

# Déjà vu or something new? What to expect from Macron vs Le Pen

*Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen will contest the second round of the French presidential election on 24 April. Joseph Downing writes that while Macron will be hoping for a repeat of his victory against Le Pen in the last presidential election five years ago, the campaign is likely to be markedly different this time around.*

On the surface, the second round of the 2022 French presidential election will look a lot like the second round five years ago in 2017. The centrist Emmanuel Macron is once again facing off against the far-right candidate Marine Le Pen. However, this obscures a universe of differences lurking under the surface.

Macron is no longer a fresh faced, unproven upstart – he is a battle-hardened incumbent with a good record of steering France through the historic Covid-19 pandemic, and successfully delivering a [13-year low unemployment rate](#) in a country where a sluggish employment market has haunted politicians on the left and right for decades. But two weeks is a long time in politics and the race remains to be run. There are some key factors that are set to complicate Macron's road to re-election.

## Abstention

If elections are not won but rather lost, Macron could lose the second round due to abstention, with the first round already showing [lower voter turnout than 2017](#). The 2017 contest between Macron and Le Pen featured the highest voter abstention rate since 1969 and social media activity identified one of several reasons for this being [a lack of trust in Macron](#) due to his links to global finance.

This has not been helped by Macron's campaign, which has been lacklustre from the beginning. He made the [bizarre decision](#) to only declare himself a candidate for the election at the very last minute. This has shortened the duration of his campaign and he has never seemed to get onto the front foot. In his [first round victory speech](#), he issued the worn-out rallying cry for the French to get behind him to deny the far right the presidency. This was used in 2002 and 2017, each time losing its ability to shock and mobilise voters, and again possibly feeding into abstention.

## War in Ukraine

Macron's presidency has been one of historically significant shocks – first with Covid-19 and most recently with the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The war in Ukraine seems on the surface to be a win for Macron, owing to Le Pen's history as a Putin sycophant – something that was underlined by one of her [campaign leaflets for this election](#) featuring her shaking hands with the Russian leader. She also [took a loan from a Russian bank](#) to finance her 2017 campaign.

However, it is more complicated, not only because Putin enjoys some popularity in France, but also because Macron has staked his legitimacy on efforts to [reassert France as a global military and diplomatic power](#) as well as a leader of European security with his [calls for an EU army](#). Macron [was also reported in 2019](#) as stating that NATO had become "brain dead", a quote that has not aged well. Most recently, however, he has seemed out of step with events, as the horrors of the Russian invasion continue to emerge while he keeps an [open line to Moscow](#), even to the point of visiting the Kremlin.

## Economics

A key battle ground for Le Pen and Macron in 2022 will be, to borrow James Carville's famous quote, "the economy, stupid". As the wave of global inflation also washes over France, [the state of the economy](#) is once again a major concern for voters. While Macron has a good economic record, the current issues are a difficult circle for him to square. The French President has been blighted by the idea he is a candidate of the rich, something that has not been helped by his aloof campaign with its limited on the ground activity – a problem further exacerbated by the optics of one of his [few local visits](#) being to the extremely wealthy Neuilly-sur-Seine commune to the west of Paris.

His intention to [reform the French state and raise retirement ages](#) also looks less appealing with near double-digit inflation. Macron's [manifesto pledges](#) to establish a more protectionist and "France first" approach for industry and agriculture also seem paradoxical for a historically more free market politician, and seem suspiciously close to policy platforms Le Pen has prioritised for decades.

Le Pen has been [extremely active](#) here, meeting voters in a variety of regional, rural and urban contexts. In her speech on Sunday night, she took a direct shot at Macron, arguing she would govern for the many and not the few, and promising the French "fair" access to retirement. Le Pen has also campaigned on a platform of [intervening to protect French consumers from price rises](#), including on fuel.

## Religion and minorities

French politics is notorious for its preoccupation with concerns of religion and identity – especially when it comes to the country's six million [French Muslims](#). In 2017 Macron was a "light touch" politician when it came to this long running French political obsession, in stark contrast to Le Pen's headline views. However, paradoxically while Le Pen has attempted to tone down her rhetoric, the latter half of Macron's presidency has [tacked markedly to the right](#) on these issues.

This is not to overstate their similarities but rather to say the waters have become muddied on the issue since 2017. For voters, it is increasingly unclear how far apart the two stand. Macron took a huge gamble in his speech on Sunday by appearing to walk back on some of his more excessive stances on Islam, saying that he wants a France that [allows freedom of religion](#) and which does not stop Jews and Muslims from eating what is required by their religions. In a country that has seen [repeated polemics about kosher and halal food](#) in recent years, this was a bold move. Meanwhile, Le Pen reasserted her support for a united French civilisation, culture and language in her speech, in line with her extreme policy of [banning the wearing of Islamic headscarves in public places](#) – a stance that goes against *laïcité's* remit of being concerned with [secularism in state institutions](#).

## The second round

While Macron has performed better than many had feared he might, there is a lot of road left to run in this presidential election. The candidates' shifting positions since 2017, coupled with the fact the election will take place at the intersection of two global crises, mean this is unlikely to be a simple rerun of 2017. Abstention, economic woes and the blurring of the candidates' positions on religion all contribute to a sense of uncertainty about who the next person to lead France will be.

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*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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