

# FIIA 11/2017 COMMENT

David Cadier  
LSE/ Finnish Institute of International Affairs

## Macron conquered the French presidency: Now he must secure the capacity to govern

Emmanuel Macron defeated Marine Le Pen in the second round of an atypical election that was closely monitored by France's EU partners. His election could potentially create the conditions for a revival of the European integration dynamic, provided that he's in a strong position domestically to both govern and implement promised reforms.

Emmanuel Macron's stellar and unconventional rise makes his victory particularly resounding. A former banker in a country not particularly fond of banks, and a former adviser to the least popular French president in the history of the Fifth Republic, Mr Macron created his political movement (*En Marche!* or 'Onward') only one year ago. He had never held any elected office before making it to the highest one. He undoubtedly benefited from favourable and unexpected conditions (such as Alain Juppé and Manuel Valls' eviction in the conservative and socialist primaries, or François Fillon's embroilment in financial scandals) but there is also something genuinely new about Macron's strategy and message.

Macron managed to position himself against the political system, while embodying the French elite. Insisting on notions such as justice and efficiency, he appealed both to the left and the right, while calling for renewal. His positive, optimistic, and meritocratic message – a French version of 'Yes We Can' – breaks with the country's traditional political rhetoric, just as his waving of the EU flag (both figuratively and literally) contrasts with the populist parties'

posture, and success, across Europe. In a way, Macron is offering a new recipe for identity politics, pro-European and inclusive. This recipe, and most decisively French voters' determination to prevent Le Pen from seizing the Elysée, allowed him to score a large win in the election (66%). Neither will be enough to secure his ability to govern, however.

The Macron presidency inherits an antagonised electorate and a fragmented political landscape. Before the vote, 40% of the French electorate declared themselves ready to cast a blank vote if that could serve to cancel the election and disqualify all of the candidates. The mainstream parties were the first victims of voter dissatisfaction with their political class: neither Les Républicains (LR, conservative) nor the Socialist Party (PS) made it to the second round. Their demise also confirms that, in France as in many other European countries, the main line of polarisation is now not so much between left and right as it is between progressivist and populist, Europeanist and sovereignist, open and closed.

Macron's victory will not erase this divide overnight. Imagining that it will completely and definitively stall the populist wave that

capitalises on (and fuels) anti-EU sentiment, as some have written, seems premature at best. In the first round, 51% of French voters aged 18–24 cast their ballots either for Marine Le Pen or Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who claims for himself the label of 'leftist populist' and who also envisaged France's exit from the EU in his programme. Mélenchon's high score (19.58%, almost twice as much as in 2012) is, in fact, one of the most significant outcomes of the first round. His voters tend to be not only young but also urban and educated, two categories that are traditionally less inclined to vote for populist parties. With a view to positioning himself for the political battles to come and avoiding leaving the high ground of anti-system opposition to Le Pen alone, Mélenchon refused to urge his followers to vote for Macron in the second round.

This polarisation, fragmentation and re-composition of the political scene mean that the outcome of the June parliamentary elections (11<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>) is highly uncertain. Yet, this ballot will in large part determine the new president's ability to govern.

All in all, President Macron will probably be unable to secure

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Finnish Institute of  
International Affairs

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Kruunuvuorenkatu 4

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POB 400

---

00161 Helsinki

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Telephone

---

+358 (0)9 432 7000

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Fax

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+358 (0)9 432 7799

[www.fiia.fi](http://www.fiia.fi)

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a parliamentary majority simply based on the number of seats won by his movement. In this context, two scenarios are possible. In the first, after securing a high number of seats, *En Marche* would receive the backing of another party or, more probably, some of its politicians. It is not too difficult to envisage how some among PS's social-democrat wing, the centrist party UDI or even LR liberals could join Macron's reformist platform.

In this respect, the challenge will lie in incorporating some members of the political establishment, which he denounced in his campaign, and in maintaining the cohesiveness of a heterogeneous majority, but overall it is the scenario that would be most conducive to his ability to implement reforms. It is also the most likely as things stand today: the latest forecasts predict that *En Marche* will win the greatest number of seats (between 249 and 286, just short of the 290 majority).

In the second scenario, another party (most likely LR) would secure a majority in the lower house and President Macron would appoint a prime minister from among its ranks. This would significantly weaken Macron's ability to govern and overcome the societal tensions that his reforms are likely to trigger.

He would mainly deal with foreign policy and defence issues, while the domestic agenda would be left to the government.

More profoundly, this scenario would strengthen Le Pen's position by making her the principal leader of the opposition. Relying on the kind of uninhibited populist rhetoric she displayed in the final presidential debate, it would be easy for her to denounce either the lack of results of an executive paralysed by the cohabitation setting or the unpopular reforms of a heterogeneous government and inexperienced president. In other words, she could approach the 2022 presidential elections in an even stronger position than she did this year.