

Will the ‘front républicain’ carry Macron to power?

LSE blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2017/05/01/will-the-front-republicain-carry-macron-to-power/

2017-5-1

The so called ‘front républicain’ refers to a strategy by France’s mainstream parties to ally against far-right politicians when electoral circumstances demand it. But with both of the two major parties in France failing to see their presidential candidates qualify for the second round, is this approach still viable?

Joshua Forstenzer traces the history of the front républicain, writing that new political forces and electoral alliances are now taking shape in French politics that will have relevance for both the second round of voting on 7 May and upcoming legislative elections in June.



Liberty Leading the People by Eugène Delacroix, Louvre Museum. Public domain.

“The tired and rotten ‘front républicain’, that no one wants anymore, that the French have cleared off with remarkable violence, is trying to coalesce around Emmanuel Macron. I almost feel like saying so much the better!”

These [words](#) were spoken by Marine Le Pen, the Front National candidate for the French presidency, when she visited the town of Rouvroy (in the Pas-de-Calais) the day after qualifying for the second round of the elections. With her statement, Le Pen underlined a tectonic shift in French politics: while Macron’s lead in the first round suggests a strong resistance to her far right extremist politics, it also points to the hollowing out of support for the two main parties of government. Indeed, for the first time in the Fifth Republic, the second round of the French presidential

elections will be conducted without a representative from either of the main centre-right (i.e. currently *Les Républicains*, previously UMP and RPR) or centre-left (i.e. the Socialist Party) parties still in the race. Let there be no doubt, France is entering a new era with many unknowns and an unpredictable political map.

In the short term, with Macron arriving comfortably ahead in the first round and having a [solid lead in the polls](#) over Le Pen, it appears as though France will likely avert the worst. Relief will be – if Macron is elected in the second round – a justifiable reaction to a fraught and unpredictable campaign marked by Shakespearean political [drama](#) on the left leading to the birth of a new centrist force, judicial proceedings against a major party's candidate on [embezzlement](#) charges, the unexpected [rise](#) of a far left candidate, and a [terrorist attack](#) on the Champs Élysées just two days before the first round.

And yet, this election also broke the mould in several further ways. Emmanuel Macron, a man who has never been elected to public office (though he was appointed as Hollande's economic advisor and subsequently his Minister of Finance), [came out on top](#) with 24% of the vote. Marine Le Pen obtained the highest proportion (21.3%) and total number of votes (7,679,493) of any Front National candidate in the party's history.

Meanwhile, the Socialist Party's candidate, Benoît Hamon, had the lowest share of the vote (6.4%) of any of its party's candidates since [1969](#) when Gaston Defferre only obtained 5% of the vote. And Jean-Luc Mélenchon received 19.6% of the vote, a result not reached by a candidate supported by the French Communist Party since 1969 when Jacques Duclos came third (with 21.3%), only trailing the then centre-right candidate, Alain Poher, by a little more than 2% for a place in the second round.

Historical resonance: 1969 more than 2002

While the first temptation will be to draw parallels between this election and that of [2002](#) when Jean-Marie Le Pen – Marine Le Pen's father and the then leader of the Front National – passed the first round, this time was different. In 2017, Le Pen (the daughter) was [expected to make it to the second round](#) and maybe even to top the popular vote, so her relative success was not the [surprise](#) that her father's success had been in 2002.

If there is any resonance here with a previous moment in the history of the Fifth Republic (i.e. since 1958), it would be 1969. That presidential election was an early election called because De Gaulle, the incumbent, had lost a referendum on the creation of regions and a reform of the Senate, upon which he had staked public confidence in his leadership. Taking stock of his defeat, he relinquished the presidency. In 2017, François Hollande, the incumbent, chose [not to run for re-election](#) because of being dissuaded by his historically low favourability ratings. Thus, in 1969 as in 2017, the incumbent president did not run for re-election for want of popular support.

However, one major difference between 2017 and 1969 is the strong presence of the Front National. The Front National was only [founded in 1972](#) and its electoral success was stifled for quite some time. Perhaps the most successful electoral strategy adopted against far-right parties, including the Front National, is what is known as the 'Front républicain'.

[In 1956](#), in anticipation of parliamentary elections and in order to stifle the potential for the far-right Poujadist party to gain a foothold in French politics, the parties of the socialist left and the Gaullist party of the right made a political pact. The pact proved electorally successful, but did not make for stable government under the [Fourth Republic](#) (which had a weak presidential regime and tended towards highly scattered parliamentary majorities).

[This idea](#), however, ultimately proved to have more legs than the first government it generated. During most of the Fifth Republic, an informal electoral [pact of non-aggression](#) (usually consisting in calling for one's followers to vote against the far-right candidate or dropping out in the second round to ensure a victory for a non far-right candidate) was instigated between the "republican" or "democratic" parties of the left and the right to defeat Front National candidates.

Although there were periods where the Gaullists dropped the pact during the 1980s, it was a version of this informal

pact that [stopped Jean-Marie Le Pen](#) from acceding to the presidency in 2002, when the defeated left called for their voters to back Jacques Chirac (the Gaullist candidate). Despite the fact that it was not always adhered to, it has been broadly successful in crippling the Front National's capacity to gain seats in parliament and earn the legitimacy of victory. That is, until more recently.

In 2011-12, under the leadership of Nicolas Sarkozy and Jean-François Copé, the UMP rejected the pact by calling for their voters to vote "neither for the Socialist Party nor the Front National" (known as the 'Ni-ni' [neither, nor] position) in regional elections and then when contemplating the possibility of a second round run off in the 2012 presidential elections between the Socialist candidate, François Hollande, and Marine Le Pen.

As much as the rhetoric might suggest that the 'Front républicain' is an inviolable political norm of the Fifth Republic, it never was. But, it has been and continues to be an influential [ad hoc practice](#). Indeed, the speeches by defeated candidates after the first round saw its resurgence when [both](#) François Fillon (to the surprise of many of his followers) and Benoît Hamon called for their supporters to back Macron in the second round to defeat Le Pen.

[Many were surprised](#) when Mélenchon did not follow suit and called on his followers to participate in an online consultation to determine their collective position. While it is unimaginable that Mélenchon's *La France Insoumise* will end up supporting Marine Le Pen, this moment of hesitation also points to the fraught history the 'Front républicain' has had with the far-left. In the 1980s, it was the alliance between the Socialist and the Communist Party that was [used by Chirac](#) to justify the RPR and the UDF allying themselves with the Front National in some places.

Whether this momentary wobble will detract many from voting for Macron is unclear. But what is already abundantly clear is that new battle lines are being drawn before our very eyes, with new political forces and new electoral alliances taking shape in French politics. These will be crucial, not just in the presidential second round, but in the parliamentary elections looming on the horizon.

[Please read our comments policy before commenting.](#)

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.

About the author

Joshua Forstenzer – *University of Sheffield*

[Joshua Forstenzer](#) is the Vice-Chancellor's Fellow for the Public Benefit of Higher Education at the University of Sheffield.

-

