22 April 2007		
Total electorate:	44,472,834	
Voters:	37,254,242	
Valid votes:	36,719,396	
Spoilt ballots:	1.44%	
Abstentions:	16.23%	
Candidate	**Votes**	**%**
Nicolas Sarkozy (Union pour un Mouvement Populaire)	11,448,663	31.18
Ségolène Royal (Parti Socialiste)	9,500,112	25.87
François Bayrou (Union pour la Démocratie Française)	6,820,119	18.57
Jean-Marie Le Pen (Front National)	3,834,530	10.44
Olivier Besancenot (Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire)	1,498,581	4.08
Philippe de Villiers (Mouvement pour la France)	818,407	2.23
Marie-Georges Buffet (Parti Communiste Français)	707,268	1.93
Dominique Voynet (Les Verts)	576,666	1.57
Arlette Laguiller (Lutte Ouvrière)	487,857	1.33
José Bové (Alter-mondialiste)	483,008	1.32
Frédéric Nihous (Chasse, Pêche, Nature, Traditions)	420,645	1.15
Gérard Schivardi (Parti des Travailleurs)	123,540	0.34
Second round, 6 May 2007		
Total electorate:	44, 472,733	
Voters:	37,342,004	
Valid votes:	35,773, 578	
Spoilt ballots:	4.20%	
Abstentions:	16.23%	
Candidate	**Votes**	**%**
Nicolas Sarkozy (Union pour un Mouvement Populaire)	18,983,138	53.06
Ségolène Royal (Parti Socialiste)	16,790,440	46.94

Source: Ministère de l'Intérieur.

Table 2 The French parliamentary elections of 10 June and 17 June 2007

First round, 10 June 2007	
Total electorate:	43,896,043
Valid votes:	26,521,824
Spoilt ballots:	1.13%
Abstentions:	39.58%
Second round, 17 June 2007	
Total electorate:	35,224,832
Valid votes:	21,129,554
Spoilt ballots:	2.05%
Abstentions:	40.03%

Parties and coalitions	**1st round, 10 June**			**2nd round, 17 June**		
	Votes	**%**	**Seats**	**Votes**	**%**	**Total seats**
Union pour un Mouvement Populaire	10,289,028	39.54	98	9,463,408	46.37	313
Nouveau Centre	616,443	2.37	7	432,921	2.12	22
Divers droite	641 600	2.47	2	238,585	1.17	9
Mouvement pour la France	312 587	1.20	1	–	–	1
Total Presidential Majority	**11,859,658**	**45,58**				**345**
Parti Socialiste	6,436,136	24.73	1	8,622,529	42.25	186
Parti Communiste Français	1 115 719	4.29	0	464,739	2.28	15
Divers gauche	513 457	1.97	0	503,674	2.47	15
Parti Radical de Gauche	343 580	1.31	0	333,189	1.63	7
Les Verts	845 884	3.25	0	90,975	0.45	4

(*continued*)

Total United Left	**9,254,776**	**35,55**				**227**
Mouvement Démocrate	1,981,121	7.61	0	100,106	0.49	3
Regionalists	131,585	0.51		106,459	0,52	1
Miscellaneous	267,987	1.03	0	33,068	0.16	1
Front National	1 116 005	4.29	0	17,107	0.08	0
Far-left	887 887	3.41	0	–	–	0
Chasse, Pêche, Nature, Traditions	213 448	0.82	0	–	–	0
Other ecologists	208 465	0.80	0	–	–	0
Other far-right	102 100	0.39	0	–	–	0
Total	26 023 052	100	110	21,130,346	100	577

Source: Ministère de l'Intérieur.

spread over different age groups and different social groups and, although there is particular support from farmers and the self-employed, the Sarkozy electorate is not unlike de Gaulle's and that of the populist and hard-right-inclined Rassemblement du peuple français in its heyday.

A brief description of Sarkozy's behaviour between presidential and parliamentary elections is crucial for an understanding of what followed. It was clear that he would rule in a controlling and centralised fashion, a desire facilitated by reducing the number of ministers by half; this smaller, more tightly controlled government was led by Sarkozy loyalist and former Minister of Social Affairs, Work and Solidarity (2002–2004), François Fillon, and a Minister for Immigration and National Identity (close ally Brice Hortefeux) was indeed appointed. On the one hand, Sarkozy confirmed that the programme of reforms would take place very fast, starting with an extraordinary summer parliamentary session. Not long after victory, the news headlines described how Sarkozy had appointed a faithful ally, Frédéric Péchenard, as Director General of Police which, as Piotr Smolar comments in *Le Monde*, 'tradui[t] la volonté de l'Elysée de faire appliquer scrupuleusement ses projets de réforme en matière de sécurité' (Smolar 2007, p. 1). Meanwhile, Laurent Solly, his deputy campaign director, became head of the television channel TF1.

On the other hand, in characteristically maverick fashion, Sarkozy pursued what was described as *ouverture*, which meant, notably, appointing PS member, Médecins sans Frontières founder and pro-American Bernard Kouchner as Foreign Minister. Such *ouverture* was not just populist *largesse*, however, but was designed also to neutralise somewhat the Socialist Party, making it seem as if the PS was already represented in government and did not need a large number of votes in the parliamentary elections. There were also seven women in the new cabinet, including Rachida Dati as Minister of Justice, the first person of North African origin to be appointed at such a level in France. Sarkozy certainly made it clear that he wanted a very large majority in the National Assembly in order to give his government an even

Table 3 Distribution of votes between Sarkozy and Royal according to age and profession. Second round, presidential elections, 2007. % (S = Sarkozy, R = Royal)

Age	Profession
18–24 years: S 42, R 58	Farmers: S 67, R 33
25–34 years: S 57, R 43	Craftspeople, shopkeepers: S 82, R 18
35–44 years: S 50, R 50	Managerial, liberal professions: S 52, R 48
45–59 years: S 45, R 55	Lower supervisory, nurses, primary teachers (*professions intermédiaires*): S 49, R 51
60–69 years: S 61, R 39	Clerical: S 49, R 51
70 years and +: S 68, R 32	Blue-collar: S 46, R 54

Source: Ipsos, in *Le Monde*, 8 May 2007, p. 8.

Table 4 Abstentions in French presidential elections (first round only), 1965–2007

Year	% abstentions
1965	15.3
1969	22.4
1974	15.8
1981	18.9
1988	18.6
1995	21.6
2002	28.4
2007	16.2

Source: Ministère de l'Intérieur.

clearer mandate for profound reform. The parliamentary elections became, then, more like a referendum on Sarkozy's programme and leadership, almost a plebiscite.

The first round of the parliamentary elections saw a record high level of abstentions, at 39.6 per cent (see Table 2). This seemed not only to indicate that voters were beginning to suffer from voting fatigue, but also to confirm that presidential elections were seen as the more important national elections of the Fifth Republic, with parliamentary elections simply confirming the result of the presidentials. The results certainly did confirm Sarkozy and the Union pour un Mouvement Populaire as far more popular than Royal and the PS; the UMP won 39.5 per cent of the vote (an exceptionally high level for any party in the Fifth Republic) and the PS 24.7 per cent. The decline of the FN was confirmed with its 4.3 per cent in the first round, compared with 11.4 per cent in 2002. Sarkozy continued to plan detailed implementation of his programme and there was much talk of a *vague bleue* in the second round, as analysts evoked other landslides in parliamentary elections in 1968, 1981 and 1993.

At the second round of the parliamentary elections, however, the UMP failed to gain the overwhelming result they sought and anticipated as they became victims, it seems, of Sarkozy and his followers' over-confidence. In fact voters delivered what *Le Monde* (19 June) described in its front page headline as 'un avertissement adressé à Sarkozy'. The electorate was apparently strongly affected by discussions of the possible five-percentage-point increase in VAT, *TVA sociale*. This was planned in order to pay for reductions in social security contributions for employers, thus reducing labour costs and moving taxation further onto consumption. François Hollande and other PS leaders were able to make capital out of this blunder, as electors feared substantial price rises: 'Travailler plus pour payer plus', Hollande quipped, and others spoke of 'Robin des bois à l'envers'. One minister commented that '[t]oute la semaine, nos candidats se sont fait interpeller par leurs électeurs sur la hausse de la TVA' and former Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin suggested that '[l]a TVA sociale nous a fait perdre 60 députés' (Jakubyszyn 2007). The *vague bleue* thus failed to materialise, although the UMP did achieve an absolute majority of seats in the National Assembly. One particularly serious blow for the new government was the defeat of the second most

important minister and former Prime Minister Alain Juppé, who resigned from his post after losing his seat in the Gironde. All this notwithstanding, Prime Minister Fillon declared that the parliamentary elections 'valide un projet pour moderniser résolument la France' and reminded the public that his government would continue to work on the promised new laws relating to work, employment, purchasing power, security, modernisation of universities, immigration and the provision of a minimum service during strikes (Fottorino 2007).

Conclusions

I hope to have argued successfully that there are clear Bonapartist characteristics to the way in which Sarkozy constructed a particular image and managed to persuade a broad electorate to support him. I have dwelt long on Sarkozy as an individual politician because one of the principal characteristics of Bonapartism is the promotion of one person whom their supporters argue is exceptionally suited to leading the nation in what are seen as unusual circumstances. This does not signify the absence of political and economic agenda. Quite the contrary. As we have seen, Sarkozy comes to power with a well-defined and far-reaching, largely neo-liberal agenda, overlaid with patriotism and populist nods towards a fairer lot for the ordinary working person, including a certain emphasis on state protection.

It should also be said that there are, in René Rémond's terms and highly schematically, both counter-revolutionary and Orléanist—that is extreme right and liberal-right—tendencies in Sarkozy's recipe for success, although these are less pronounced.[3] Sarkozy was successful in undermining the electorate of the Front National in both presidential and parliamentary elections, which was arithmetically a key element in his success. Sarkozy and the UMP were attempting to do to the FN—albeit far more rapidly—what Mitterrand had done to the PCF. Just as in the early 1970s Mitterrand stated publicly that in his view, out of five million Communist voters three million should be voting Socialist, in 2007 Sarkozy declared: 'Oui, je cherche à séduire les électeurs du FN. Qui pourrait m'en vouloir de récupérer ces gens dans le camp républicain? J'irai même les chercher un par un, ça ne me gêne pas. Si le FN a progressé, c'est que nous n'avons pas fait à droite notre boulot' (Fourquet 2007, p. 1).

In a highly revealing article by Jérôme Fourquet, we see that in the areas where Le Pen was strong in 2002, Sarkozy made real gains in 2007 over candidates of the mainstream right in 2002. The increases were particularly large in the Mediterranean departments and Sarkozy's highest score anywhere in France was in the Alpes-Maritimes, with 43.6 per cent of votes. In a large-scale survey, Fourquet found that Sarkozy's tough reaction to clashes between youths and police at the Gare du Nord in Paris in March 2007 encouraged former Le Pen voters to vote Sarkozy instead of Le Pen, as did Sarkozy's more general positions on what might broadly be termed delinquency. Given the choice between various different aspects of his policies, they were particularly impressed by the President-in-waiting's views on law and order: Fourquet notes that a quarter of what he describes as the most faithful, 'hard core' FN

supporters had even more faith in Sarkozy's views on the key theme of *sécurité* than in Le Pen's (Fourquet 2007, p. 5). To Marine Le Pen, it seemed that Sarkozy was indeed Le Pen-lite; as Sarkozy's victory was being announced on television, she commented: 'C'est la victoire des idées de Jean-Marie Le Pen', adding that the French 'ont préféré l'apparence du changement au vrai changement' (Forcari 2007). Certainly, Le Pen's age and uncertainty over who will take over as leader after him played a role in his and the FN's relative misfortunes, but there is little doubt that Sarkozy's part in Le Pen's fall was crucial.

In several ways, these elections can be seen as an almost literal counter-revolution in relation to key landmarks of the left, despite some positive references to Jean Jaurès and Léon Blum, for example. Sarkozy has, it seems, a certain obsession with May 1968 and is very keen to insist that the legacy of May is now dead, freeing the French to do many things they could not do before. At the beginning of his book, he lets us know that it was only his youth that prevented him being on the May 30 pro-Gaullist counter-demonstration on the Champs Elysées, which effectively put an end to the events, and in the last speech of his campaign, he promised to lay to rest the left-wing ghost of May 1968 once and for all. Sarkozy's victory is also, in some ways, the antithesis of May 10, 1981, when Mitterrand was elected President of the Republic. I have mentioned how Mitterrand succeeded in becoming President of the Republic partly by attracting PCF voters and that Sarkozy has done the same with the FN. When Mitterrand became President he came with a programme which was a neo-Keynesian attempt to stimulate demand, with particular emphasis on labour, penal law and education. Sarkozy's programme is by contrast one which places emphasis on supply-side measures, but it too concentrates to a large extent on labour, penal law and education.

Sarkozy has also, of course, certain characteristics of the Orléanist liberal-right, which arguably largely characterised the politics of Giscard d'Estaing in particular and also, in part at least, François Bayrou. But there is now a real shift of emphasis, of which Sarkozy himself is both entirely aware and proud, claiming that '[s]i j'avais mis mes pas dans ceux de mes prédecesseurs, on aurait tout perdu' (Ridet 2007, p. 23). Whether or not this is a long-lasting change will depend on many factors, not least the success or otherwise of Sarkozy and his ministers in addressing the perceived crises discussed at the beginning of this article.

Before concluding it is necessary to reiterate the point that, if the main key to understanding the presidential and parliamentary elections of 2007 is the Sarkozy phenomenon, the Socialists' inability to tackle the question of (to put it simply) where to situate themselves on the left-right spectrum, to unify around an answer to this question, and to choose and properly support a candidate who represents this new position, all played an important part as well. This all meant that they and their presidential candidate were hampered from the start and gave the right a greater advantage than it would have had otherwise. However, in the second round, Royal received only 46.9 per cent of the vote, which was one of the worst scores in the Fifth Republic for candidates in the second round; on the left, only Mitterrand had done

worse, in 1965, against de Gaulle. Not only had Royal and the PS failed to convince enough voters that it had anything new to say in terms of policies, but attempts to make quasi-alliances with Bayrou and the UDF were reminiscent of unstable coalition arrangements in the Fourth Republic. All this did not, however, prevent the PS increasing the number of *députés* compared with 2002 in the parliamentary elections.

A final point to be borne in mind by analysts, activists and politicians alike is that Bonapartism is and always has been inherently unstable, because it is built upon flimsy bases. It is volatile and particularly vulnerable to the changes in the whims of voters, many of whom were in April, May and June 2007 persuaded more by image and ideology than by the longer-term practical logic of the proposed reforms. We should not forget that many people made up their minds which way to vote right at the last minute, and that all mainstream politicians were hugely unpopular well into the election campaign. Moreover, the fragility of politics infused with Bonapartist tendencies means that it is prone to successful challenge by people on the street, and whatever Sarkozy might preach, the predilection for demonstration and protest in France is not a thing of the past. Many activists and potential activists might, on the contrary, see the new president as having thrown down the gauntlet.

Notes

[1] I would like to thank both James Shields and an anonymous reader for some very helpful and detailed comments on an earlier draft of this article.

[2] Losurdo (1993) argues that in the late twentieth century there emerged what he describes as 'soft' Bonapartist political leaders who come to power in order to pursue a neo-liberal economic agenda and claim legitimacy based on fairly flimsy democratic bases.

[3] Eric Dupin (2007) argues, largely by contrast with myself, that Sarkozy represents a synthesis of Bonapartism, Orleanism and the counter-revolutionary right.

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