

Further lurch to the right in French election campaign

Peter Schwarz in Paris
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One week before the first round of voting on April 22, the leading candidates in the French presidential election have moved further to the right.

In the camp of the Socialist Party (SP) and the right-wing, free market Union for French Democracy (UDF), described by French media as “centrist,” calls for a *vote utile*, a useful vote, are getting louder. This refers to a vote for purely tactical purposes rather than on the basis of agreement with a political program. Voters are being called upon to vote for Ségolène Royal (the candidate of the Socialist Party) or François Bayrou (UDF), in order to prevent a victory for the Gaullist Nicolas Sarkozy or the extreme right-winger Jean-Marie Le Pen.

The candidates do their best to avoid the impression that they are advocating this policy. On Sunday Royal declared: “It is true that there might be a defensive vote. But I want the main body of votes to be given on the basis of support.” It is becoming apparent, however, that Royal is unable to mobilise large numbers of voters with her right-wing program and increasingly is hoping for tactical votes.

The discussion over a *vote utile* was stimulated last weekend by a contribution in the newspaper *Le Monde* by Michel Rocard the former SP head of government. Rocard suggested that Royal and the UDF candidate Bayrou should agree to an alliance even prior to the first round of voting.

He argued that when “isolated, neither it [the UDF] nor we would have a chance of beating the coalition of Nicolas Sarkozy and Jean-Marie Le Pen.” Rocard added that there is no longer “anything of substance to differentiate the socialists and the centrists with respect to the urgent questions in France today. We share the same values.”

On first impression, there seems to be little sense in

the alliance proposed by Rocard. Each voter can only vote for one of the twelve candidates and must decide between Royal or Bayrou, even if the pair choose to strike a pact, and Rocard does not call upon either of the candidates to stand down.

What he has in mind is a sort of non-aggression pact between the two candidates and a mutual obligation to support whichever candidate makes it into the second round. “A campaign in the first round inevitably involves aggression and injuries, which can endanger a mutual agreement in the second round,” he said in justifying such a pact.

Even if Rocard does not openly say so, it is clear that his proposal means he has jettisoned any hope of an election victory for Royal. His proposal for a pact amounts to electoral support for Bayrou, who is currently trailing Royal in the polls, but is reckoned to have a better chance than Royal in the final round against Sarkozy, since he has part of the present government camp behind him. Since its foundation in 1978 by Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, the UDF has always belonged to the right-wing bourgeois political camp. For the past five years it has supported the Gaullist government.

Bayrou “congratulated” himself on Rocard’s suggestion and said he was “very interested”. Nevertheless he turned down the offer. He fears for his conservative constituency, should he get involved in a one-sided alliance with the Socialist Party. He has placed the issue of reconciliation between right and left at the centre of his election campaign and intends, should he be elected president, to form a government incorporating both the Socialist Party and the Gaullists.

Bayrou assessed Rocard’s proposal as confirmation of the latter’s agreement with his own “vision” of overcoming traditional barriers and the readiness of

prominent “socialists” to construct a grand coalition of parties. “One can see today that such responsible persons are available, also within the Socialist Party, despite the blockade imposed by the apparatus and despite the fact that Ségolène Royal, [the chairman of the party] François Hollande and a few others have obviously said no.”

Royal rejected Rocard’s proposal and announced she would only speak with Bayrou over a possible alliance between the two ballots when the candidates for the second round have been determined. Among the party’s ranks, Rocard was accused of delivering Royal’s campaign a stab in the back with his suggestion. It soon became clear, however, that Rocard is not alone in this respect.

The first to publicly support Rocard’s proposal was Bernard Kouchner. Kouchner is the founder of the relief organization *Médecins sans Frontières* and has held ministerial posts on two occasions in Socialist Party-led governments. The faction around the former Minister of Finance Dominique Strauss-Kahn is also alleged to agree with Rocard’s suggestion, although it has not publicly commented on it.

The Spanish Socialist Party leader and prime minister José Zapatero has intervened to undermine Royal’s election campaign in an even more blatant manner than Rocard and Kouchner. He announced he felt “great empathy” for Ségolène Royal and would speak at one of her election meetings in Toulouse on April 19, only then to go heaping praise on her main rival Nicolas Sarkozy.

Zapatero expressed his “respect” and “admiration” for the Gaullist candidate. “He is a man with recognized political abilities, firm convictions and self-confident stamina,” Zapatero continued. “I have had important links to him as Interior Minister and now as a candidate. Nicolas Sarkozy always had an open and positive attitude towards Spain and helped to strengthen the relationship between our two countries.” Their co-operation was particularly “fruitful” in the “anti-terror struggle” against the Basque separatist movement, ETA, Zapatero added.

The right-wing policy of Royal and the proposals for an alliance with Bayrou from within their own camp serve to strengthen Sarkozy and Le Pen. The lurch to the right by the Socialist Party, which is shifting even further away from its traditional layers of support,

allows Sarkozy and Le Pen to mobilize the most reactionary layers of society.

So far, Sarkozy and Le Pen have determined the topics of the election. Themes such as authority, law and order, security, national identity, patriotism, immigration and all the other topics favoured by the extreme right have dominated all the campaigns. Largely excluded from discussion are all the issues which affect the lives of millions of voters—unemployment, poverty, the destruction of the country’s infrastructure and the social fabric, militarism and the international missions undertaken by the French army.

In the past few days, both Sarkozy and Le Pen have adopted an even more right-wing tone. On his election campaign tour in southern France, where the National Front has its strongholds of support, Sarkozy took up the slogans of the NF and appealed directly to Le Pen’s voters. He conjured up the “silent majority” and contrasted it to the political elite (to which he belongs)—to the “France of hypocrisy,” to the “France of single thought,” to “this small elite, which arrogates the right to determine what is good and what is bad.”

At a press conference, Sarkozy defined the “silent majority” as “those who think one must speak about the identity of France, who believe there is a problem with purchasing power, who think one needs a new team, who voted no [to the European referendum] and for Le Pen in 2002. I hope they will speak out on Sunday.”

For his part, Le Pen attacked Sarkozy at his election meetings on the grounds of the latter’s Hungarian origins, insulting him as a member of the “political lumpen pack.”

These forces are able to freely express their ultra-right nostrums because they confront no serious opposition. They are utilising the vacuum, left behind by the constant shift to the right of the Socialist Party. This political trajectory, however, by no means corresponds to the mood of broad social layers, which are moving to the left.



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