

The French Elections of 2022: Macron's Half Victory in a Changing Political Landscape

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Introduction

The French presidential and legislative elections of 2022 were not expected to be particularly exciting ones. Whereas the 2017 elections had upended the French political system, resulting in the election of a 39-year-old political novice to the French presidency and to his newly formed party winning the subsequent legislative elections, 2022 looked to be a repeat of that election. In spite of a tumultuous first term as president, marked by early protests by the Yellow Vests (Della Sudda and Reungoat, 2022) and by the Covid-19 pandemic, Macron was projected to repeat his 2017 feat.

These expectations proved only half right. Macron did become the first president to secure re-election since the early 2000s, but he failed to secure a parliamentary majority. Precisely as to avoid this outcome, a 2000 Constitutional reform had shortened the presidential term and mandated parliamentary elections shortly after presidential ones – aligning previously staggered electoral calendars. Despite a favourable institutional context, Emmanuel Macron became the first President of the French Republic in the 21st century to form a minority government.

In this contribution, we retrace the steps leading to this result. We first present the candidates in the presidential election and the campaign. We then discuss the results of the presidential and parliamentary elections. In the concluding sections, we consider how these results reflect a changed electoral sociology and analyse their implications.

I. The Candidates

French presidential elections take place every 5 years as a two-round electoral contest. In the first round, all candidates who received 500 sponsorships (*parrainages*) compete. If no candidate reaches the 50% threshold, which would enable them to become president in the first round, the top two candidates face off 2 weeks later in a second round. Legislative elections are held shortly after the presidential election to determine the composition of the parliament.

In 2022, 12 candidates ran for president. Political fragmentation was the name of the game. On the left, a traditionally fragmented ground (Juillard, 2012), each of the main parties presented their own candidate. The top candidate on the left was Jean-Luc Mélenchon who, on his third electoral campaign, led the left-wing *La France Insoumise* (LFI). Mélenchon had achieved a surprisingly positive result in the 2017 election, coming in fourth at 19.6%. This was only 0.4% behind mainstream right-wing candidate François Fillon [*Les Républicains* (LR)] and just under 2% behind Marine Le Pen. Hoping to

repeat the feat, he ran on a similar platform. The historically dominant party of the left, the *Parti Socialiste* (PS), put forward Mayor of Paris Anne Hidalgo as their candidate. Hidalgo inherited a battered party still reeling from the disastrous results of 2017, when presidential hopeful Benoît Hamon only won 6.4% of the vote. To complicate her position further, she had to deal with Macron's competition on the right and LFI's competition on the left. The PS was also unable to negotiate a deal with *Europe Ecologie Les Verts* (EELV) or with the French Communist Party (PCF), who presented their own candidates: Jannick Jadot and Fabien Roussel.

Fragmentation on the right was a more unusual dynamic. In previous elections, two main parties competed in this political space: mainstream right LR and far-right *Rassemblement National* (RN). In 2022, LR presented Valérie Pécresse, the president of the Ile-de-France regional government, as their candidate. The RN put forward party leader Marine Le Pen. Le Pen was on her third presidential campaign in a row and had made it into the run-off in 2017, before losing to Emmanuel Macron. This two-horse race was disrupted when Éric Zemmour, a right-wing journalist known for his controversial positions on immigration, Islam and gender politics, emerged as a third competitor looking to break the RN's dominance on the far-right political space and siphon some of LR's less moderate voters. Supported by his newly founded party *Reconquête*, he took up the political space to the right of the RN and LR.

Whereas most candidates declared their intention to run early in the campaign, incumbent Emmanuel Macron waited until the very last minute to confirm he would be running for re-election. Leading his party *La République en Marche* (LREM, now renamed 'Renaissance'), and with the support of a broad centrist alliance, Macron declared he would run for re-election on 3 March 2022.

The camp of presidential hopefuls was completed by a series of smaller candidates from across the political spectrum: Nathalie Arthaud (*Lutte ouvrière*), Jean Lassalle (*Résistons!*), Philippe Poutou (*Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste*) and Nicolas Dupont-Aignan (*Debout la France*).

II. The Campaign

The presidential campaign officially started in March 2022; however, most candidates had already started campaigning months, and in some cases, years, before. On the right, Marine Le Pen had declared her intention to run for election in January 2020 (Soullier, 2020). Le Pen's 2022 campaign differed in a few significant respects from her previous ones. First, in an attempt to continue the 'de-demonization' of her party and present a more moderate face to the French electorate (Hewlett and Kuhn, 2022; Ivaldi, 2016), Le Pen shifted focus away from immigration (her party's most recognizable policy issue) and centred her campaign on economic and social issues (Startin, 2022). She defended protectionist policies, such as lowering the VAT on energy products and essential goods, abolishing social security contributions for lower salaries and lowering the retirement age to 60 for those who started working very young (overwhelmingly, in Le Pen's view, manual workers) (Le Pen, 2022). Second, Le Pen chose to run a different type of campaign compared with 2017. Whereas in 2017, she had held several large meetings, in 2022, she opted for smaller, local meetings to promote an image of herself as a leader 'close to the people' – in stark contrast to 'out-of-touch' Macron (Durovic, 2023).

Éric Zemmour waited until 30 November 2021 to declare his intention to run. Unlike Le Pen, who tried to expand her issue agenda, Zemmour focused his campaign on issues pertaining to identity. A believer in the ‘great replacement theory’, he proposed extreme measures to stop migration and reinforce assimilation. He combined these restrictive policy preferences on cultural issues with a liberal economic agenda reminiscent of Kitschelt and McGann’s (1995) far-right ‘winning formula’. Initially, Zemmour managed to impose his themes on the campaign, growing steadily in the polls and creating more than a few headaches for his right-wing competitors.

Whereas Le Pen and Zemmour’s campaigns had clear foci, Valérie Pécresse’s campaign failed to gain traction. Pécresse won LR’s internal primary and became their candidate on 4 December 2021. Inheriting a party divided between a moderate wing and a more radical one (Haegel, 2012), Pécresse struggled to create cohesion. Caught between Le Pen and Zemmour on the right, and Macron on her left, she was also left with little space to develop a recognizable political offer and ended up with a blurry campaign. On the one hand, she adopted some strongly right-wing talking points on security and immigration. On the other, she presented an economic programme broadly in line with Macron’s, proposing, for example, to raise the retirement age to 65 and to increase the number of hours worked by public sector workers.

On the left, Jean-Luc Mélenchon had already declared his intention to run in 2020. As in 2017, he ran a very successful campaign, holding many well-attended campaign events. However, he also presented a less radical face to French voters, moderating his rhetorical style and toning down some of his more divisive positions, especially concerning the EU (Durovic, 2023; Hewlett and Kuhn, 2022). His campaign focused primarily on social and economic issues. Amongst the measures he advanced were the lowering of the retirement age from 62 to 60, increasing the minimum wage and capping the price of certain goods. He also proposed a radical reform of the political system and the introduction of a ‘Sixth Republic’ founded on increased direct popular involvement in decision-making. More controversially, especially after the beginning of the war in Ukraine, he advocated withdrawing from NATO. Mélenchon was particularly effective at establishing the narrative that a vote for him was a ‘useful vote’. Given his position in the polls, he insisted that he was the only left-wing candidate who could make it into the run-off and beat Le Pen. Other candidates on the left struggled to contest these claims and ultimately appeared as secondary in the campaign.

Emmanuel Macron was the last candidate to declare his intention to run and the least engaged in the campaign. Going into the election, Macron had a few wins under his belt, including a successful management of the Covid-19 crisis, a reduction in unemployment figures and a strengthening of France’s international role. However, Macron had also been a very divisive president, triggering a series of protests by the Yellow Vests in his first mandate. Unwilling to mar his presidential stature, he barely campaigned and refused to take part in any of the first-round debates. The few proposals he discussed in his re-election campaign were quite unpopular and included reforming the pension system and making unemployment benefits conditional to working for 15–20 h/week.

Although many of the candidates in the run were the same, the 2022 presidential campaign presented a different picture compared with the 2017 one. The 2017 presidential campaign had been long, intense and packed with twists and turns. In contrast, the 2022 presidential campaign was shorter and more subdued. The early stages of the

campaign were hampered by Macron's refusal to engage. Even when he did eventually declare his intention to run for re-election, Macron barely campaigned, thereby reducing the overall coverage of the campaign (Tiberj, 2023). The later stages of the campaign, for their part, were dominated by the response to the war in Ukraine.

The conflict in Ukraine put Macron in an advantageous position. Benefitting from a rally around the flag effect, he could point towards his statesmanship and attempts to resolve the conflict. At the same time, the Russian invasion brought attention to the friendly relations some of his competitors had held with President Vladimir Putin. This was the case for Le Pen, but also for Zemmour and Mélenchon. Le Pen, who has consistently supported Russia's annexation of Crimea (Basso, 2023) and received funding from a bank close to Russia's centres of power (Durand, 2022), was quick at dissociating herself from her previous positions. She condemned the Kremlin, without, however, endorsing NATO efforts in the area or sanctions against Russia. Zemmour, for his part, was unable to successfully distance himself from his previous positions. Finally, Mélenchon also came under attack for his positions on NATO and Russia, with most of the attacks coming from other parties on the left.

The war in Ukraine, however, also offered opportunities for some candidates. Le Pen's choice to focus on cost-of-living issues early on proved to be a winning gamble, as the economic implications of the conflict in Ukraine brought these issues front and centre in voters' minds. Conversely, Zemmour's inability to adapt and show how his agenda could speak to these concerns sealed his fate. Following the beginning of the war in Ukraine, he steadily lost ground in the polls (Trippenbach, 2022).

Whereas 12 candidates faced off in the first round, only Marine Le Pen and Emmanuel Macron competed in the second round. Unlike in the first round, Macron campaigned more actively. He received the endorsement of Hidalgo, Jadot and Péresse. Le Pen, for her part, received the endorsement of Zemmour and Dupont-Aignan. Significantly, Mélenchon refused to endorse either candidate, although he explicitly said that his voters should not support Le Pen (France24, 2022).

Both Le Pen and Macron sought to appeal to Mélenchon voters, as it was clear this was the constituency that could swing the election. Le Pen continued campaigning on cost-of-living issues but also presented more detailed plans for her international and European agenda (a noticeable absence in her 2022 programme). She also spoke more consistently of issues pertaining to immigration and security, as these were her strong suits. For his part, Macron sought to moderate some of his proposals and bring more attention to his environmental agenda.

Macron and Le Pen came head-to-head in a televised debate on 20 April. The debate was viewed as a decisive moment for Le Pen. In the 2017 debate, she had performed extremely poorly, and whilst she was unlikely to win in the first place, the debate did nothing to increase her likelihood of doing so. The 2022 debate was less disastrous for her, although it was not game changing either. Polls taken after the debate suggested that Macron had 'won' it (Bulant, 2022).

III. Results of the Presidential Elections

The results of the 2022 French presidential elections deepened three main transformative trends from 2017: record-breaking abstention rates, the demise of previously dominant

mainstream left and right forces and the ongoing restructuring of the French party system around three main poles.

Averaging out turnout rates for the first and second rounds, the 2022 presidential elections saw the lowest electoral participation since the Fifth Republic adopted a semi-presidential form in 1962 (Hewlett and Kuhn, 2022, p. 400). Only 73.69% and 71.99% of French citizens cast a vote in the first and second rounds, respectively (Ministere de l'Interieur, 2022), against 77.77% and 74.56% in 2017 (Ministere de l'Interieur, 2017). Voters thus broke a long-term pattern of heading in greater numbers to the polls in the final run-off for the second presidential election in a row.

Citizens' rising defiance towards mainstream politics was also evident in their rejection of the centrist forces, which, prior to 2017, had structured the French party system for decades. Gathering 1.75% and 4.78%, respectively (Ministere de l'Interieur, 2022), Anne Hidalgo (PS) and Valerie Pécresse (LR) earned the lowest scores in both of their parties' history. As a point of contrast, Francois Hollande and Nicolas Sarkozy received a combined score of over 55% in the first round of the 2012 elections, just 10 years prior. Dismal electoral results in 2022 were also a blow to both parties' finances, given neither candidate reached the minimal 5% threshold to see their significant campaign expenses fully reimbursed (Dupont, 2022).

Whilst it goes beyond the remit of this article to discuss in detail the reasons for these electoral failures, a key, common supply-side factor is the existence of long-standing ideological strife within both parties over how to appropriately respond to the multi-faceted consequences of globalization (Chabal and Behrent, 2022, pp. 523–524). Over time, these disagreements deepened mirror divisions within both electorates, who in 2017 and 2022 split their votes across the centrist offer of Emmanuel Macron, and more radical alternatives on the far left and far right. All three forces increased their first-round presidential score since 2017. Mélenchon reached third place with 21.95% of the vote (19.58% in 2017), 420,000 votes behind Marine Le Pen's score of 23.15% (21.30% in 2017) (Ministere de l'Interieur, 2017, 2022). The RN's improved score was even more remarkable that a share of her traditional electorate defected to Zemmour, who gathered a sizeable 7.07% of the first-round vote. The Macron vote also made a significant jump for an incumbent, from 24.01% of the suffrage in 2017 to 27.85% in 2022 (Ministere de l'Interieur, 2022).

Macron was re-elected as President of the Republic 2 weeks later with a comfortable margin, yet his was a muted victory. With 58.55% of the second-round vote, the centrist candidate did better than any elected president prior to 2002 (Hewlett and Kuhn, 2022, p. 402). Yet, when compared only with those presidential elections that saw a far-right actor enter the second round, mainstream candidates have been winning by ever-decreasing margins: Jacques Chirac had a 64.42 percentage point advance on Jean-Marie Le Pen in April 2002 and Macron halved this mainstream lead to 32.2 points in 2017; by 2022, this margin of victory had shrunk again, to 17.1 points. In turn, far-right forces have been doing increasingly well in presidential contests: in the second round of 2002, Jean-Marie Le Pen secured 5.25 million votes, whilst his daughter convinced a staggering 13 million in 2022.

IV. Results of the Parliamentary Elections

The results of the 2022 parliamentary elections, which took place on June 12 and 19, largely confirmed the president's fragile standing. Three different parties presented

pro-Macron candidates under the common, centrist umbrella *Ensemble!*: former Prime Minister Édouard Philippe's *Horizons*, François Bayrou's *MoDem* and Macron's *Renaissance*. Whilst in 2017, the presidential alliance won by a comfortable margin with 350 seats, only 245 Ensemble! candidates were successful in 2022 – leaving Macron 44 seats short of an absolute majority.

LR never formally joined this alliance, but the 64 seats it added to the Assemblée Nationale's centre-right contingent have since proved a welcome safety net for Macron's minority government. After a disastrous showing at the presidential election, the former governing party's local anchorage saved it from near collapse in the parliamentary contest, yet LR still saw its number of seats shrink by half compared with the previous term.

Left-wing forces were relatively more successful than in 2017. To avoid a dispersion of the left-wing vote, four parties agreed to present a single candidate in each constituency under the banner NUPES (Nouvelle Union Populaire Ecologique et Sociale). Formed under the leadership of Mélenchon, the electoral alliance between the PS, PCF, EELV and LFI gave the latter the lion's share of potential seats whilst providing smaller parties with an opportunity for electoral survival. Beyond strategic considerations, all four parties put considerable effort into drafting a common programme of government consisting of over 650 progressive measures. This joining of forces was approved by 84% of left-wing sympathizers (Kuhn, 2022, p. 468) and ultimately rewarded at the polls. The NUPES won 153 seats – against a total of 73 for the same parties in 2017 (Kuhn, 2022, p. 461). This was a striking success for LFI specifically, which quadrupled its number of deputies (to 75) compared with the previous term.

Finally, the far right gave its strongest performance yet in a legislative contest whilst also showcasing the sharpest increase in representation of any political force in the Assemblée Nationale. With a record score of 17.3%, the RN multiplied its number of seats by over 10 to an unprecedented total of 88 (Durovic, 2023), thus reaching for the first time the 15-seat threshold to form a parliamentary group. This has come hand in hand with a number of new political rights, including speaking time, membership of committees and a significant increase of income, all of which have provided the party with greater visibility, legislative influence and legitimacy.

V. A Shifting Electoral Sociology

From a sociological perspective, this last electoral cycle corresponds to distinct shifts and increased fragmentation within the French electorate – with age, education, employment status and geographical factors being the strongest voting predictors. The RN has tended to over-represent younger voters, with lower levels of education and in blue-collar jobs. In the legislative elections' first round, for instance, 45% of workers chose the RN, along with 28% of those without a high-school diploma, and 31% who describe themselves as 'underprivileged' (Chabal and Behrent, 2022, p. 528). The RN has also done particularly well in the deindustrialized zones of Northern France and the traditionally conservative Mediterranean basin (Chabal et al., 2023, pp. 12–13).

RN voters share with LFI supporters a distaste for neoliberalism and the economic implications of globalization, whilst being diametrically opposed to them in their relationship to cultural globalization (Chabal and Behrent, 2022). LFI voters also share some sociological characteristics with their far-right counterparts. Left-wing and, to a lesser

extent, far-left voters were less privileged than average, with the unemployed, low earners and those who consider themselves to belong to the '*classes populaires*' being over-represented (Kuhn, 2022, pp. 467–469). This is also a young electorate, with 31% of 18–24-year-olds and 34% of 25–34-year-olds voting for Jean-Luc Mélenchon in the first round of the 2022 elections (Ipsos Sopra-Steria, 2022). Geography and education, however, largely divide the far-right and far-left electorates, with 26% of highly educated voter choosing Mélenchon in the presidential elections (Kuhn, 2022, p. 467) and 32% of the highly educated choosing NUPES in the parliamentary elections (Chabal and Behrent, 2022, p. 528). These political forces also have a strong base within larger urban centres such as Paris, Lyon and Marseille (Chabal et al., 2023, pp. 12–13).

In turn, those voting for Macron also showed higher levels of education than average and were more present in large cities and densely populated areas, specifically the Ile-De-France region. However, they otherwise displayed a distinct profile from the far-left electorate. Most significantly, those who favoured centre-right positions, whether voting for Ensemble! or LR, were older than average, with 38% of pensioners choosing Macron in the first round of the presidential elections (Kuhn, 2022, p. 467). Material security was also one of the strongest predictors for a centrist choice in these elections. As highlighted by Knapp (2022, p. 499), 'all the indicators of occupation, self-declared class, life satisfaction, education, income, or financial security, offer a practically linear relationship between comfort, security, and the Macron vote' (see also Hewlett and Kuhn, 2022, p. 401).

VI. Implications: Governmental Instability and the Collapse of the Republican Front

These coherent sociological groupings suggest a realignment between offer and demand away from the left–right dichotomy, and towards opposition and support for different dimensions of globalization, resulting in what many commentators have labelled a process of tripolarization of French party politics (Durovic, 2023; Hewlett and Kuhn, 2022; Knapp, 2022). Whilst the centre ground represented by Ensemble! and LR supports the economic implications of open borders, the far-left and far-right blocs are fundamentally opposed to this neoliberal outlook. But these last two blocs, in turn, clash in their approach to the cultural dimension of globalization, with deeply entrenched opposition on issues of immigration, environmental policy, cultural diversity and gender rights.

The absence of a clear majority around any of these three options creates a particularly unstable ground for French politics in the next 4 years. Cross-bloc coalitions and alliances are essentially unthinkable within this new configuration, with the more radical blocs grounding their identity in an opposition to both Macron's brand of politics and each others' (Chabal and Behrent, 2022, pp. 527–528; Kuhn, 2022). This has forced Ensemble! into forming a minority government headed by the uncharismatic former member of the PS, Elizabeth Borne, an unusual configuration in France's hyper-majoritarian political system.

Political decision-making has nevertheless remained possible due to several factors. First, clashes between the two main opposition groups have rendered motions of defiance ineffective – with NUPES MPs refusing to vote any proposal made by the RN. The Borne government can also play the two oppositions against each other, forming ad hoc

majorities that rely on left- or right-wing forces depending on which legislation is voted in. Second, Macron has regularly benefited from the support of LR, which, although refusing to join the presidential majority, aligns with its priorities on many issues; the vast majority of LR MPs have also voted against motions of no confidence initiated by other forces. In practice, this has also stirred Macron's second mandate towards a more traditional, centre-right profile, not only on economic but also on socio-cultural issues, thereby muddling his 2017 promise of breaking the traditional left–right registers.

Third, Macron has been helped by existing tools in the Constitution of the Fifth Republic that allow governments to pass legislation without parliamentary support. This includes article 49.3, whereby the government engages its responsibility on a given piece of legislation and thus conditions its adoption to an unsuccessful motion of no confidence. The procedure was used only once during Macron's first mandate, but Borne has had to rely on it 11 times over the first year of her appointment alone – a higher than average number in historical retrospect (Imbach and Geoffroy, 2023). In March 2023, the government used this specific procedure to pass a particularly controversial pension reform raising the retirement age to 64.

Whilst the government's survival is not currently at stake, the 2022 elections and its aftermath have left French voters disillusioned, the political centre-ground considerably weakened and the RN in a particularly strong position. The reconfiguration of France's political offer around three poles corresponds to real sociological shifts in the French electorate, but many voters still have none of their preferred options to choose from in the second round of presidential and parliamentary elections. As shown in a recent poll, 72% of respondents feel like the last presidential election did not give voters a real choice as to whom they could support (CEVIPOF, 2022).

This feeling goes hand in hand with the continuous weakening of the Republican front: French voters are less and less willing to vote strategically to keep the far right out of power. In a majority of run-offs in the parliamentary elections, RN candidates faced either Ensemble! or NUPES candidates; yet, according to a number of polling organization, only a minority of NUPES voters and of Ensemble! voters whose preferred candidate did not make it to the second round were willing to back their former adversaries to keep the RN out of parliament (Knapp, 2022, p. 510). These dynamics help explain already record levels of abstention rising from the first to the second round of the parliamentary elections, with only 47.51% and 46.23% of voters heading to the polls in both contests (Durovic, 2023, p. 624). In other cases, citizens that initially favoured other parties ultimately transferred their vote to the RN in the second round. For example, in the second round of the presidential elections, 17% of first-round LFI voters and 18% of first-round LR voters chose Marine Le Pen (Knapp, 2022, p. 508).

These dynamics show no signs of abating since the start of Macron's second mandate. In a more general context of rising defiance and distrust (CEVIPOF, 2022), only 39% expressed satisfaction with Macron's record in June 2022, compared with 58% at the same time in 2017 (IPSOS Sopra Steria, 2022). Since then, the RN has been given unprecedented media exposure through its parliamentary participation and has successfully cultivated the more polished image Marine Le Pen has been striving for since the early 2010s (Kantar Public – EPOKA, 2022). A year after the 2022 parliamentary elections, voting intentions for LREM have decreased by 4 points (from 26% to 22%), whilst the share of respondents ready to vote for the RN has increased by 7 points (from 19% to

26%) (Bristelle, 2023). As her status as main opposition contender consolidates, the ‘glass ceiling’ between Marine le Pen and the centre of French political power is showing signs of shatter (Startin, 2022).

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