

François Hollande is by no means certain to win the French Presidential election. He may yet fall foul of France’s well-known ‘Frontrunner Syndrome’, as Sarkozy’s fightback begins

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*In the run up to France’s presidential election on 22 April opinion polls place President Nicolas Sarkozy on the back foot against the Socialist candidate François Hollande. Yet **Rainbow Murray** argues that the contest is far from over yet. Sarkozy can draw on his recent experience on the European and world stages, and Hollande must overcome historical trends where election frontrunners in France see their support fall dramatically in the immediate run up to Presidential elections.*



Following the opinion polls is a daily sport for any observer of French politics. Although the standings in the **polls fluctuate day by day**, the headline trend has remained constant for months: François Hollande is the front-runner, and Nicolas Sarkozy appears to be on course for a crushing defeat. Sarkozy has even tacitly acknowledged his own weakness, telling journalists of his regret for mistakes made and his plans for life after office. Hollande, on the other hand, is obliged to keep reminding his team that ‘we haven’t won it yet’.

Last week, three eminent teams of electoral forecasters published their long-range forecasts of the result in the journal, *French Politics*. **Two papers** anticipate a victory for Hollande, although the latter article expects that a comeback from Sarkozy will result in a tighter race than the current polls would suggest. It should be noted that Michael Lewis-Beck, a renowned forecaster and one of the authors on both these papers, wrongly called the election for the Left in 2007. The third **paper** predicts that Sarkozy will defy all the odds and win by a narrow margin in the second round, as Table 1 illustrates. The authors, Bruno Jérôme and Véronique Jérôme-Speziari, produced by far the most accurate forecast in 2007.



Table 1 – The predicted votes for French Presidential Elections 2012 in a model by Jérôme and Jérôme-Speziari

Forecast vote share for first round of 2012 presidential election	Right + Centre	Total Left	National Front
	46 per cent	41 per cent	13 per cent
Forecast vote share for second round of 2012 presidential election	Right	Left	
	50.6 per cent	49.40 per cent	

While Sarkozy's pessimism is more obviously justified, Hollande's fear of premature celebration reflects a long history in France of underdogs stealing elections from frontrunners. So is it really in the bag for Hollande, or will he be the latest victim of French Frontrunner Syndrome?

In 1980, outgoing President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing looked to be assured of a comfortable re-election victory in the forthcoming election. By early 1981, however, his lead began to decline, and rivals François Mitterrand and Jacques Chirac started catching up. Ultimately, Mitterrand went on to win the election. In 1995, Chirac tailed a different candidate – the right-wing favourite and incumbent prime minister, Edouard Balladur. Balladur's commanding lead in February that year had withered away by April, and in the final ballot he came a sorry third behind Chirac and the Socialist candidate, Lionel Jospin.

In 2002, Chirac (now the outgoing president) again faced Jospin (outgoing prime minister), after five uncomfortable years of power-sharing, also known as *cohabitation*. The opinion polls indicated that Chirac and Jospin would qualify for the second vote in France's two-round run-off voting system, with Jospin expected to win by a narrow margin in the final ballot. Yet it was not to be. Voters on the French left became too complacent about their candidate, assuming that his qualification for the second round could be taken for granted, and they therefore used the first round to support minority candidates who had emerged from the increasingly divided "plural left" government. A political 'earthquake' resulted, as the far-right candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen received more votes than Jospin in the first round and qualified for the second round at Jospin's expense. Far from becoming the next president, Jospin was forced into a humiliating retreat from public life. Meanwhile, left-wing voters were forced to grit their teeth and re-elect Jacques Chirac in order to ensure the defeat of Le Pen.

In the run up to the 2007 election Ségolène Royal looked almost unstoppable. She powered her way through the Socialist primary, obtaining more than 60 per cent of the vote in a three-horse race, and entered the main race in a position of strength. However, by January her position in the polls had begun to erode, and never recovered. Once the frontrunner, by the month of the election she was tailing Sarkozy.

So what of the prospects for François Hollande? His main strength lies, not in his own talents, but in the weakness of the French economy. The public are disillusioned with Sarkozy and have demonstrated their willingness to consider someone else. Their initial preferred alternative was Dominique Strauss-Kahn (DSK), whose polling figures were sky-high until his dramatic downfall last May. Although no-one could have anticipated the public humiliation of DSK, he himself warned that his sizeable lead in the polls would quickly erode once the campaign kicked off and the attacks on his character began. For DSK recognised in Sarkozy the qualities that are set to keep this election interesting: Sarkozy is a fighter.

This election is not a foregone conclusion. Armed with the formidable campaigning machine of his party, the UMP, Sarkozy is doing all he can to claw his way back in the polls. His protracted pre-campaign consisted of imposing himself as much as possible on the world and European stage, often by the side of Angela Merkel, in order to elevate his status as a



François Hollande Credit: Philippe Moreau Chevolet
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powerful leader. This is in stark contrast to Hollande, who has no experience of government. Now that Sarkozy is officially a candidate, the gloves have come off further and the true campaign has begun.

Sarkozy's task is unenviable. He faces four sizeable challenges: a long lead in the polls for his opponent, a credible threat from far-right candidate Marine Le Pen, a weak economy, and a tarnished reputation as 'the President of the Rich'. He is tackling the last of these with a dose of humble pie, and trying to stave off the far-right threat by pandering to a watered-down version of their agenda. Meanwhile, his party are defending their economic record by claiming that they did the best they could do under the circumstances, and that a change now would do France more harm than good.

A similar discourse by the UK Labour party in 2010 was not enough to keep them in power, but it may have curbed their losses. Will it stem the bleeding of support for Sarkozy? The gap between Sarkozy and Hollande varies from poll to poll, but an Ifop poll published this week indicates that it has narrowed to just half a point in the first round. Lightning may not strike twice for the forecasters – but Hollande is certainly right not to be counting his chickens just yet.

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