France at a crossroads

IPS

Yes but no but

Macron will probably become president of France. Finding parliamentary support for his policies will be a bigger challenge

The grand duel between France's two presidential challengers – Europhile liberal Emmanuel Macron and far-right Marine Le Pen, will take place on 7 May. Macron, President Francois Hollande's former economy minister and founder of the *'En Marche!'* movement, was running virtually neck-and-neck with the *Front National's* Marine Le Pen during campaigning for the first round of presidential elections. Now that Macron has qualified for the second round on 7 May – which he is predicted to win – the question is which parliamentary majority he could and would like to govern with after the parliamentary elections on 11 and 18 June.

Macron, running on an independent ticket, claims he can win a majority. *En Marche!* has been using an open application process to field one candidate for each election district from among 15,000 applicants. If Macron faced certain victory, I could stop here. But we can't take anything for granted. The majority voting system in parliamentary elections allows any candidate who wins over 12.5 percent of the vote in their constituency to enter the second round, in which three or even four candidates may be competing. In the past, parties have tried to build alliances before the second round. But since throughout the campaign Macron has presented himself as a political outsider, unwilling to get in bed with the established parties, any such arrangements would hurt rather than help him. Besides, the French electorate tends towards conservatism, and the premium Macron got from the François Fillon scandal will not apply in the National Assembly elections. Yet '*En Marche!*' candidates need the conservatives to win.

Natural chemistry?

If Macron does not win a parliamentary majority, he still has options:

One of the larger parties could agree to enter into a coalition with him. That would be a first in French Politics since Charles de Gaulle instigated the Fifth Republic. It is more likely that Macron would get support without any formal coalition agreement or being forced into 'cohabitation' (where the president rules with a prime minister from the opposition). Macron's political opponents like to portray him as Hollande's protégé who will continue his mentor's programme, but that does not mean the *Partie Socialiste* (PS) is Macron's natural partner. Perhaps the PS will receive a similar battering in the parliamentary elections as did presidential candidate Benoît Hamon. When you take out the PS left-wingers who refuse to back Macron anyway, that leaves him only meagre support from the party. Macron needs the PS's centrist wing to implement his social-liberal programme. Whether he gets that support depends on how quickly the PS repositions after its trammelling in the presidential elections.

Without the PS, Macron will have to look to *Les Republicains* (LR) on the right, whose views on the economy and labour market often chime with his. During campaigning, Fillon called on France to "tighten its belt", promising to slash 500,000 civil service jobs and cut €100bn from public spending. Macron's proposals are both more modest and optimistic, with plans to cut just 120,000 jobs and reduce public spending by €60bn. It is conceivable he and conservatives could agree on key reforms. A German-style coalition is unlikely: The Republicans are aiming to achieve a parliamentary majority and 'cohabit' with their own prime minister. President Macron would be forced to make large concessions that would go against his own manifesto pledges, and could even force new elections.

If, between now and mid-May when the parliamentary candidates are confirmed, social liberals in the PS, such as former prime minister Manuel Valls, unite to adopt a more centrist position, it will considerably improve the chances of a coalition. On the campaign trail, Macron was careful to snub neither the left nor the right. Instead of scrapping the cherished 35-hour working week, he proposed a flexibility clause that would enable employers and employees to negotiate terms individually. He also wants to invest €50 billion for structural changes in infrastructure, training and education, health and agriculture – not as on-going costs. But plans to cut up to 120,000 public service jobs during his five-year term is still anathema to the PS.

If Macron proceeds to become president, he will need to draw on broad support to implement his policies. Five years of political paralysis would damage both France and Europe, with Macron acting as a caretaker president until the next elections – when the extremists may have their

say.



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