

# Politics, French Style

*France has movements, not parties, and whoever becomes president will face mass discontent*

Gilles Verniers



The first round of the French presidential election has produced the same competition as five years ago. With 23% of the votes (against 21.3% in 2017), the far-right candidate, Marine Le Pen, qualified for a runoff election against the sitting president, Emmanuel Macron, who improved his first-round score from 24% in 2017 to 28%. The leader of the leftist “Unbowed” movement, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, surged to the third position, at 22%, just missing the qualification to the second round.

These three figures, while very distinct from an ideological standpoint, represent three streams of populism – left, centrist and right-wing – that are dominating French politics.

In France’s electoral system, a candidate must secure at least 50% of the votes cast to win the presidency. Because the fragmentation of the French party system has always prevented absolute majorities in the first round, a second round is organised 15 days later between the two candidates who obtained the most votes in the first round.

Supporters of this electoral institution point to the fact that it pushes candidates to mobilise beyond their party base, to broaden their appeal, thus reinforcing their legitimacy for the whole nation once elected. Detractors claim that most voters choose to vote strategically, which creates an inflated perception of support for the winner’s political project, giving majorities an artificial character.

In 2017, most voters who did not vote for Macron or Le Pen in the first round simply transferred their vote to the former in the second round, to prevent a far-right victory. Emmanuel Macron then scored 66.1% of the vote, the highest score obtained in a presidential election since Jacques Chirac in 2002, who defeated Marine Le Pen’s father, Jean-Marie Le Pen, the founder of the Front National.

In every election since 2002, this “Republican Front” or coalition has successfully thwarted the far-right candidate’s prospects for victory. The key



Three leaders, one unhappy country

question in this election is whether the Republican Front will hold once more.

Two related factors will shape the outcome of the second round. The first relates to vote transfers from other candidates’ supporters to the two qualifying candidates. The second is the level of abstention (and votes for NOTA), which determines how many votes a candidate needs to win a majority.

Daily polls conducted since the first round of the election show that Macron remains the favourite by a slim margin (52.5% on April 11 according to IPSOS) and that the gap between him and Le Pen has since slowly widened. While Macron is favoured to win on April 24, it seems likely that the distance separating him from Le Pen will be considerably smaller than in 2017.

The same polls indicate that the plurality of Mélenchon’s anti-system supporters are likely to abstain or vote NOTA in the second round (at 45%), while others will transfer their vote to Macron (34%) or to Le Pen (21%). Other candidates’ supporters are also likely to split between these three options. The

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other far-right candidate, polemicist and television pundit Éric Zemmour, obtained 7% of the vote, without depleting Le Pen’s vote base. His supporters are likely to vote exclusively for Le Pen.

While the supporters of candidates from the two traditional parties – Republicans and Socialists – are more likely to support Macron, they also account for very few votes. These two parties, which governed France for the period between World War II and 2017, have been decimated. The Republican candidate,

Valérie Pécresse, failed to reach the 5% of vote share required for reimbursement of campaign expenditure, while the Socialist candidate and Paris mayor, Anne Hidalgo, scored an abject 1.75%.

Macron, who already leads by five points, should receive more transferred votes in total than Le Pen. But a large abstention in the second round will magnify her vote share, making this election closer than before. Error margins in these polls suggest the possibility that the two candidates might actually be evenly matched.

Whatever happens, the results from the first round as well as polls for the second show that French politics has undergone a profound transformation since 2017.

The three leading political figures are, in effect, leaders of movements rather than heads of parties.

- Macron, once a minister in the Socialist government in 2014, created a new centrist political movement (En Marche, or “Forward”) less than nine months before the 2017 presidential election.

- Le Pen leads a far-right movement that has always been organised around a central leader:

- Mélenchon is a popular tribune who runs his movement as a one-man show and uses holograms to broadcast his message.

These movements function mostly as electoral machines at the service of their leaders, rather than as traditional party organisations that aggregate interests through intermediary bodies, like local communities or unions. As a result, French politics has become even more centralised and personalised. It has also become more polarised. Once unthinkable, Le Pen’s appeal keeps increasing election after election.

Since most citizens will end up either voting for a sitting president they do not support or abstaining from voting altogether, France’s political system breeds mass discontent from the first day of the president’s new mandate – regardless of the outcome.

*The writer is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Ashoka University. Views are personal*