



CONSERVATIVE SARKOZY WINS FRENCH PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

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With record numbers of voters going to the polls, France has elected as president Nicolas Sarkozy, a conservative leader who has pledged to improve the European country's economy and get tough on crime and immigration.

Sarkozy, the son of a Hungarian immigrant, defeated Socialist Segolene Royal, the first woman to get this far in a French presidential election, by 53 percent of the vote to Royal's 47 percent.

Following Sunday's run-off election, Sarkozy is set to replace President Jacques Chirac, who has led France for the past 12 years.

The turnout was high -- 84 percent of the country's 44.5 million registered voters participated in Sunday's runoff -- levels not seen in 40 years.

Exit polls, which asked people as they left election sites who they voted for and why, showed that nearly 49 percent of blue-collar workers who usually vote for politically left candidates voted for Sarkozy, the Associated Press reported.

Sarkozy's main message of revitalizing France's stagnating economy appeared to appeal to such voters, according to the AP. His election platform also included getting tough on criminals and strengthening immigration rules.

"Tonight is not a victory on one France over another. For me there is only one victory, that of democracy," he said during his victory speech. "The people of France have chosen change."

Improving the economy

The main thrust of Sarkozy's argument for improving the French economy, the sixth biggest in the world, has been to eliminate the 35-hour workweek to allow people to "work more in order to get more."

The 35-hour workweek comes from a 2000 French law that states that after working 35 hours in one week a worker must get overtime pay. The law's creators hoped that it would help create jobs for more people and give workers more personal time.

But critics, like Sarkozy, say the law has not created more jobs and should be changed. They claim that companies expect employees to do more work in less time instead of hiring more workers.

And Sarkozy supporters agreed.

"I'm for liberalizing the labor market and getting rid of the 35-hour workweek, which is hurting economic growth and limiting our economic choices and opportunities," Parisian voter Nicolas Arnault, 25, told the International Herald Tribune.

One bill, proposed by Sarkozy, would make overtime pay tax free to encourage people to work more, the AP reported.

Immigration

But not everyone in the country was celebrating Sarkozy's victory.

Though not as much as anticipated, demonstrations with a smattering of violence occurred in parts of the country, including Paris, Lyons, Marseilles and Bordeaux.

Many in France's immigrant community loath the tough-talking politician, who in 2005 referred to the perpetrators -- many of whom were blacks and Arabs -- of a three-week wave of rioting over employment problems as "scum."

Sarkozy has refused to apologize for the comment and has expressed a commitment to remain tough on crime and to create laws to tighten criteria for immigrants who want to bring their families to France.

"In theory I should be voting for Sarkozy, as I've got a really good job," Houari Amraoui, 26, a computer programmer of Moroccan origin born in France, told the International Herald Tribune.

"I'm part of the French economy. But Sarkozy is all about the politics of big money, and the greatest danger for France is rising inequality, the rich getting richer, the poor getting poorer," he added.

Foreign policy

As president, Sarkozy's main job will be to handle defense and foreign policy; though, as a former finance and interior minister, he has little experience with either.

He reached out to the United States in his acceptance speech, stressing that it can "count on our friendship," but he added that "friendship means accepting that friends can have different opinions."

Under Chirac, France and the United States disagreed sharply on the war in Iraq and other foreign policy issues. Sarkozy is seen as much friendlier to U.S. policy and interests.

He has adopted U.S.-styled programs like "zero tolerance" for crime and affirmative action programs for minorities.

Sarkozy also called on the United States to lead the global effort against climate change, an issue France would make a priority.

"A great nation, like the United States, has a duty not to block the battle against global warming but -- on the contrary -- to take the lead in this battle, because the fate of the whole of humanity is at stake," he said, according to the AP.

In terms of relations with the wider European Union, Sarkozy has expressed a desire to create an integrated Europe, but warned of the negative effects of globalization.

"I beseech our European partners to hear the voices of those who want to be protected," he said.

Sarkozy, expected to take over on May 16, will be the first president of France born after World War II.

-- Compiled by Annie Schleicher for NewsHour Extra

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