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France shuns mainstream political parties: world experts react

Abstract

France must now choose between two candidates with strongly opposing visions. The outcome of the May 7 run-off could radically alter France, as well as its position in Europe and in the world..

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THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair

France shuns mainstream political parties: world experts react

April 25, 2017 12.26am AEST

The first round of France's 2017 presidential contest sent two political outsiders to the second round. What's next in this key European election? Emmanuel Foudrot/Reuters

France shuns mainstream political parties: world experts react

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The first round of voting in France has concluded, but nerves are hardly calmed. Emmanuel Macron, a former French finance minister who heads up his own political movement, *En Marche!* (Forward), secured the largest share of votes during Sunday's presidential election, with approximately 24%.

This outcome places him ahead of the other candidates, including far-right populist Marine Le Pen. But, with 22% of votes, she is still in the race for the country's May 7 run-off.

Both candidates have made strong anti-establishment statements, but they promote opposing visions for France, particularly vis-a-vis its foreign policy, economy and membership in the European Union.

As the candidates ramp up their run-off campaigns, The Conversation Global has asked scholars from around the world to give their view on this tense European contest.

Luis Gómez Romero - The toughest battle is yet to come

Both the EU and markets all over the world are breathing a sigh of relief after the results of the first round of the French election.

The prospect of a final victory of Emmanuel Macron – who has pledged to promote a “rebirth” of the EU – over the right-wing firebrand Marine Le Pen has sent the euro soaring to its highest level in almost six months.

The April 23 results will also facilitate Mexico's own survival strategies after Donald Trump has threatened to dump the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which he has called “the worse trade deal” ever. In an urgent move to mitigate the impact of US protectionism on Mexican economy, Enrique Peña Nieto's administration is now pushing for a renewal of its free trade agreement with the EU.

Mexicans can be relatively confident that the EU will survive the French election. It would be very difficult for Le Pen to win the second round. Both the conservative François Fillon and the socialist Benoît Hamon, following the tradition of “*le Pacte Républicain*” that previously blocked the National Front in 2002, have asked their supporters to vote for Macron.

Yet the genie of discontent that Le Pen's 22.9% share of the vote has evidenced is not getting back into the bottle at any time soon. The next French president will come from neither of the two main traditional parties for the first time since the foundation of the Fifth Republic in 1958.

This is symptomatic of how little mainstream political parties have to offer to effectively redress basic social problems caused by capitalist globalisation – such as unemployment, job precariousness and

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Languages

- Français
- English

the impact of migration in configuring multicultural societies.

Le Pen's National Front has many similarities with fascism. It would hence be convenient to remember that, in the 1930s, fascist parties didn't raise to victory based on pure hatred and discrimination: they also offered their voters alternative narratives on protection against predatory capitalism.

These narratives should be central to Macron's campaign if he wants to obtain, in the legislative elections in June, a big enough majority in the National Assembly to govern. Considering that his movement *En Marche!* didn't even exist a year ago, the toughest battle is yet to come.

Simon Watmough - French election could endanger relations with Turkey

While France and Turkey have a very long and rich connection that extends back centuries, their relations have been deteriorating since the mid 2000s, when France vetoed Turkey's accession to the European Union.

Dating back to president Jacques Chirac, French presidents have largely used Turkey's status as a Muslim-majority nation and French domestic resentment about its large first- and second-generation Turkish population to mobilise anti-Turkey sentiment during elections.

This first round of elections was no different: both the centrist Emmanuel Macron and far-right Marine Le Pen antagonised Turkey over its April 18 referendum, which dramatically expanded the powers of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey's president.



Supporters attending a meeting in France for Turkey's 2017 referendum on strengthening its president's powers. Vincent Kessler

Emmanuel Macron took the opportunity to bolster his centrist and EU credentials by criticising the referendum results, saying they were indicative of Turkey's slide into authoritarianism.

Marine Le Pen, who had blasted Turkey's referendum rallies in March, actually promotes within France a vision similar to President Erdogan's conservative, "country first" populism. She hopes for "a privileged relation with Turkey" and, if in power, says she would orchestrate France's exit from the bloc.

To add fuel to the fire, this past weekend, French professor Philippe Moreau Defarges, a researcher at the French Institute of International Relations, asserted that the best way to "deal" with Erdogan

would be a political assassination. Predictably, many outraged Turkish citizens living in France took to social media to express their dismay.



Reactions from Turks in France outraged by the statement of Professor Moreau Defarges. The Conversation, CC BY

Erdogan, for his part, has been highly adept at using French claims that Turkey is not Europe to bolster his argument that Europe will never accept Turkey as a member and to present France as a bastion of European Islamophobia.

Some half a million first- and second-generation Turks (about 4% of people among those with at least one immigrant parent in 2015) live in France today. The Turkish community is widely viewed as the least integrated immigrant community in France due to local Turks' strong connections to their home country. Policies of the Turkish state also encourage them in this direction.

It will be interesting to analyse how Turkish-French citizens vote on May 7. For now, what's certain is that given the resurgence of the French far-right and Turkey's lurch toward authoritarianism, prospects for renewed relations between the two nations are dim.

Balveer Arora - Election 'has echoes in India'

The French presidential election has aroused great interest in India. The context has undoubtedly something to do with it, sandwiched as they are between the Brexit vote and the upcoming German elections.

Given the restrictive policies of the Trump administration, the direction that Europe will now take is of acute interest here, as Indian students and professionals turn their gaze away from the US to other possible destinations.

Emmanuel Macron's victory in the first round has allayed fears of the backlash against globalisation wrecking the European Union. His political positioning as neither left nor right, and his invocation of general Charles de Gaulle – the first president of the French Fifth Republic and former leader of the resistance – while founding his movement, echoed the foundational principles of modern France.

The astute choreography of his rise, designed by none other than the unpopular French president Francois Hollande himself, was also a fascinating study in political strategy.

Marine Le Pen's Right-wing ultra-nationalist ideology has parallels in India. The trajectory of her party over the past 15 years – from outcast untouchable to major player – recalls that India's ruling Hindu nationalist party, the BJP clawed its way to respectability after having been ostracised for its

hostility towards minorities.



French President Francois Hollande (L) with India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi, whose party has emerged from India's far-right, recalling Le Pen's rise. Adnan Abidi/Reuters

France's hybrid regime of the executive presidency (with a strong prime minister appointed by the president) has been watched in India since the mid-1970s, when Indira Gandhi's government discussed constitutional reforms. Indeed, the French model has been cited in many reform proposals for its promise of a stronger central leader liberated from the constraints of a fragmented parliament.

The fact that this regime, which was being questioned during the campaign, appears to have got a second lease of life with Macron's first-round victory will strike a chord in India.

The apparent decline of the major national parties is a development that will be followed closely when legislative elections come around in June. Will the new parliamentary majority inaugurate an era of coalitions and *cohabitation*, (a scenario in which the president in power works with a parliament composed of the opposition), or will it further accelerate the decomposition of the mainstream parties?

Donatella Della Porta - Anti-establishment wins, and so does the radical left

Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen have emerged triumphant from 11 candidates this week end, showing that anti-establishment candidates were favourite for French voters. This trend confirms the increasing relevance of new electoral politics in Europe and the continued need for strong social movements.





Supporters of social media-driven movement 'Nuit Debout' movement in Paris in 2016. Philippe Wojazer/Reuters

It's important to note the success of the far left in this election. Jean-Luc Mélenchon, a surprise challenger with his "*La France Insoumise*" rallying cry, came in fourth place, with 19,2% of the votes, just behind François Fillon (who got 20%).

The centre-left parties are losing members and voters in Europe, and the radical left that is emerging in its place is capable of attracting not only attention but also extraordinary electoral success. Take, as examples, Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, Bloco de Esquerda in Portugal and the Pirate Party in Iceland.

None of these parties can be seen as the sole direct expression of the social movements that in recent years have mobilised against neoliberalism or authoritarian regimes. Still, the claims of these parties overlap strongly with the views and forms of actions of current popular movements, including France's *Nuit Debout* (roughly translated as the "standing up all night" movement).



Catarina Martins, chairman of Portugal's Bloco de Esquerda ('Leftist Bloc') party, in Rabo de Peixe. Bloco/Flickr, CC BY-NC-ND

In Latin America and Southern Europe, electoral earthquakes have happened when centre-left parties have embraced neoliberalism. The same thing happened with the French Socialist Party (PS), which once in power betrayed its own short-term and long-term promises.

Whatever the final results of the French presidential election, it points to the broad and deep discontent in Europe over increasing inequality and the widespread evidences of corruption of the political class. Across Europe, the far left has demonstrated a capacity to innovate and to empower progressive ideas, at a moment in which the centre-left is being bitterly punished for its neoliberal turn.

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