Why can't we admit that Macron won big?

Emmanuel Macron won the second round of the French presidential election over Marine Le Pen with 58.5% of the vote ahead of Le Pen's 41.5%. **Marco Bitschnau** *asks why coverage of the result has tended to downplay the scale of his victory.*

It is well known that the French do not have much love for their incumbents, even if they reside in the Elysée. Whereas the likes of Angela Merkel or Mark Rutte comfortably sailed to re-election three times each, neither of the last two French presidents – Nicolas Sarkozy and François Hollande – were successful in maintaining power.

The former was narrowly dethroned by the latter, and the latter struggled with approval ratings so bad that he, probably wisely, decided not to seek a second term. Only the late Jacques Chirac managed to serve two terms in this century, but his 2002 victory over Jean-Marie Le Pen (the biggest landslide in French history) was a stark anomaly, far detached from the usual *modus operandi* of electoral politics and unlikely to ever be repeated.

Yet after the luckless Hollande came the energetic Emmanuel Macron, who should once more prove to be the exception to the French rule. On 24 April, he clinched a second term after winning against his nativist challenger Marine Le Pen in the second round of the presidential election – a rematch of the 2017 election's second round.

Just as they did back then, both Macron and Le Pen made it to the run-off ahead of far-left firebrand Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who (despite strong numbers in urban areas) failed to convince enough voters that his blend of economic populism, sovereignism, and Germanophobia is the right recipe to cure France's manifold ills. Also falling by the wayside this time was Éric Zemmour, the notorious journalist-turned-demagogue who concluded his "meteoric rise" with a meagre 7.1% of the first round vote; a far cry from the 18% that some polls predicted in January but admittedly not as devastating as the 4.8% of the Republicans' Valérie Pécresse or the 1.8% of the Socialist Party's Anne Hidalgo.

A comfortable victory

What can be said about Macron's victory? First and foremost, that it was rock solid. He had already overperformed his poll numbers in the first round, winning 27.9% of the total vote (Le Pen: 23.2%) and 45.1% of French expatriates (Le Pen: 5.3%; she only matched Macron's numbers among the 35 voters in Moldova). In the second round, this trend became even more pronounced: Macron came out on top in all but three regions of the French mainland, beating his opponent by almost 5.5 million votes: 58.5% to 41.5%.

However, most media reactions have been strangely defensive so far. Instead of acknowledging how comfortable this win has been, they give the impression that the incumbent only barely survived a tough nail-biter election. While this may make sense in terms of attracting public interest, it is somewhat galling given that Macron's margin of victory is a rare exception in competitive presidential elections.

If we cast a glance at far more presidentialist South America, for example, we soon find that most such elections are decided by five percentage points or fewer. In Ecuador, Guillermo Lasso defeated Andrés Arauz by 4.8% in 2021; in Paraguay, Mario Abdo Benítez beat Efraín Alegre by 3.9% in 2018; in Uruguay, Luis Lacalle Pou got the better of Daniel Martínez by 1.6% in 2019; and in Peru, Pedro Castillo only prevailed against Keiko Fujimori by 0.2% in 2021.

Even in Colombia or most recently in Chile, where winning margins were larger, the gap was well below 15%. Meanwhile in Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro's 10-point victory over Fernando Haddad in 2018 was called a "triumph" and a "landslide". All of this makes the coverage of Macron's 17-point re-election appear rather odd to put it mildly.

The lure of populist success

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In fact, there is a strange tendency to revel in even narrow 'populist' successes but to ignore crushing 'populist' defeats (for an example, see Janez Janša). And a crushing defeat this was, particularly in view of what was expected from Le Pen. Consider only the immense hype about her ability to channel the wrath of the *gilets jaunes* movement and lure disenchanted Mélenchonists; the shrill overreactions when one out of more than eighty April polls gave her a 1-point lead; or the numerous times we were told about the disastrous consequences of a far-right presidency, a prospect presented as being a real possibility.

It can be speculated whether the consequences really would have been disastrous. Le Pen may also have ended up as an 'all-talk-but-little-action' president, perhaps even without a majority in the National Assembly (and no possibility to work with a Prime Minister of her liking). Yet the narrative of the apocalypse being just a tiny polling error away was willingly adopted and disseminated by pundits of all stripes.

Even now, the tone of exaggerated concern has not entirely disappeared. In addition to an analysis titled "France has never been as divided as it is today" (a bold claim given its colourful postwar politics), the German daily *Die Welt* even published an opinion piece that makes the winner look like a loser and the loser like a master of three-dimensional chess.

Five years from now, we are told, "Macron won't be president anymore but Marine Le Pen and Éric Zemmour will probably still be around […] This could be the last time that the European anthem is played after a French presidential election." One cannot help but think of the famed Lacanian philosopher Slavoj Žižek who already predicted after the 2017 election that "to vote for Macron today means to get Le Pen in five years." Like so many, he was mistaken; a victim of the gloomy alarmism that has haunted western democracies ever since the 2016 double shock of Brexit and Trump.

Liberal masochism

If anything, the odd obsession with Le Pen in 2022 shows how easily this alarmism can assume yet another form: that of liberal masochism, which not only prevents us from, for instance, accepting that we have overrated Russia's military capacities but also from acknowledging that most 'populists' are just as overrated. Wrongly cast as evil geniuses, most turn out to be strategically inflexible, tactically inept, and ultimately at the losing end of crucial electoral contests.

Granted, the future is yet to be written, and there is an obvious role model for Le Pen's aspirations: François Mitterrand, the longest-serving president of the Fifth Republic, also lost two run-offs (in 1965 and 1974) before succeeding at his third attempt in 1981. However, he had been previously defeated by 1.6% rather than 17% and could rely on a powerful party apparatus, whereas Le Pen's anti-establishment coalition is increasingly volatile, her personal brand tarnished, and her dynastic authority so weak that even her own niece Marion Maréchal defected to Zemmour's doomed campaign.

No, for all we know, Le Pen does not appear to be a second Mitterrand. She was not on the brink of winning the presidency this time, and there is a considerable chance that she never will be. Macron, on the other hand, exceeded his polling average twice and won a well-deserved second term under difficult circumstances. It would be reasonable to recognise the magnitude of his success and then direct our attention to his ambitious agenda for the next five years. It is because of this agenda that millions gave him their vote in the first place – and not just because he is *not Le Pen*.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: European Council

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