

Oui The EU People?

Macron's win doesn't mean the mainstream will dominate in France. Far-right is also stronger

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Emmanuel Macron has won a second term as President of France with 58.8% of votes cast. This is a decisive victory for the 44-year-old incumbent, who defeated the far-right candidate Marine Le Pen at the end of a bitter campaign.

Macron is the first president since 1965 to be re-elected while holding a majority in Parliament. His opponent's vote share – 41.2% – will also make history, as this is the highest notched by a far-right candidate in a presidential election. Compared to 2017, Le Pen improved her first-round score by 2.2 percentage points and her second-round score by more than 8 percentage points.

The third relevant figure is the level of abstention. 28% of voters chose to stay at home rather than settle for either of the two candidates. And 8.6% of voters who went to the booths chose to submit either a NOTA ballot or an invalid vote. This is the lowest turnout in a presidential election runoff since 1969 and the sign of a deep discontent with a political system that requires most voters to choose a candidate they would not have supported in other circumstances.

The geography of the results shows that Le Pen consolidated her presence in the north-east and southern France, usual strongholds for the French far-right. She has also made substantial inroads in rural areas across the territory, particularly in central France and in the south-west, even though Macron remains ahead in these regions. This suggests that the electoral base of the far-right has also become more diversified.

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In 2017, Macron brought the promise of introducing a new way of doing politics, transcending the traditional left-right cleavage. He inspired optimism in many voters, who supported him, not merely because they sought to block the far-right candidate. Five years later, his popularity has eroded and a larger share of his voters have cast their ballot mainly to oppose Le Pen.

Ahead of this election, Macron presented the electorate with a detailed road map for his second term, but he will have to find a way to rekindle the now dissipated optimism before the upcoming legislative elections, which will be held in June, and are often dubbed as the third round of the presidential election.

France has a semi-presidential system, in which power is shared between the president and a prime minister who has the backing of a majority in Parliament. When Parliament and the president align, power tilts towards the latter. When they do not, France enters into a system of cohabitation in which powers are split between the two executives.

It is difficult to predict the outcome of the incoming legislative election. Despite the bipolar character of the two-

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round presidential election, the French political landscape remains intensely fragmented. Though this should play in favour of the president's movement, it is unlikely that he will benefit much from the honeymoon period this time, which five years ago gave him his majority in Parliament.

The president's movement, En Marche ("Forward"), currently holds 267 of the National Assembly's 577 seats, few seats short of a majority. It had won

314 seats in 2017 but its presence in Parliament was whittled away by defections over policy disagreements in a context of heightened social tensions. The rest of the Assembly is deeply split between the Republicans (traditional right, holding 101 seats), the centrists (57 seats), the Socialist Party (28), Mélenchon's movement (17) and four other formations, as well as non-affiliated MPs.

Till now, the French electoral system with its two-round majority process has prevented the representation of the far-right in the National Assembly, as at least two stronger parties have been usually present in most constituencies which qualify for the second round.

However, the decimation of traditional parties in the first round of this presidential election may well translate into a reconfiguration of the political landscape in the legislative elections. Should Le Pen succeed in building on her performance, she may become the main opposition figure to Macron outside presidential contests. In such a scenario, or in case of a greater splintering of the political landscape, much could ride on Macron's ability to build alliances and, possibly, a coalition.

These domestic considerations may seem remote but the stakes are actually very high, given that France currently holds the chair of the European Union Council and is de facto leading the European response to the war in Ukraine.

With the defeat of the far-right candidate, it is not just France that has dodged a bullet but the EU as a whole. Given Le Pen's dependence on Russian loans, her abhorrence of the European idea and ideal of integration, a far-right victory in France would have precipitated the whole continent into a crisis. It would have broken the EU's resolve to stand up to Russia's aggression and caused a setback to a cohesive European Union for years to come.

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