

The French presidential election: an (E)U-turn in the making?

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In most European capitals, France's decision to put Emmanuel Macron ahead in the first round of the presidential election was taken as a reassurance that France would continue to contribute to the European integration process. But the first round also featured a historical rejection of the country's two mainstream parties. What does this result tell us about the future of populism in France? How is this likely to influence the country's priorities on the EU agenda and the position of its partners? Macron's victory would certainly represent a revolution for France's role within the Union, but the lingering possibility of a French (E)U-turn could well be the real game changer coming out of this election.

The (real) revolution in the making

The results of the first round of the French presidential election confirmed the singularity of France's semi-presidential regime and the exceptional character of an election that its initiator, Charles de Gaulle, once described as "the meeting between a man and a people". Macron's ability to qualify his one year old movement *En Marche!* (EM!) ahead of Marine Le Pen should hence be seen as resulting as much from his individual appeal to voters as from the lack of credible alternatives among progressive candidates.

However, two events seem to indicate that the elimination of the two mainstream parties in the first round – the *Parti Socialiste* (PS) and *Les Républicains* (LR) – reveals more structural dynamics. First, the historically low score of the PS (6.4%) tends to confirm a scission of its electoral base on very similar lines as those observed in the 2005 referendum on the EU constitution. Second, the normalisation of the *Front National* (FN) characterised by the implicit acceptance, despite its illiberal stance, of its compatibility with the rules of the French Republic. The decision of Jean-Luc Mélenchon and his supporters from the movement of *La France Insoumise* (FI) ('France Unbowed'), as well as some LR leaders, not to call for a Macron vote in the second round indicates a shift in attitude among critics of globalisation towards the 'Vote Républicain', a cross-party consensus aimed at keeping the FN away from power. As a consequence, France may be seen as experiencing a similar re-orientation as the one observed in other EU countries (United Kingdom, Austria, the Netherlands) with its political supply integrating the axis of winners versus losers of globalisation.

France's long-term EU path: 'double or quits'?

The geographical distribution of the votes cast in the first round confirms the thesis of a new line of polarisation of French politics. While Macron arrived ahead in big metropolitan areas and in the west and south-west, Le Pen did best in rural peripheries as well as in the north, east and south-east parts of France. EM!'s voters also seem to have more favourable views towards globalisation and a more optimistic stance towards the future than the voters of FN, leading the French demographer Hervé Le Bras to describe Macron's voter map as a "reverse mirror" of Le Pen's.¹ The dynamics observed in the first round also indicate a structural progression of the FN vote, with the party reaching

¹ "Miroir inversé du vote FN : les cartes du vote Macron", France Culture, 24 April 2014, available at: <https://www.franceculture.fr/politique/miroir-inverse-du-vote-fn-les-cartes-du-vote-macron>

more than 7 million voters for the first time, and gaining traction locally – with Le Pen coming ahead in over 19,000 municipalities against circa. 7,000 for Macron. These trends suggest that the FN may be able to confirm over the long run its present position as the most visible alternative to Macron's progressive agenda. Given France's bipartisan regime,² this trend could turn France's long-term EU path into a 'doubling down' bet, with voters facing a binary choice between more EU and no EU in future elections.

Macron's momentum and the expected transfer of votes seem to put him in a good position to win this election. However, the highly volatile electoral climate make it hard to predict whether this will be sufficient to give EM! a majority in Parliament following the upcoming parliamentary elections in June.³ The two contenders for a majority in Parliament, EM! and LR, have both made labour market reforms a top priority, which makes it very likely that proposals aiming to modernise the country's economy will be implemented. Yet, this agenda may prove politically risky, if nationalist movements (FN, FI) gradually strengthen their position in the perceived fight between (pro-EU) 'global liberals' versus (Euro-sceptic) 'social patriots' before these reforms actually deliver on growth and jobs.

A 'sovereign Europe' to respond to the nationalist agenda?

Anticipating a run-off against the FN, Macron's campaign portrayed Europe as the "real level of sovereignty", emphasising the role that France should play in encouraging the EU not only to embrace but also to shape globalisation in order to better protect its citizens.

To preclude a nationalist backlash, Macron will therefore have to deliver on the economic and social dimension of his 'sovereign Europe' agenda and to showcase that France's EU path can also be an effective tool to deal with the negative forces of globalisation.⁴ Macron's manifesto rightly identified this issue supporting, for example, EU minimum standards on access to training, healthcare and social benefits, as well as for the introduction of social and environmental clauses in trade agreements. These proposals were made alongside a call for reform of the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) aimed at preventing the undeniable (and politically unsustainable) spill-over effects that a new economic crisis would have on France.

Pushing through these reforms at EU level could prove politically difficult as other EU partners may want to focus on alternative priorities such as migration and security. However, in order to preclude the perspective – and the wider spill-over effects – of an irreversible French (E)U-turn, Germany⁵ and other pro-EU governments may well be tempted to help Macron deliver on parts of this reform agenda. Not out of solidarity with France but out of 'enlightened self-interest' aimed at securing the future of European integration.

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² The voting system in France – based on a simple-majority two-ballot system in the Presidential and Parliamentary elections – strongly contributes or even imposes a bi-polarisation of the universal suffrage, by e.g. providing incentives to voters to adopt strategies favouring the candidate seen as having the best chances to win in a face-to-face opposition ("vote utile").

³ Candidates need to reach a threshold of 12.5% of the registered voters in the first round, which means circa. 22.5% of the votes cast if the participation reaches 57% (turnout in 2012).

⁴ Emmanouilidis, Janis A., Fabbri, Francesca, Rittelmeyer, Yann-Sven, Schout, Adriaan, Stratulat, Corina and Zuleeg, Fabian (2017), "The 2017 elections across Europe: facts, expectations and consequences" *EPC Discussion Paper*, European Policy Centre, available at: http://www.epc.eu/documents/uploads/pub_7501_2017electionsacrossEurope.pdf

⁵ Rittelmeyer, Yann-Sven (2017), "Germany and the next French president: in search of the best partner", *EPC commentary*, European Policy Centre, available at: http://www.epc.eu/pub_details.php?cat_id=4&pub_id=7592