



مركز الجزيرة للدراسات  
ALJAZEERA CENTRE FOR STUDIES

## Report

### The Meaning of Macron's Victory

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**18 May 2017**





**Supporters of Emmanuel Macron celebrate near the Louvre museum after results were announced on Sunday [Reuters]**

## Abstract

Emmanuel Macron, a political newcomer, was inaugurated as French president on May 14 following a tumultuous two-round election. The first round of the election swept aside the two parties that have dominated French politics for the last half century, and the second round pitted Macron against Marine Le Pen, the leader of a populist—at time xenophobic—right-wing movement. This paper looks at the political dynamics of the elections, the rocky future for France’s establishment parties, and the road ahead for Macron.

## First Round: Out with the old, in with the new

Eleven candidates participated in the first round of the French presidential election on April 23, however the real contest came down to four: François Fillon, the center-right Republican candidate; Jean-Luc Mélenchon, leader of the communist La France Insoumise (the Defiant France); Marine Le Pen, leader of the far-right National Front; and Emmanuel Macron, founder of the En Marche! (Forward!) movement. Both Le Pen and Macron brought new political modes to the fore. Le Pen’s party represents a rising tide of anti-immigrant, anti-Europe French nationalist populism, which has brewed for decades at the margins of French politics, but never ventured so far in presidential elections. Macron, an iconoclast in his own way, rejects the traditional political distinction between left and right, stating that he is inspired by the social dimension of the left and the liberal economics of the Republican right.

Macron and Le Pen emerged from the first round with the highest number of votes. Macron returned 24 percent and Le Pen 21.3 percent, while Fillon trailed in third (20 percent) and Mélenchon came fourth (19.6 percent). As an indication of the current state

of establishment politics, the candidate of the ruling Socialist party came in a distant fifth.

### **An exceptional context**

The first round took place in a complex and uncharacteristic domestic and international context. After President Hollande decided against running for a second term, the ruling party's support split between the party's official candidate, Benoit Hamon, winner of the leftist primaries, and Emmanuel Macron, a former Minister of Economy under Hollande. This split took place against a domestic backdrop of economic troubles, the consolidation of the far right, and a rising populist sentiment on the left and the right. The campaign took place in the international context of rising populism and isolationism: the ascent of far-right candidates in Austria and the Netherlands, Britain's exit from the European Union, and the election of Donald Trump in America.

These trends combined to exacerbate the existing French political polarization, strengthening the forces on the fringes of the political spectrum, and weakening the forces of the traditional center.

### **End of bipolarity**

The results of the first round led to an unprecedented situation. For the first time in the history of the Fifth Republic (since 1958), the candidates of the moderate left and the moderate right were eliminated in the first round. In 2002, Jean-Marie Le Pen (Marine Le Pen's father) defeated the Socialist Party candidate, Lionel Jospin, in the first round. Thus, the Socialist party experienced its second exclusion in fifteen years, while the Republican right experienced its first exclusion ever. By voting for Macron and Le Pen, the French people ended decades of bipolarity and the revolving door of power between the Republican right and the Socialist left. The outcome was a political surprise, representing a shift in the ideological landscape and a downgrading of the clout of the political establishment.

Ending the dominance of the parties is also a move to renew and rejuvenate the ruling political class: Macron is thirty-nine and Le Pen is forty-eight years old. However, this was not strictly a house-cleaning vote, as Le Pen was mired in financial and political scandals. Ultimately, the scandals did not affect her popularity because her supporters were either willing to look past the scandals or believed they were the product of a conspiracy of the establishment.

Another aspect of the end of bipolarity is the normalization of the National Front. When Jean-Marie Le Pen passed the first round of the elections in 2002 hundreds of thousands of citizens came out to denounce the far right and demand a vote against it. However, when his daughter passed the first round on Sunday, the same mobilization was not

repeated; on April 24, fewer than 300 people gathered in the Place de la Republique in the center of Paris to denounce her and the far right. In part this was due to disagreement among her opponents: there are signs of division within the Republican Front (anti-far right), while the refusal of Mélenchon (the radical left) to endorse Macron to block Le Pen fuelled resentment among large segments of his first round supporters.

### **Second round: Total clash of political platforms**

The second stage was marked by an absolute incompatibility between the two candidates' platforms. Macron proposed a socially liberal, tolerant, and moderate project, while Le Pen offered a protectionist and xenophobic vision. The former views globalization and free trade as engines for development and defends the benefits of French membership in the European Union. The latter sees globalization as a driver of the country's economic crisis and considers membership in the European Union and Eurozone as a source of France's economic and social worries. Macron called for stronger borders; Le Pen pledged to close them. Macron called for tolerance and moderate secularism, while Le Pen championed discrimination between French citizen and foreigners, and between "native" French and French of foreign heritage.

### **Macron gains the center**

Le Pen's radical platform had the effect of galvanizing support for Macron from the moderate left and right. Despite the consolidation of the far right and the penetration of their ideas into broad sectors of the population, Le Pen's chances of winning were quite limited for a number of reasons. The majority of French voters do not want, still, the far right to reach the presidency. Even a large part of right-leaning voters were determined to cast their votes for Macron, not necessarily because they loved him, but because they despised Le Pen and what she represents. This explains why Macron's victory was such a landslide (66 percent)—he claimed most of the left and most of the center.

Unlike the far right, the majority of French people support the European Union and its unified currency, despite their criticism of the Union's performance. It can be said that the second round was also a referendum on the European Union, which still enjoys the endorsement of the majority of the French people.

As pollsters forecast Macron as a clear favorite, his margin of victory became an important point. The Socialists and the Greens believed that a comprehensive vote must be mobilized for Macron to ensure that Le Pen received the lowest possible number of votes. The aim was to show that only a small minority of voters supports the National Front, thus depriving the party of political momentum heading into parliamentary elections. Large segments of the Republican right embraced the same logic, out of both political self-interest and a sense of patriotic decency.

## Implications of the new scene

Parliamentary elections are less than one month away and political parties are scrambling to adapt to the new landscape. Because Macron's party is less than one-year old and currently holds no seats, he has a lot of ground to cover. Three prevailing dynamics are at play.

First, Macron and his movement are determined to win as many seats as possible in the next parliament to strengthen the presidency with a parliamentary majority that would make it easier for them to govern. This is prompting the Socialist and Republican parties to attempt to temporarily overcome internal divisions in order to achieve a parliamentary result that compels Macron to share power. Second, the success achieved by the National Front in the presidential election may create momentum in the legislative elections (they hold only two seats in the current parliament). Third, Mélenchon will seek to exploit his success in the election's first round to expand his influence in parliament. These three challenges are likely to further splinter bipolarity in the French National Assembly (the lower house of the bicameral parliament). This new multi-polar scene may prevent any faction from winning a parliamentary majority. The Republican Party is concerned about the expansion of the far-right National Front and the risk of it capturing part of its electorate. Likewise, the Socialist Party is concerned that far left voters who supported Mélenchon will lure away part of its constituency and perhaps pull the party farther to the left.

Each party has its own problems, but there are similarities. The Socialist party is worse off, since it suffers from a political rift between supporters of the party's own candidate and Macron. Before the first round, the Socialists who supported Macron did so not out of love for him but out of opposition to Le Pen. This included prominent figures like former Prime Minister Manuel Valls, who said that voting for Macron was the only way to block Le Pen because of the danger posed to the republic. Valls sees no room for reconciliation between the center-left and far-left wings of the party, and traces the party's trouble to a failure to impose discipline among its ranks to respect the results of its primaries. Now, the Socialist party's primary battle is to reach an ideological consensus between its two wings.

The Republicans also find themselves in internal political deadlock. Unlike their Socialist rival that is unified in their opposition to the far right, the Republican Party is internally divided, as evidenced by a meeting of its political bureau on April 24. It is true that on the evening of April 23 Fillon and a number of party leaders called on supporters to vote for Macron, in rejection of Le Pen. However, other figures rejected the trade-off, arguing it would create a problem of inconsistency: Macron cannot be supported for the presidency and then considered a political opponent in the legislative elections. This logic appears coherent, but in fact it contradicts historical precedent: in 2002, the left voted

for their opponent, Jacques Chirac (who won 80 percent of the vote), to deny Jean-Marie Le Pen, and this did not prevent them from competing in the legislative elections that followed.

The legislative campaign is reviving the debate around this issue, as the conflict intensifies over the evaluation of the party's own poor performance. Officials in the party are accused of colluding with Fillon and failing to take a firm stand to force him to withdraw because of his scandals to spare the party a certain defeat. While it would be most advantageous if all its members went to the legislative elections on good terms, the split between the camps will not be easy to mend. If the Socialist Party is torn apart by its left wing pulling away, the Republican Party is torn apart by confrontation in at least three directions: the conservative Catholic-oriented right (represented by Fillon and his supporters), the hard-line popular right (represented by the supporters of former President Nicolas Sarkozy, including Laurent Wauquiez), and the moderate right (represented by Alain Juppe).

### Macron and the Arab World

Looking ahead, Macron's prospective victory has repercussions for the Arab world on a number of levels:

1. Macron's adherence to an open market economy will restrain economic conflicts and increase the demand for energy, which is the primary source of income for a number of countries in the Arab world.
2. His endorsement of internationalist liberal principles will strengthen the position of democracy advocates. Signs of this emerged in Macron's promise to punish the Bashar al-Assad regime. By extension, France led by Macron will be a constraint to Russia's revanchist agenda in the Arab world.
3. Given Macron's liberal principles and social ideology, migrants will benefit from policies of integration, receive rights and duties equal with the rest of the French populace, and will not suffer from Le Pen's threats of marginalization, exclusion, and hatred.

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