

Macron's victory: A historic break with the past, or simply the postponement of real change?

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*Emmanuel Macron's En Marche! movement will attempt to win a majority in the French legislative elections in June, but if he fails to achieve this, his power to implement substantial policy changes may be limited. **Nick Parsons** writes that winning the presidency was a relatively easy task in comparison to what he will face in June, and that Marine Le Pen will be ready to capitalise on any disaffection should he fail to live up to his campaign pledges.*



The crushing victory of Emmanuel Macron by 66% to 34% against the Front National's Marine Le Pen in the second round of the French presidential election has been greeted with relief in France and across Europe. The scale of the victory, second only to Jacques Chirac's 82% landslide against Le Pen's father, Jean-Marie, in 2002, is indeed impressive, and better than predicted by opinion polls. However, while the 'republican discipline' that has constantly kept extremist parties out of power in France appears to have held up again, albeit more weakly, the scale of victory hides profound divisions within France that mean only the easy part of Macron's task has been achieved. Now that he has beaten his far-right rival, Macron will need parliamentary support to implement his centrist, social-liberal programme. Winning and maintaining that support will be difficult in a politically divided and unpredictable France.

Firstly, Macron's support base is not as large as second-round voting figures suggest. Abstention rates, at just over 25%, were the highest since 1969 for French presidential elections, while a further 9% of voters spoilt their ballot papers, meaning that Macron was actually elected on the votes of about 44% of those entitled to vote. Furthermore, this was an anti-Le Pen rather than pro-Macron vote. In the first round of voting, Macron came first with 24%, but even here tactical voting may have played a part, with many voting for him in the belief that he was the best placed candidate to beat Le Pen in the second round rather than out of conviction. Translating success from presidential polls into parliamentary elections is therefore not a foregone conclusion, even if it can be argued that the presidential vote creates a certain groundswell in his favour.

The attitudes of the other main parties to the possibility of governing with Macron and his En Marche! movement will be crucial. Mélenchon's France Insoumise and Le Pen's Front National will provide opposition from different ends of the political spectrum, but will find it difficult to translate success in presidential elections into large numbers of seats in the National Assembly due to France's two-ballot electoral system that will again operate, in a slightly different fashion, in the legislative elections. The presence of En Marche! in these elections, however, means that they will no longer be a straight left-right duel, as they have tended to be in the past, with a three-horse race in prospect for parliamentary supremacy. This means that an overall majority is unlikely for any party, and Macron will need the support of the mainstream left or right, or both, to govern.



However, the Republicans have announced their intention to go into the parliamentary elections as opponents of Macron and to win a majority that would force a *cohabitation* with a parliament opposed to the president. The Socialists are more inclined to work with Macron, but are divided over the question. Leading Socialist Party figures such as former Prime Minister Manuel Valls, ex-presidential candidate Ségolène Royal, current Prime Minister Bernard Cazeneuve and Party First Secretary Jean-Christophe Cambadélis called for the party to support Macron. Other figures around the party's presidential candidate, Benoît Hamon, however, called for an oppositional left union, to include Mélenchon's France Insoumise. On the other side of the equation, an alliance with the Socialists would undermine Macron's claims to represent political renewal and a break with the past, but unless he does manage to achieve an En Marche! majority, he will need support from somewhere.

Although support from the Socialists seems the most likely at present, it may prove difficult to sustain over time. Much of Macron's liberalising agenda will appeal more to centre-right Republicans than to Socialists, and if it doesn't manage to reduce persistently high levels of unemployment, support may soon fade from the centre-left. Of course, he could seek support from left and/or right according to the issue at stake, but this is a difficult balancing act to sustain over time.

If he doesn't achieve this, rather than the historic break that some have seen in Macron's victory, we may see his presidency as merely a postponement of real change. Having rejected the traditional left and right parties of government, the French electorate has turned to a political newcomer who promises to reverse French decline by governing from the centre and through reinforced cooperation with the European Union. If this doesn't bear fruit, another alternative is waiting in the wings.

Although the scale of her defeat raises doubts about her continued leadership of the Front National, it should not be forgotten that Le Pen gained nearly three million more votes between the first and second ballots to amass 10.6 million. A significantly large proportion of the French population is therefore discontented enough to vote for a far-right candidate for the key political office of state, with a similarly large proportion disaffected enough not to vote against her. Macron has five years to make sure this does not rise further, but the uncertainty and flux that his own victory has introduced into French politics make this far more difficult than any task he has faced to date.

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

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About the author

Nick Parsons – *Cardiff University*

Nick Parsons is Reader in French in the School of Modern Languages, Cardiff University, and is a specialist in French and European industrial relations and social policy.

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