



## Introduction

# Symposium on Forecasting the French 2007 Elections

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Everybody wants to know the outcome of an election in advance. Parties and candidates are eager to know their likely fortunes. For some, their livelihood may depend on it, and the need to make alternative arrangements in the event of a likely defeat may be pressing. Knowing that a defeat is likely also gives parties the option of refining their strategy and trying to correct whatever problem is contributing to their predicted downfall. A party or candidate that is expected to win will wish to capitalize on this information and use it to generate an upward momentum. Voters also like to know how an election is likely to end. They want to know who will be governing them after the election, how this might affect their interests and how likely their vote is to count. Voter turnout tends to be significantly higher in elections where the result is too close to call than in those where a landslide victory is expected. Last but not least, the media thrive on electoral forecasts to maintain interest in the election, generate sales or viewing figures, and add their weight to the electoral process.

In addition to the usual interest in electoral forecasts, there was particular interest in forecasting the outcome of the 2007 French presidential elections for a number of reasons. Firstly, the outcome remained unpredictable for much of the race, with the top two candidates (Sarkozy and Royal) initially running neck and neck, followed by the unexpected rise of a third candidate (Bayrou) who looked set to create an upset if he succeeded in qualifying to the second round. Secondly, since the harmonization and reversal of the electoral calendar in 2002, the presidential elections closely precede the legislative elections, with the presidential victor likely to bring home a parliamentary majority. Hence the outcome of the presidential election is important not only for knowing the next occupant of the Elysée, but also knowing the likely future party of government. Lastly and most significantly, France was wary of unexpected shocks and unpredicted outcomes following the ‘earthquake’ of 2002, when the far-right candidate Le Pen surprised voters and commentators alike by qualifying to the second round of the ballot ahead of the Socialist candidate, Jospin. As neither pollsters nor forecasters had foreseen this event, it left



the public in 2007 both thirsty for better information and sceptical about the received wisdom. Meanwhile, all those involved in electoral forecasting tried to figure out what went wrong in 2002, and to get it right this time.

This symposium features four examples of the efforts made to know the outcome of the 2007 elections before a single ballot was cast. Each offers a different approach and a fresh perspective on the motivations, methods, trials and tribulations of electoral forecasting. The first of these, by Michael Lewis-Beck, Eric Bélanger and Christine Fauvelle-Aymar, is based on the Iowa political economy model of electoral forecasting. As such, it falls within a developing tradition of electoral forecasting that seeks to explain an election as far in advance as possible using parsimonious models based on independent variables such as government and economic performance (Fauvelle-Aymar and Lewis-Beck, 1997, 2002; Bélanger *et al.*, 2007), prospective economic expectations (Sanders *et al.*, 1987), incumbency (Weisberg, 2002), and similar political and economic variables that have been fine-tuned in an attempt to produce the ultimate electoral forecasting model.

The second paper, by Nicolas Sauger, considers a more traditional method of electoral forecasting, namely the use of opinion polls. Following the failure of opinion polls to pick up on the strength of Le Pen's vote in 2002, Sauger considers the problems faced by pollsters in generating accurate polling data, and evaluates whether they managed to correct these problems (and avoid over-compensating for them) in 2007.

One barrier faced by pollsters is that it can be very difficult to forecast Le Pen's vote based purely on polling data, as voters tend to under-report their likelihood to vote Le Pen. Given the significance of this problem in the 2002 election, Jocelyn Evans and Gilles Ivaldi focus in the third paper on developing a scientific model of electoral forecasting devoted entirely to forecasting the far-right FN vote. They identify two key variables — levels of crime and of FN popularity — that can be used to generate forecasts using a parsimonious and often accurate model.

Finally the last paper, by Rainbow Murray, takes a different approach to the other three papers, by combining candidate data available prior to the legislative elections with data concerning the safety of the seats where the candidates were placed, in order to create a model forecasting how many women would be elected under different electoral scenarios. Unlike the other models, Murray's model serves not only to provide advance knowledge of the gender distribution of the National Assembly, but also to illustrate differential party behaviour in their promotion of women candidates, and thus show how different distributions of seats between the parties would result in significantly different numbers of women being elected.

All of the forecasts used in this symposium were made *ex ante*; that is to say, prior to the election. The original forecasts have been included within each



paper, along with a discussion to explain how well each forecast predicted the actual outcome, and an explanation for why the forecasts did not always perform as well as hoped. The Iowa model, so often right, did not in this instance call the election correctly; the Evans and Ivaldi model significantly over-estimated the Le Pen vote. As the articles explain, the mixed successes of the forecasts point to two potential explanations: unsatisfactory forecasting models, or exceptional circumstances. Why did models that have proven to be so robust on other occasions fall so wide of the mark in the French 2007 presidential elections? The answer lies in the enduring ripples created by the earthquake of 2002. The rise of Bayrou, the fall of Le Pen, the nervous adjustments by pollsters and the miscalculations of academics may all be linked to a spooked electorate that did not conform to previous patterns of voting behaviour, resulting in an election with a peculiar dynamic all of its own. Learning how to adjust forecasting models to an electorate that are themselves adjusting to brutal electoral ‘shocks’ is the next big challenge in the evolving science of electoral forecasting.

## References

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