

French presidential election: An expected surprise

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The eventful and unconventional campaign for the French presidential elections (partly) came to an end on Sunday night. Centrist candidate Emmanuel Macron (24,0%) and Marine Le Pen (21,3%) of the radical right Front National have both qualified for the run-off of the presidential election. Even though polls had predicted this results in the months prior to the election, it still constitutes a surprise. The outcome is historically close, and 4 candidates have gathered around 20% of the electorate, yet both mainstream parties have been eliminated. After Macron and Le Pen, right-wing candidate François Fillon (20,0%) and radical left Jean-Luc Mélenchon (19,6%) came short of making it to the second round. 2017 is ahistorical election for the left: Mélenchon obtained a record result, while Benoit Hamon finished at one of the lowest scores of the Socialist Party of outgoing president Francois Hollande. The fact that the latter had renounced to compete for re-election (because of his very low approval ratings) had completely opened the presidential race, although the campaign had been mostly centred on political and financial scandals.

Macron's result is particularly impressive as the candidate was virtually unknown a few years before the election, and he led his campaign without the support of any established political party. He managed to gather individuals from the left and the right to create his own centrist movement: En Marche. The same strategy worked with voters. Macron's campaign was articulated around two types of issues. First, he embodied the idea of political renewal – and mostly renewal of the political personnel. This issue has been the core of the campaign, and although all his opponents have targeted Macron as the “candidate of the system” and the heir of Francois Hollande. Macron seems to have captured the call for renewal of the French voters because he was relatively unknown before the campaign, and because he sides with no traditional political party. Additionally, Macron mostly campaigned on valence issues (that is, issues that are mainly consensual) such as supporting economic

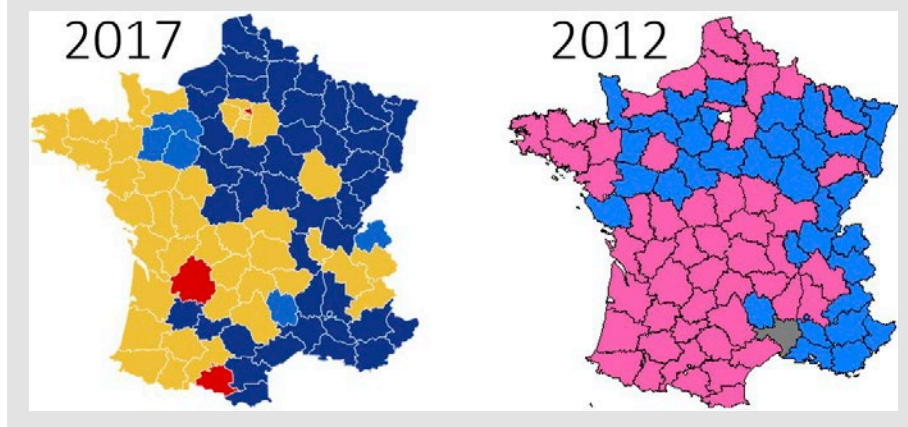
Table 1. Results in the first round of 2017 French presidential elections

	Total	% (on registered voters)	% (on total turnout)
Registered voters	47,582,183		
Turnout	37,003,728	77.8	
Abstentions	10,578,455	22.2	
Valid votes	36,054,394	75.8	97.4
Blank votes	659,997	1.4	1.8
Null votes	289,337	0.6	0.8
Candidate	Votes	% (on registered voters)	% (on valid votes)
Macron (En Marche !)	8,656,346	18.2	24.0
Le Pen (Front National)	7,678,491	16.1	21.3
Fillon (Les Republicains)	7,212,995	15.2	20.0
Mélenchon (La France insoumise)	7,059,951	14.8	19.6
Hamon (Parti Socialiste)	2,291,288	4.8	6.4
Dupont-Aignan (Debout la France)	1,695,000	3.6	4.7
Lassalle (Résistons !)	435,301	0.9	1.2
Poutou (Nouveau Parti anticapitaliste)	394,505	0.8	1.1
Asselineau (Union populaire républicaine)	332,547	0.7	0.9
Arthaud (Lutte ouvrière)	232,384	0.5	0.6
Cheminade (Solidarité et progrès)	65,586	0.1	0.2

growth, and improving education as his top campaign priority. Macron was also the most openly pro-European candidate, in a campaign which was influenced by Eurosceptic candidates (Le Pen, Mélenchon).

Marine Le Pen's result can be interpreted both as a success and a disappointment. The candidate of the Front National will compete in the second round of the election only for the second time of this party's history (after her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen in 2002). She articulated her campaign on issues where her positions clash the most clashing compared to other candidates: immigration and euro-scepticism. Particularly, Marine Le Pen was the only major candidate to support the abandon of the euro, and to support a referendum on the participation of France to the EU. Yet, Le Pen had been polling over 25% for several years and was expected to finish the race first. Finishing second with less than 22% of the vote will prove a challenge to gather a majority for the second round; especially since she is only supported by right-wing

Figure 1. Electoral map of French presidential elections, 2017 and 2012



candidate Dupont-Aignan (less than 5%) in the second round. Most candidates have rather called for the “Republican Front” and to support Macron in order to avoid the FN taking power.

Francois Fillon is the major loser of this election. As he won the primaries of the centre and the right in 2016, he appeared as the strongest contender for the presidency. After the extremely unpopular term of Hollande, Les Républicains, the mainstream conservative party considered this election to be “impossible to lose”. Yet, Fillon’s campaign has been completely focused on the political and financial scandals in which he was involved. Fillon decided to carry on his campaign, and portray himself as the victim of a political conspiracy rather than stepping down (as many of his fellow party members were advising). Coming third is likely to have important consequences on the mainstream right party, as followers and voters will be divided between a centrist Macron-leaning option, and a more radical and conservative trend. Acknowledging his defeat, Fillon has called his supporter to vote for Macron in the second round.

The cumulated score of the Left (Mélenchon and Hamon) is over 25% of the vote, but in an unusual order. While Mélenchon managed to receive about 20% of the vote on a radical left platform which called for a transformation of the French political institutions through a constituent assembly drafting a new constitution, and the renegotiation of all European treaties (supporting a French withdrawal in case of failure), Benoit Hamon only managed to get 6,4% of the vote, which is the lowest score of the Socialist Party since 1969.

No other candidate has reached 5%, which is also the threshold for obtaining public reimbursement of campaign expenses.

Overall, the campaign for the presidential election has been mainly centred on the reject of traditional parties and the renewal of the political person-

nel. Indeed, the two mainstream parties are both out of the second round for the first time in modern French history. The two contenders of the first round are outsiders of the usual party landscape: Macron has launched his own movement, while Le Pen leads the “anti-system” party (Sartori 1976). Voters will be called to vote in the second round on May 7th, in an election that Macron seems very likely to win¹. The winner will then have to win a majority in the legislative elections of June (similar two-round system in single-member districts)². In that case, outsidership and having no support from traditional parties might prove to be less of an advantage than in the presidential election.

References

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¹ For specific analyses concerning the results of the second-round of the presidential elections, see [Paparo in this volume](#).

² For detailed reports of the electoral results observed in the two rounds of the legislative elections, see Michel in this volume ([a](#); [b](#)).