

## Blog

### The stakes of the upcoming French elections

Rose Hartwig-Peillon



March  
2022

Although the political debate in the French presidential elections hardly focuses on European issues, the elections are nevertheless taking place at the end of its presidency of the Council. Thus, it is an election with significant European stakes. The outcome of these elections could profoundly change the political direction of the end of the French presidency, from Macronian Europeanism to the fierce Euroscepticism stemming from Jean-Luc Mélenchon (France Unbowed) or Marine Le Pen (National Rally). For now, President Macron is still leading the race in the voting intentions<sup>1</sup>. Ever since the Russian invasion of Ukraine started, voting intentions for President Macron have kept him on top of the presidential race. The war in Ukraine could therefore be seen as a boon for President Macron's reelection.

Indeed, a few weeks before the French presidential elections are to take place, we still very much see a "rally round the flag" effects<sup>2</sup> in place (i.e. that in times of war, the public's support for their political leaders is greatly heightened). So far, President Macron's active handling of the war in Ukraine seems to have helped his campaign. So much so that some believe that the first round of the upcoming French elections will merely be about who deciding will lose to Mr. Macron in the second round of the election. There seems to me much less uncertainty about the outcome of the election than in 2017. Therefore, is the election already won for President Macron? Is this election already played out?

### **2022, a possible revival of 2002?**

At multiple occasions, President Macron has underlined to his presidential team that *no*, whilst his popularity rate is definitely an encouraging sign for his reelection, the victory certainly is not assured. In a promotional clip for his campaign, he notably declared to *En Marche* MP's that "We have seen many in the past who were big winners in the election before, but did not make it to the second round!" This is a direct reference to the defeat of the socialist candidate Lionel Jospin in the 2002 presidential election. In 2002, French left-leaning voters

---

<sup>1</sup> POLITICO. (2022, March 27). *Politico poll of polls*. POLITICO. Retrieved March 28, 2022, from <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/france/>.

<sup>2</sup> Mueller, J. E. (1970). Presidential popularity from Truman to Johnson. *American Political Science Review*, 64(1), 18–34.



March  
2022

expected Lionel Jospin (Socialist Party), a favorite of the election, to go through to the second round. They therefore preferred to vote for a heartland candidate in the first round, and planned to report their vote for him in the second<sup>3</sup>. However, this reasoning resulted in an atomisation of the French left, and Lionel Jospin not reaching the second round. As the election's favorite, just as Jospin was at his time, President Macron seems to be fearing to be pushed aside by this "Jospin effect" — i.e. having electors vote for smaller candidates for the first round and, as a consequence, being unable to reach the second round of the election.

One can draw yet another parallel with past presidential elections: if, as in 2002 and 2017, the extreme right reaches the second round of the election, will the rest of the political class will call to block extreme-rights parties? In 2002, when the National Front, then chaired by Jean-Marie Le Pen, father to Marine Le Pen, accessed the second round of the presidential elections, all the political parties, from the left to the right, called their supporters to cast a vote for Jacques Chirac (Union for a Popular Movement). In French politics, we call it a « barrage vote », meaning that all parties unite to block the advancement of extremist ideas and their representatives. However, it seems that election after election, this "barrage" holds less and less steady. In 2017 already, the elected representatives of the left and the right do not unite against the National Front in view of the second round of the presidential election. The inclination towards national unity against the National Front and other extremist parties seems to be breaking down.

As it stands, it seems rather likely that E. Macron will face M. Le Pen at the second round; this situation will beg the question of the vote carryovers. It seems rather likely that a part of the French left would rather call to vote blank rather than for two candidates considered to be rightward-leaning. Hence, if Mr. Macron is to proceed to the second round of the election, will the vote carryovers towards his candidacy will be sufficient to defeat M. Le Pen? The progressive rightward shift of the country, well-illustrated by the rise of the National Front and

---

<sup>3</sup> On this topic, see the work of Patrick Cohen.



March  
2022

the rather high popularity of E. Zemmour (Reconquest), could make it that second round carryovers would rather be directed towards M. Le Pen.

### **Abstention on the rise**

The outcome of this election is far from being decided. It is specifically true considering the expected skyrocketing abstention rate. The last elections have been subject to very high abstention rates: 58% for the municipal elections of 2020 and 65% for the regional elections of 2021. Even though the presidential elections are considered of a higher stake, and are therefore more likely to lead voters to cast a ballot, there is a general trend towards abstentionism that cannot be dismissed.

Furthermore, it would appear that the presidential campaign is not really imposing itself in people's lives as it did in 2017. As summarised by *France Info*, "With the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, the presidential campaign is struggling to impose itself in the daily lives of the French."<sup>4</sup> Moreover, as mentioned before, since it may seem as if the election is already played out, there is a risk a part of the French voters will lose even more interest in the election and will not make it to the polls. Then again, who would benefit and who would be harmed by abstentionism? When looking at general trends in abstentionism in France, it would appear the younger voters are the ones the most reluctant to go to the polls. Since this part of the electorate is more left-leaning, one may expect that leftist candidates would suffer from it the most. The biggest part of the centre-right party The Republicans are mostly older voters, which are less prone to abstentionism. Moreover, it would probably not affect the Zemmour vote as its supporters are highly politicized.

---

<sup>4</sup> Comte, A. (2022, March 22). Pr sidentielle 2022 : face au risque d'une abstention record, l'impuissance de la classe politique est-elle irr versible ? *France Info*. Retrieved from [https://www.francetvinfo.fr/elections/presidentielle/presidentielle-2022-face-au-risque-d-une-abstention-record-l-impuissance-de-la-classe-politique-est-elle-irreversible\\_5015471.html](https://www.francetvinfo.fr/elections/presidentielle/presidentielle-2022-face-au-risque-d-une-abstention-record-l-impuissance-de-la-classe-politique-est-elle-irreversible_5015471.html).



March  
2022

### **The lack of a proper national debate**

The lack of interest in the campaign, one of the roots of abstentionism, could also be explained by the lack of a proper political debate: President Macron has consistently refused participating in a debate with all the candidates, as well as being quite frugal regarding his campaign spending. In a remarkably Gaullist way, he claims to be "above the fray", first among equals, refusing to "stoop" to a debate. This situation sharply contrasts with the 2017 campaign, where all the candidates competed in a televised debate, watched by more than ten million viewers (which equals to more than a fifth of the electorate).

Given the fact that the President is refusing to take part in the political debate with his competitors, the president of the French senate Gérard Larcher therefore questions the potential lack of "legitimacy" of Emmanuel Macron in case of his re-election. Indeed, E. Macron's proposals for his reelection are truly controversial, and they are not directly subjected to a proper discussion. If implementing them without a large-enough support from the population, he risks facing yet another social uproar. Therefore, not having a proper debate on those ideas could harm him further down his term.

For example, it could be the case of the proposed reform of the "earned income supplement" (le revenu de solidarité active), which is an allowance given to any French person who is unemployed and does not receive any unemployment benefit. Mr. Macron is advancing that this allowance should be subjected to the condition of working twenty hours per week. However, given the low sum of money given through this program, Macron's proposal would imply that the beneficiaries would have to work for less than the minimum wage. Given that this program is one of the most substantial safety nets of the French welfare system, and that about two million households benefit from it each year<sup>5</sup>, revising the earned income supplement is extremely controversial. Macron's announcement created quite an uproar on French social

---

<sup>5</sup> Numbers extracted from a July 2021 report from the Directorate of Research, Studies, Evaluation and Statistics, which you may find at the following link: <https://drees.solidarites-sante.gouv.fr/communique-de-presse/en-juillet-le-nombre-dallocaires-du-rsa-remonte-legerement>



March  
2022

media, and he could face further outcry if he were to carry out this reform. One can express concerns over his late involvement in the campaign, which has prevented from having a formal discussion on this major change in the French social contract.

To conclude, this election is far from being won for President Macron. The spectre of abstention, due to a loss of interest in the election, for which Macron is partly responsible, may prejudice him on the 10th of April. Moreover, as the "rally round the flag" effect is often very short-lived, the president's popularity spike could fade in the final stretch of the election. The rise of public support for both Mélenchon and Le Pen may be an illustration of it. Therefore, both Mélenchon and Le Pen must be considered as serious adversaries to Macron.



March  
2022

## About EUROPEUM

EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy is a non-profit, non-partisan, and independent think-tank focusing on European integration and cohesion. EUROPEUM contributes to democracy, security, stability, freedom, and solidarity across Europe as well as to active engagement of the Czech Republic in the European Union. EUROPEUM undertakes original research, organizes public events and educational activities, and formulates new ideas and recommendations to improve European and Czech policy making.

[More about us](#)

## Contact

Web: [europeum.org](http://europeum.org)

Prague Office address: Staroměstské náměstí 4/1, 110 00, Praha 1

Tel.: +420 212 246 552

E-mail: [europeum@europeum.org](mailto:europeum@europeum.org)

Brussels Office address: 77, Avenue de la Toison d'Or. B-1060 Brusel, Belgie

Tel: +32 484 14 06 97

E-mail: [brussels@europeum.org](mailto:brussels@europeum.org)

More publications can be found on [our website](#).

*The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.*



Co-funded by the  
Citizens, Equality, Rights and  
Values Programme (CERV)