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‘For Europe, Le Pen as president would be a tragedy’

France’s presidential elections will see a repeat of the 2017 run-off between Macron and Le Pen. Thomas Manz on how this time is different

The results of first round of the French presidential election confirmed that the second round will see a repeat of the 2017 run-off between Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen. The latter has achieved her best result to date with 23.4 per cent. What are the reasons for this?

The result of the first round of voting does indeed give the French a new edition of the Macron-Le Pen duel for the run-off on 24 April, though a majority does not actually want it. However, this is by no means unexpected.

Since 2017, Emmanuel Macron has worked to replace the left-right polarisation in a pluralistic party system with the dichotomous opposition between a ‘progressive’ camp – represented by himself – and a camp of national conservatives – represented above all by Marine Le Pen: the camp of reason and progress against the camp of conspiracy theories and reaction. To succeed, he attracted moderate conservative voters as well as moderate leftists.

This has led to the erosion of the traditional parties – Republicans and Socialists – and consequently to the fact that political alternatives to the centre occupied by Macron can only be found on the extreme fringes. Macron has worked towards this polarisation with the promise of being able to keep the extreme right in check. Last Sunday’s result shows that he did not succeed.

Why did he not succeed in doing so?

For one thing, Macron has put too much faith in the idea that, with the backing of an overall good management of the Covid-19 crisis and his media presence as a statesman working tirelessly to deal with the Ukraine conflict, he can spare himself an election campaign in which

he has to confront his opponents and, above all, turn to his electorate. His absence from the election campaign has revived the image of the detached, arrogant president who is distant from his people. In addition, in the face of a struggling left, he thought he could afford to put unpopular social reforms such as the 65+ pension reform or the conditioning of social welfare at the centre of his programme. This has reinforced the image of the socially insensitive 'president of the rich'.

On the other hand, Marine Le Pen has continued her course of 'de-demonising' her party *Rassemblement National*. She has softened her tone and hidden her racist and anti-European positions behind a more socially focused discourse. While her far-right rival Éric Zemmour kept racist and authoritarian positions present in the election campaign with his hate speech and radical demands, she was able to present herself as a popular candidate who addresses the everyday problems of ordinary people.

That Marine Le Pen has succeeded is demonstrated by polls showing a wide lead over Macron as the candidate most likely to understand the problems of ordinary citizens. This 'closeness to the people' is now also reflected in the election results: while Macron was elected to an above-average extent by senior employees and pensioners as well as people with an income of over €3,000, for Le Pen it is mainly ordinary employees and the working class as well as people with an income of less than €3,000.

How does the new rerun of the Macron-Le Pen duel differ from the 2017 election?

The situation today is by no means identical to 2017. While Macron, with a 3.6 per cent increase in votes compared to 2017, appears at first glance to have gained in strength, his position before the second round is actually much weaker than it was five years ago. Marine Le Pen has also been able to slightly improve her vote share from 2017, despite competition from Éric Zemmour. And unlike in 2017, she will not go into the run-off isolated. On the contrary, she even seems to have larger vote reserves than Emmanuel Macron.

Both Zémmour and the sovereignist Nicolas Dupont-Aignan, who together accounted for nine per cent of the vote, have called for Le Pen to be elected in the second round. Macron, on the other hand, is in the delicate situation of, on the one hand, not being allowed to alienate the voters of the republican right and, on the other hand, having to make a gesture to the left – for that is where the decisive vote potential for a 'republican front' against Le Pen lies.

Whether the Republican voters will heed the call of their humiliated

candidate Valérie Pécresse and vote for Macron in the second round is by no means certain. More certain are the votes from the camp of the Greens and the Socialists, whose candidates have also called to vote for Macron; but their voting potential is very low at less than six per cent.

Therefore, it is above all the 20 per cent of voters who voted for the candidate of the radical left, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who matter. Although Mélenchon made an urgent appeal on election night not to vote for Marine Le Pen under any circumstances, he did not make a recommendation for Macron either. According to a recent poll, his electorate is split with regard to the run-off: 30 per cent are leaning towards Le Pen, 34 per cent towards Macron and 36 per cent are inclined to abstain.

One naturally asks: Why can the far-right Marine Le Pen be an option for voters of the radical left? On the one hand, this has to do with Le Pen's aforementioned self-stylisation as a 'normal' candidate who stands for social justice, or – given the economic impact of the war in Ukraine – as a 'candidate for purchasing power'.

On the other hand, it is due to the deep aversion that Macron's policies have created among left-wing voters, especially those from the so-called 'popular classes'. About 60 per cent of employees and workers and over 50 per cent of those with an income of less than €2000 voted for either Le Pen or Mélenchon. They share the same feeling that Macron's policies don't benefit them. Instead of the formation of a 'republican front' against Le Pen, the second round of voting could thus also lead to a 'referendum against Macron'.

What would be the consequences for France and Europe if Le Pen became French president?

For Europe, Marine Le Pen as president of the French Republic would be a tragedy. It is true that she has curbed and partly revised many of her anti-European positions such as a 'Frexit' or a French exit from the monetary union – this is mainly because these demands are not supported by the entirety of her electorate. Nevertheless, she continues to pursue a Eurosceptic course. Instead of strengthening European integration, she promotes a 'Europe of nations'. Le Pen wants to put French law back above European law and reduce France's contribution to the financing of the EU budget. A common European migration policy based on solidarity would also be impossible with her.

In addition, Le Pen is unreliable on foreign and defence policy issues. As recently as December, she said that Ukraine belonged to Russia's sphere of influence. She financed her election campaign, among other

things, with a loan from a Russian bank. And just now, when the importance of NATO for Europe's collective security has become clearer than ever, she maintains a NATO-critical position. France with Le Pen as President would weaken Europe enormously at a critical moment.

The *Parti Socialiste* (PS) and its candidate Anne Hidalgo have now received as little as 1.7 per cent of the vote after the historically poor result of 2017. This means that the party will not be reimbursed by the French state for its campaign spendng. How does the future of the party now look like?

The election result is not only a disgrace for the party, but indeed calls into question its survival as a political force. Indeed, the PS will not be able to benefit from the state reimbursement of the costs of the election campaign. This makes its financial situation, which has already been precarious since 2017, even more dire.

More serious, however, are the divisions within the PS itself amid this life-threatening situation for the party. A clear strategic and programmatic orientation is currently not discernible. While its candidate Anne Hidalgo campaigned with a traditional social-democratic programme for the voters it lost to Macron in 2017, the party cultivated a discourse aimed more at voters that puts it in competition with the Greens or Mélenchon's *La Franç Insoumise*. And while some were already musing about the re-formation of a social-democratic pole before election day, party leader Olivier Faure renewed his call for a large left unification – targeting the Greens and the communists in particular.

The reality, however, is that with this election result, France's social-democratic left has been reduced to a marginal player on the political landscape. Mélenchon's radical left has established itself as the dominant, if not hegemonic, force. While Mélenchon received 22 per cent of the vote, the remaining candidates of the left together only got eight per cent. With his 'pôle populaire', Mélenchon has also succeeded in presenting a left alternative to the polarisation between Macron-style progressivism and the national conservative camp.

Certainly, many have voted for him out of pragmatic considerations, to bring the left into the run-off, and are not necessarily die-hard supporters of Mélenchon. Certainly, there is also a good portion of romanticism of a left yearning for unity behind the decision to vote for Mélenchon. But for the time being, the image has taken root that the radical left is the pulsating force that will determine the dynamics in the left camp, especially in view of the upcoming parliamentary elections in June.

Moreover, it must be recognised that – as the writer Annie Ernaux put it – Mélenchon embodies young France. In the 18-34 age group, he has received about a third of the votes. Also, unlike the socialists, he has managed to represent social and ecological issues equally. This does not make the situation any easier for the socialists.

France's traditional conservative force *Les Républicains* – who almost made it into the second round in 2017 – have now received their lowest share of the vote since the beginning of the Fifth Republic. Does this mean that the disintegration of the traditional French party system is now complete?

The reorganisation of the French party system has at least entered a new stage. The disintegration of the traditional parties has continued for the time being. Whereas for a long time they had dominated political events in the Fifth Republic, today they no longer even account for seven per cent of the vote. Whether they will be able to recover from this blow remains to be seen.

In any case, the tectonic shifts in the party landscape that have been at work since 2017 have not yet come to a conclusion. While the duopoly between progressives and right-wing populists was initially established, Mélenchon's 'Union populaire' has now added a new pole on the far left. It remains to be seen how stable this three-pole constellation is. It is certainly problematic for democracy – for alternatives to the 'progressive' centre can only be found at the extremes.

This interview was conducted by Daniel Kopp.



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