

Macron looks set for a huge majority, but does he have popular support?

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Emmanuel Macron's La République En Marche (LREM) are set to win a large majority in the French parliament following the first round of legislative elections on 11 June. Nick Parsons suggests that while few can question Macron's victory, the low turnout in the election also raises questions about the health of French democracy. Far-reaching reforms may ultimately be initiated by a president with a large parliamentary majority, but a relatively small level of popular support.



Emmanuel Macron, Credit: [vfutscher](#) (CC BY-NC 2.0)

On Sunday 11 June, in the first round of the French legislative elections, the French electorate appeared to confirm the choice they made in the presidential elections. In the second round of those elections, Emmanuel Macron exceeded expectations and won a crushing victory over his far-right rival Marine Le Pen, with two-thirds of the votes cast. Having rapidly established a party, *La République En Marche* (LREM), Macron has again exceeded expectations and looks set to win a landslide majority after the second round of the election on 18 June.

Indeed, projections suggest that LREM will win between 415 and 455 of the 577 parliamentary seats in France. As expected, both the *Front National* (FN) and Jean-Luc Mélenchon's *La France insoumise* failed to capitalise on success in the presidential elections, with both amassing less than 15% of votes cast and looking set to win just a handful of seats each after the second round of voting. With 21.6%, the right-wing *Les Républicains* slightly improved upon François Fillon's score in the first round of the presidential vote, but they can still only look forward to forming a weak opposition to En Marche in the National Assembly, with between 70 and 110 seats. Although the Socialist Party improved upon Benoît Hamon's 6% in the presidential election, its score of 9.5% still represents a collapse from the near 30% achieved in the first round of the 2012 parliamentary elections. Even in alliance with the ecologists, they can hope for no more than 30 seats.

Macron's LREM therefore appears to have swept all before it, and the new President's ambition of recasting the mould of French politics seems to have been achieved. His coalition of centre-left and centre-right forces appears to have overcome the traditional left-right divide, leaving the established parties with some serious thinking to do as to their future direction. Even before the parliamentary elections, the FN appeared to be in turmoil, with a questioning of Le Pen's leadership following her perceived poor performance in the second round of the presidential elections, and internal squabbles focusing on the question of withdrawal from the euro. For *Les Républicains*, the failure to improve significantly upon the score of a presidential candidate mired in scandal will be a cause for concern, and will, in all likelihood, lead to a questioning of the party's leadership. Already, in the run up to the parliamentary ballot, those who left the party to support Macron were denouncing what they saw as a drift to the hard right within the party, particularly on social issues.

The major losers, however, are the socialists. Not only will they be reduced to a parliamentary rump, but their leadership has also been decimated. Both Hamon and the party's First Secretary, Jean-Christophe Cambadélis, were eliminated in the first round of voting on 11 June. The party will therefore need to engage in a period of introspection if it is to renew itself without any major figureheads with the necessary legitimacy and authority to manage such a process.

Having routed the opposition, then, Macron would appear to have secured the necessary democratic legitimacy to pursue a radical reform programme, with at its heart, a project to make France more economically liberal. But is this really the case? Comment on his presidential election victory already pointed out that his landslide second round victory was more of an anti-Le Pen vote than a pro-Macron vote. Even in the first round, some of the 24% that voted for him may well have done so in the belief that he was the best-placed candidate to defeat Le Pen in the second round rather than out of conviction for his policies.

When looking at the first round of voting in the parliamentary elections similar doubts emerge. Certainly, French voters appear to have followed the institutional logic of the 2000 constitutional reform, which reduced the presidential mandate from seven to five years and made parliamentary elections follow presidential ones in an effort to give presidents a stable governing majority. However, at just over 51%, the rate of abstention on 11 June beat all previous records for voting in the first round of parliamentary elections under the Fifth Republic, eclipsing the previous highest, in 2012, by over eight percentage points. With just over 32% of the votes cast in the first ballot, then, Macron's LREM could be on for a majority of around 250 seats with the backing of just 15% of the electorate (or, according to other estimates, as little as 11%).

Of course, these figures can be interpreted in many different ways. Having already voted twice in May, the French electorate may just be suffering from electoral fatigue. Given opinion polls suggesting a large majority for LREM, many may have simply decided to stay at home and accept a foregone conclusion. Some may decide to exercise their democratic right in the second round on 18 June to prevent the concentration of power that a landslide victory would place in Macron's hands, although given the evident disaffection for established political forces this seems unlikely.

The anticipated crushing majority that Macron seems likely to win in the second ballot therefore calls into question the health of French democracy. Potentially far-reaching reform may be initiated by a president supported by a huge parliamentary majority with very little popular backing. Of course, Macron and his supporters will counter that four rounds of elections will give that democratic legitimacy, and that if the people don't like his actions they can vote him out in five years' time. In the meantime, however, there is very little to check presidential power, and certainly no effective opposition in an already weak parliament. If Macron's policies do not succeed in improving the economic position of France, and in particular in dealing with a persistent unemployment problem, the only effective opposition may well come from the streets.

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