

Put Le Pen and Macron to one side – it's the June legislative elections that will decide how France is governed

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France is due to hold the first round of its presidential election on 23 April, with Marine Le Pen and Emmanuel Macron currently predicted to make the second round of voting on 7 May. As [Françoise Boucek](#) writes, however, despite the presidential contest generating all of the headlines, the legislative elections scheduled for 11 and 18 June will be crucial in shaping the country's politics over the next five years.



Credit: Tyler Merbler (CC BY 2.0)

With only a few weeks before the first round of the presidential election on 23 April, 43 per cent of French voters say they are still undecided over who to vote for, according to a survey by *Odoxa*. Markets are jittery at the prospect of a victory for National Front leader Marine Le Pen.

Voters' uncertainty is more critical for independent centrist Emmanuel Macron, the bookies' presidential favourite, than for his closest rivals: nationalist Marine Le Pen and centre right candidate François Fillon. Less than half of Macron's potential supporters say they have definitely made up their mind about their candidate, compared to 60 per cent for Le Pen and 57 per cent for Fillon.

Fillon had been the favourite to win until his campaign was derailed by a scandal over his misuse of public funds which is under judicial investigation. He is now in third place with 18 per cent of voting intentions on the first round behind Le Pen (25 per cent) and Macron (26 per cent).

But Macron is still the man to beat. According to the latest [ifop poll](#), Macron would win the second round (on 7 May) against Le Pen by a much wider margin than Fillon against Le Pen. Moreover, Macron recently obtained the support of former colleagues in Hollande's Socialist government, notably bigwig Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian.

Much of France is in despair because of sluggish economic growth and high unemployment, prompting widespread disaffection with the political elites who seem disconnected from peoples' everyday lives. That's the big theme of an

election campaign in which both the most likely candidates to compete in the runoff – Le Pen and Macron – aren't from a mainstream party.

That said, Macron is a Socialist defector and was Hollande's economy minister until last summer. Only a Le Pen victory in the election cycle that begins on 21 April and ends on 18 June is sure to deliver a sea change to France's economic governance and Europe's future. A victory by either Macron or Fillon is unlikely to deliver a profound break from the past in terms of governance, the power of the streets and the future of Europe. Conversely, a Le Pen victory would be a huge shock: a French exit from the euro that threatens the very existence of the single currency; a referendum on France's EU membership which could just break up the EU itself and a referendum on constitutional reform.

'What Great Britain has done is tremendous (*formidable*)' said Marine Le Pen about Brexit during last week's first televised debate. Borrowing the British 'Leave' campaign slogan – 'project fear' – she berated her rivals' dismissal of her plan to leave the euro and proclaimed 'I don't want to be the Vice-Chancellor of Angela Merkel.' However, a large majority of voters are against an exit from the euro.

In contrast, despite their neo-liberal Anglo-American undertones, Macron and Fillon's economic and social reforms are unlikely to trigger a French economic boom and eliminate French citizens' long-standing dependency on the state. Both will have to contend with the street as did even mild reformers in the past. But France will remain at the centre of the EU.

The June legislative elections

What's really important to remember alongside the drama of the race to become President, is that the presidential race is only the first of a two-stage electoral cycle. The truly decisive election will be the two rounds of parliamentary elections in June. Whoever wins the presidency needs parliament to get things done. And, even then, history has shown that the street is often the final arbiter of policy change. So look beyond the second round of the presidential election on 7 May for the candidates' capacity to win an absolute majority of seats in the National Assembly in June.

Parties must select individual candidates to represent the party in 577 constituencies. Finding credible local candidates to challenge sitting MPs is going to be difficult for both Le Pen's National Front and Macron, who has to start from scratch. Macron's '*En Marche*' movement lacks a party machine and grassroots organisation. And he has promised to deliver parity and recruit candidates from civil society.

For National Assembly elections, the two-ballot system works differently than for the presidential race, where voters face a binary choice in the runoff – the 'unity moment'. In contrast, to qualify for the run-off race in National Assembly elections candidates need the support of at least 12.5% of their constituency's registered voters (*not* votes cast). Hence, a pretty high barrier. Traditionally, the mainstream parties on the left and right make strategic pacts. The best placed candidate fights the seat on behalf of the alliance.

However, this district-level coordination doesn't always work. In some constituencies, three or even four candidates compete in the runoff (34 *triangulaires* in 2012). These '*triangulaires*' or even '*quadrangulaires*' are more likely to happen in 2017 given the fragmented and polarised state of the party system. What does that all mean? Well, it will probably get very messy with a high probability that there won't be any party with an absolute majority unless the Socialists and Macron's movement regroup or the conservatives manage to heal their differences. A new period of co-habitation cannot be ruled out either.

Without a majority party in government, there won't be a clear mandate for any of the serious reforms that France so desperately needs to unplug a dysfunctional labour market or get economic growth up to meaningful levels. And that likely means the street will continue to have the final say well after all the balloting is done with in June.

Françoise Boucek recently spoke at the LSE's European Institute on the upcoming French election. For more information about upcoming events, see [here](#).

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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