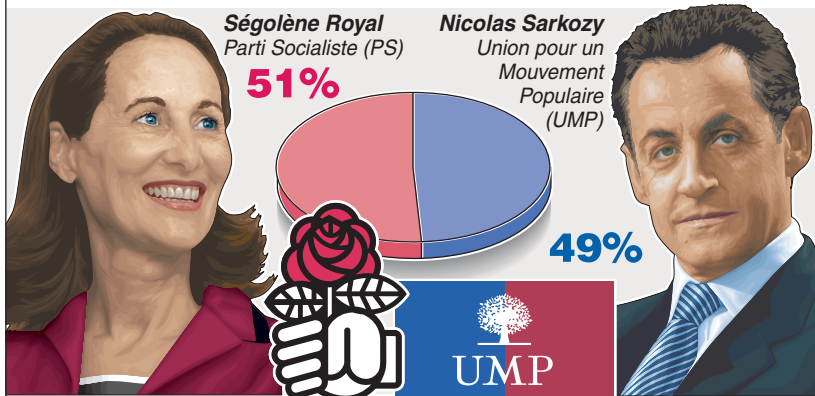


Ségol and Sarko in opinion poll face-off

Half a year before the candidates to succeed French President Jacques Chirac are officially chosen, voters have become increasingly absorbed with the jockeying between would-be presidential candidates – Socialist former minister Ségolène Royal and Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy



■ **Sep 22, 1953:** Born in Senegal; one of eight children of a conservative French army colonel

■ Mother of four and partner of **François Hollande** – PS boss who also has ambitions to be president

■ **1980:** Graduates with honours from France's ultra-elite **Ecole Nationale d'Administration** – training ground for politicians and civil servants

■ **1992-1997:** Serves as Minister of Environment under former President **François Mitterrand**

■ **1997:** Minister of Education under Prime Minister **Lionel Jospin**

■ **2000-02:** Minister responsible for Family Affairs in Employment Ministry

■ **Issues:** Favours sending persistent young offenders to "boot camps". **Critic of mandatory 35-hour working week.** Proposes lifelong learning to help workers move from one job to another and reduce unemployment

■ **Jan 28, 1955:** Born in Paris, son of Hungarian aristocrat who fled to France

■ Married, with two children

■ **1982:** Graduates in public law and political science, becomes a barrister

■ **1977:** Begins political career as councillor in wealthy Neuilly-sur-Seine

■ **1983:** Mayor of Neuilly-sur-Seine

■ **1993-95:** Minister for Budget in cabinet of **Edouard Balladur**

■ **1995:** Dramatic fall-out with mentor **Jacques Chirac** when Sarkozy backs Balladur's bid for presidency

■ **2002-04:** Minister of Interior in cabinet of **Jean-Pierre Raffarin**

■ **2004-05:** Brief spell as Finance Minister, reappointed Interior Minister

■ **Issues:** Reform of work contracts to cut unemployment. **Immigration quotas of skilled workers to help economy.** Public funds for mosques to ease tensions with Muslim community