



En Marche! candidate Emmanuel Macron is favoured to become France's next president. Reuters

The first round of voting in the French presidential election delivered a profound blow to the two parties that have dominated the country's politics since the 1970s. Together, the centre-right Republicans and the centre-left Socialists [obtained only 26% of the vote](#), down from nearly 56% in the first round of the 2012 election. Two political movements – National Front and En Marche! – have forced them off stage.

What we learnt from the first round

National Front has existed since the early 1970s. But its current leader, Marine Le Pen, has [successfully overcome](#) its marginal, extremist profile. She distanced it from the nationalistic, far-right-wing ideology of her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen.

Her share of the vote (21.3%, or more than 7.6 million votes) is the party's best-ever presidential election result. It is the culmination of its significant advance over the last three years.

Facing Le Pen in the second round will be the much more recently formed movement En Marche!, which has coalesced around independent candidate [Emmanuel Macron](#).

After serving as finance minister in a Socialist government, Macron resigned in 2016 out of frustration at the party's inability to bring about the liberal deregulation of the labour market he deemed necessary. His win in the first round of voting is proof of a radically new element in French politics: unconditional liberalism.

Economic liberalism has traditionally been presented in France as an unavoidable necessity, not a good in itself. Macron, however, is motivated by an optimistic belief in the capacity of economic freedom to deliver benefits for society as a whole.

Macron and Le Pen battle voter disdain as they square off for French presidency

Written by Natalie Doyle, Senior Lecturer in French Studies, Monash University

Both Le Pen and Macron have gained from the very deep disaffection of the French electorate with its traditional political representatives. [29% of the French people](#) are now either disgusted with politics or indifferent to it. This goes back to the 2005 decision to ignore the [rejection of the European Union's proposed constitution](#) at a referendum.

The failure of two successive presidents, Republican Nicolas Sarkozy and Socialist François Hollande, to manage the impact of the global financial crisis over the Eurozone and balance Germany's harsh austerity stance has only deepened the rift.

Combined with terrorist attacks in recent years, France's loss of influence over EU policy has cemented the perception that its politicians no longer know how to lead and protect the country's interests. The "fake jobs" accusations that engulfed Republican candidate [François Fillon](#) – coming after a former Socialist minister was [jailed for tax fraud](#) – only added to the notion that French politicians are self-serving.

Front National's rise is a symptom of the failure to properly tackle the underlying causes of Europe's economic stagnation – in particular to reassess the Franco-German partnership, a cornerstone of French policy since the 1963 [Élysée Treaty](#). This failure affects both mainstream parties. But it has been most damaging for the Socialists, historically the EU's greatest champion.

Just like the [Dutch labour alliance](#) before it, the Socialists have been severely punished for not tackling growing inequality. They received their worst result since 1969, with fewer than 6.4% of the votes.

What to look for ahead of the second round

The contest between Macron and Le Pen [reveals two opposing sides](#) of French society. Macron appeals to those sectors of society connected (or hoping to be connected) to the greater European and global market. Le Pen speaks for those relegated to badly serviced semi-rural areas and fearful for the future.

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Both candidates now face the same challenges: translating their success in the first round into a majority in the second round, and then securing a majority in the June legislative election.

Macron will likely benefit from the kind of bipartisan “ [Republican alliance](#) ” that defeated Jean-Marie Le Pen in the 2002 presidential election. But there is still a lot of uncertainty with respect to the supporters of eurocritical left-wing candidate [Jean-Luc Mélenchon](#)

These voters may abstain or vote blank. This may deprive Macron of votes he can ill afford to lose. He only secured the support of 18% of the overall electorate if you count those who did not vote in the first round.

Macron’s [triumphalist celebration](#) of his first-round success angered many French people due to its insensitivity, reminiscent of Sarkozy. It also [demonstrated no awareness](#) of the fragility of his support base.

Macron’s [statement](#) that he would like to push through more radical reform of France’s labour law through a government *ordonnance* – which does not require prior parliamentary discussion – is bound to be met with high levels of voter opposition, similar to last year’s [El Khomry law](#).

If he insists on the idea, he may well be forced to co-habit with an unco-operative, if not outright hostile, assembly. This would spell political paralysis, with no prospect of the underlying issues being resolved.

Such a scenario would only serve Le Pen’s [original plan](#) : to win in 2022.

With the [near disintegration](#) of the Socialist Party, the strong late surge of Mélenchon’s movement – especially among young voters – Le Pen may yet face a new adversary: [left-wing populism](#)

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To be any chance of success, Macron must take voters' concerns seriously and debate them democratically, rather than dismiss them. This is what the media and the establishment parties have also been doing – and this created the problem in the first place.

If Macron doesn't do this, France runs the risk of a contest of populisms in five years' time. But this may perhaps be what France needs to tackle its social divisions.

Natalie Doyle does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.

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