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# France's Presidential Election – Second Round

*By Brunswick's Paris Office*

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# Macron wins a second term – but a weaker mandate

By defeating Marine Le Pen once more, Emmanuel Macron becomes the first sitting French president to win a second term since Jacques Chirac defeated her father Jean-Marie Le Pen in 2002.

However, with a narrower margin of 58.54% to 41.46% of the vote, Macron has failed to replicate his 2017 success, in which he enjoyed the support of two-thirds of the French electorate.

While Macron's victory will reassure France's international partners and the markets, the forces behind Le Pen's rise remain present, and the President faces major hurdles in the coming months.

Brunswick's Paris office reviews the election run-off results and offers a glimpse at Macron's upcoming second term.

## Second-round results

So the "Republican Front" against the far-right has held, for now. After a difficult five years in office, marked by the "yellow vests" protests, an abortive pension reform and the Covid-19 crisis, Emmanuel Macron has succeeded, where his two predecessors had failed, in getting re-elected.

At 28.01%, the abstention rate is one of the highest ever recorded for a presidential election run-off, just after the 1969 election which followed the *Mai 68* social movement in France.

Results show that Macron's support was stronger in the liberal west and larger cities, drawing on an electoral base comprised of a mix of upper middle-class and retiree voters. Macron also managed to secure support from more than half of the voters who chose leftist candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon in the first-round. Le Pen, as the candidate of the working and lower-middle class,

drew her strongest support in the north of the country – once the beating heart of French industry and now comparable in places to the US "rust belt" – and in the south, a traditional far-right stronghold. Le Pen also managed to win many of France's overseas territories, where abstention was high, while Macron scored high amongst French expatriates.

## A bumpy road ahead

Unlike 2017, when Macron rode to power on a wave of impassioned support – especially among young urban voters won over by his pro-European narrative – this time he appears to have been elected with little broad enthusiasm, as the only option against the far-right. In the French media, most commentators agree that this victory is really one by default.

At least in the near term, Macron's victory will do little to heal France's bitter divisions. As President, the former banker has been persistently dogged by a perception of arrogance – which his second-round TV debate performance against Le Pen will have done little to dispel.

Furthermore, many of the social trends underpinning the rise of the "yellow vests" and the consolidation of the far-right bloc are here to stay. With inflation threatening to erode French pay packets at an increasing rate, a new wave of protests may well be unleashed in coming months unless the financial pressure on the lower and middle class can be alleviated. Macron has already promised raises to minimum wages and pensions – a pledge that will be complicated by the surge in French sovereign debt resulting from the comprehensive Covid-19 financial support extended to workers and businesses. In the first months of his new term, President Macron will also renew his push for a broad pension reform to raise the legal retirement age to 65 by 2031.

He must also mitigate the effects of the Ukraine war – not least the social and economic impact of surging energy costs – while keeping the French economy on the rails. Finally, Macron will be under increased pressure to convince younger generations that he takes the issue of climate change seriously, and that he is willing to take concrete measures to honour, and improve upon, the environmental commitments already made. In fact, he has already started to respond to these concerns by stating in his victory speech that he would seek to make France a “great ecological nation”.

More broadly, Macron has also acknowledged that his second term cannot be a mere extension of his first, but must rather “invent a new method” to build bridges and heal the divisions in French society. However, Macron is barred by the Constitution from running for a third term, and in the absence of local elections in the next five years, he could in theory have a freer hand to push through reforms.

## June parliamentary elections: an unofficial third round

Nevertheless, the success of Macron’s second crack at pensions, and of other potential reform proposals, will depend heavily on the makeup of France’s lower house of parliament. With legislative elections scheduled for June 12<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>, the current composition of the National Assembly could change drastically.

When Macron came to power in 2017, his party swept the lower house with a large absolute majority that allowed him to pass legislation with little need for political compromise. This year, things may well take a different turn. Macron’s support is lower overall than it was five years ago, and his latest victory will likely fail to translate to a similar majority of seats this time. Moreover, traditional parties such as the Republicans or the Socialists, whose presidential candidates were obliterated in the first round, can still rely on their much stronger local standing in what has become an existential struggle for National Assembly seats. Macron’s *La République en Marche*, which lacks the grassroots strength of longer-established rival parties, already has to count on the support of allies at local level.

Attempts are underway to forge a broad grouping of Macron-compatible parties that could form the backbone of a governing coalition, but their outcome looks uncertain.

Another threat to Macron’s second-term programme comes from Mélenchon’s *La France Insoumise (LFI)*. The anti-liberal, far-left candidate won 21.9% of the first-round presidential vote, coming very close to Le Pen. Mélenchon has already called on his supporters to “elect me Prime Minister”, a prospect less outlandish than it sounds. If LFI can win enough National Assembly seats to control the balance of power, the party could deprive Macron of a majority or any chance of a governing coalition with centre-right and/or centre-left MPs, forcing him into uncomfortable “cohabitation” with an unaffiliated government. Mélenchon will likely use the coming weeks to build a broader leftist parliamentary campaign and broker local alliances and compromises.

Having failed a third time to become president, Marine Le Pen’s future looks uncertain and could hinge on her party’s score at the June legislative elections, on which she has already turned her focus. Even if her score has improved since 2017, this election appears to confirm that, despite a normalisation effort launched by the party a decade ago, *Rassemblement National (RN)* candidates will continue to run into the glass ceiling that has kept them out of national government. Her party will hope to increase its number of National Assembly seats to influence future policy debates. But the two-round majority system of parliamentary elections, and the demoralisation inflicted by another presidential election defeat, should limit its ability to make significant inroads. And should Marine Le Pen decide to withdraw from politics, which appears unlikely after the speech she gave on election night, the survival of the RN – a party historically tied to the Le Pen family dynasty – would be far from certain. Many of her potential successors are considered too young and inexperienced to lead a national party, while others including her own niece Marion Maréchal had defected to rival far-right candidate Eric Zemmour before his first-round collapse.

Zemmour himself is likely to run for parliament and attempt to translate some of the momentum

of his earlier presidential campaign into a parliamentary base for his *Reconquête* party. In a speech following the announcement of the second-round results, he called for the creation of a “nationalist union” to combat Macron’s centre and Mélenchon’s left in the upcoming legislative elections. It is far from clear, however, whether the RN will embrace that overture. Instead, leaders on the right and far right are likely to compete to take advantage of the current situation and strengthen their own position – complicating any attempts to predict a clear outcome on the right of the political spectrum.

In many respects, the restructuring of French politics may be just getting started.

## What next?

Following his second-round victory, Macron’s most pressing task is to form a new government. Current Prime Minister Jean Castex had made clear that he intended to submit his resignation in the next few days, in keeping with French political tradition.

Macron is likely to attempt a show of force ahead of the legislative elections by announcing a government line-up that includes prominent figures from both moderate wings of the political

spectrum, in the hope of appealing to a broader base of voters and securing an absolute parliamentary majority. Some figures of the traditional left and right establishment are already showing signs of openness to Macron and his supporters. The new government should be announced next week at the latest.

Lacking any ability to enact legislation or implement reforms until after the June elections, the new ‘campaigning’ government will make the political case for the second-term programme Macron intends to deliver, if given a free hand in the parliamentary elections.

Further adjustments to the cabinet are to be expected after the new composition of the National Assembly becomes clear on June 19<sup>th</sup> – particularly in the event that Macron and his allies fall short of a majority.

Beyond the June elections, the future course of Macron’s second term will depend on many variables – including his ability to manoeuvre within the reduced fiscal latitude of an inflationary economy, while remaining sufficiently responsive to ordinary citizens’ hopes and fears to avoid any major new social conflagration. None of this promises to be easy.

The Brunswick Paris Office remains at your disposal to help you navigate this changing political landscape.

## To continue the conversation:

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