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# Reflections on the 2022 elections in France

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**ABSTRACT**

This article analyses, explains and evaluates selected key aspects of the 2022 presidential and parliamentary elections in France. It covers the first five-year term of President Macron, the presidential campaign, the results of both rounds of the presidential election, and the subsequent parliamentary contest at which the re-elected president failed to win a majority for his reform agenda. The article also examines the impact in both elections of the far right under Le Pen's leadership and the left under Mélenchon's.

**RÉSUMÉ**

Dans cet article on analyse et explique certains aspects clefs des élections présidentielles et parlementaires de 2022 en France. L'article traite du premier quinquennat d'Emmanuel Macron, de la campagne présidentielle, des résultats des deux tours des élections présidentielles, et du scrutin parlementaire où il n'y avait pas de majorité pour la politique du Président ré-élu. On examine aussi les résultats, dans les deux élections, de l'extrême droite sous Le Pen et de 'la gauche de rupture' sous Mélenchon.

In the 2022 presidential and parliamentary elections, beyond the most obvious outcomes—President Emmanuel Macron was re-elected and gained the largest group of supporting deputies in the National Assembly—lies dramatic change. The party-political reordering includes: a severely weakened governing centre (in reality centre-right) around Macron, who finds himself presiding over a hung parliament; a large, innovative, loose coalition of left parties which is well to the left of centre and most of whose members are unwilling to support Macron's policy agenda; a greatly strengthened far right, which will not support the government either; and a further weakening of both the traditional centre-right and centre-left, the two forces that dominated Fifth Republic presidential and parliamentary politics from the mid-1970s until 2017. Moreover, because of the relative weakness of Macron's party in the National Assembly, there is an immediate shift in power from the newly-elected president to parliament in a way that, outside of the three cohabitation periods of 1986–88, 1993–95 and 1997–2002, has not been seen since the establishment of the Fifth Republic in 1958. The underlying causes of these developments are profound discontent in the population at large regarding many socio-economic and political issues, combined with at best frustration

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with and often hostility towards the political establishment, frustration that manifests itself in electoral terms in both revolt from the right and from the left. It is also seen in the way in which people either abstained in large numbers or spoilt their ballots, especially younger voters and the less well off.

## The first Macron presidency, 2017–22

In 2017, Macron had seduced the French. A young, intelligent, personable newcomer, who mediatized his relationship with his wife, Brigitte, to soften his technocratic image and broaden his electoral appeal. Macron sold himself as socially progressive, economically neoliberal and pro-EU. After his election victory there was a lot of media attention paid to the concept of France as a start-up nation under a transformative president. There was an almost palpable feeling of optimism in France, encouraged by the new president's 'can do' attitude and a sense of renewal in political leadership after a presidential election characterized by a rhetorical emphasis on 'dégagisme': the replacement of the old guard including two presidents and three prime ministers (François Hollande, Nicolas Sarkozy, Manuel Valls, Alain Juppé and François Fillon) by the new.

Macron's first presidential term was, of course, greatly affected by the Covid 19 global health crisis. This would have been a challenge for a president of any hue, and Macron came in for much criticism for his handling of it. But, ultimately, that particular crisis and his appearing statesmanlike in response to it probably worked in his favour once the election came, rather than undermining his credibility. In 2021 and early 2022, President Macron addressed another international crisis, namely the Russian military build-up prior to the invasion of Ukraine, by holding repeated talks with President Putin. Again, despite his failure to prevent the invasion, Macron's apparent vigorous attempts to do so probably improved his chances of winning the presidential election. The final notable (this time domestic) crisis between 2017 and 2022 was the revolt of the *Gilets jaunes* (to which we return below) and which did Macron more harm than good in electoral terms, given the state's repressive response.

In 2022, the dominant emotions in the immediate aftermath of the election were relief for some, disappointment for others. Optimism, however, was in short supply. *Le Monde*'s editorial on the morning after the result was entitled, and without a question mark: 'Une réélection au bord de l'abîme'. In the editorial the paper's editor-in-chief, Jérôme Fenoglio (2022), wrote about the failed second terms of de Gaulle, Mitterrand and Chirac, about the atmosphere of crisis affecting France, of the country's democratic deficit and of the need for socio-economic reform if France were 'to move away from the abyss'. Explanations for the change of atmosphere might include the narrower margin of Macron's presidential victory than five years previously; the historic high score of the far-right candidate; and the toll that the exercise of power inevitably takes on the occupant of any executive leadership role.

In Weberian terms Macron's personal charisma as a candidate in 2017 was institutionalized by his occupancy of the presidential office. But the incumbent of that office inevitably becomes the target of critique, from political opponents, opposition forces, representatives of capital and labour, with those critiques transmitted not just via mainstream media of press, radio and television (as in the days of General de Gaulle and

François Mitterrand), but also on rolling news channels (of which there are currently four in France including BFM TV and CNews), social networks and the Twittersphere.

Macron was not a household name in France until the second half of the Hollande presidency. By 2022 he was a well-known quantity, he had a presidential record, and not everybody liked what they saw. Macron was a marmite politician, polarizing the views of his supporters and opponents. His supporters could point to successes during his first term: a significant reduction in the official level of unemployment (an issue that had bedevilled the mandates of all presidents from Valéry Giscard d'Estaing to Hollande; economic support ('coûte que coûte') provided to businesses and citizens during the Covid crisis; the maintenance of a socially protective welfare system far superior to that of the UK; the reinforcement of France's role within the EU (aided latterly by the departure of the German chancellor, Angela Merkel); and the exercise of French influence on the international stage, seen most evidently in Macron's diplomatic efforts over the war in Ukraine towards the end of his first term. In opinion polls, Macron was widely viewed by French voters during the 2022 campaign as incarnating the presidency well in terms of gravitas and competence (one might assume that this would be a given for a sitting president, but it was certainly not the case with Hollande) and projecting a positive image of France externally. Indeed, one frequently had the impression that, like Mikhail Gorbachev after the fall of the Soviet Union, Macron was more appreciated outside of his country than within.

In contrast, Macron's opponents focused on the downside of his first term, such as his initial failure to understand the demands of the *Gilets jaunes* protests. These protests, from late 2018 to early 2020, demonstrated not just the French capacity for street and roundabout politics, but how out of touch with popular feeling was Macron's technocratic team at the Elysée. Outside of prosperous metropolitan areas citizens had witnessed decline in public service provision and commercial services, from lack of doctors to closure of post offices. The fuel tax increase, which disproportionately affected those on low incomes and those who needed to commute to work by car, pushed many over the edge into protest. Demonstrations, notably in Paris, were met with a fierce police response, in which several persons were seriously injured. Macron eventually responded with concessions and a 'great debate', but the damage was done. Macron's critics also attacked him for the state's alleged mismanagement of aspects of the response to the Covid crisis.

From the moderate and far right came criticism of his alleged softness on immigration, on terrorism, on law and order and on the maintenance of French identity. From the left there was opposition to his tax reforms, including wealth tax, that benefited the better off in French society; and despair at the perceived lack of substantive progress in the reduction of social and economic inequalities. According to the Institut des politiques publiques (2021), during the period 2017–2022, the French on average became 1.6% better off in terms of purchasing power; however, the richest one per cent grew 2.8% richer while the poorest 5% became 0.5% poorer. Macron's use of the phrases 'en même temps' and 'et de droite et de gauche' could come across as rhetorical attempts to square an ideological circle, whereby technocratic efficiency would deliver a project of modernization (for which read neoliberalization) of the French economy. He has been described as a 'liquid' president, a 'chameleon' president, and a 'catch-all' candidate, who refuses to be labelled or pigeon-holed in conventional ideological terms of left and right; he had been a member of the Socialist government during the Hollande presidency, but had

previously worked for a merchant bank. His two prime ministers, Édouard Phillippe and Jean Castex, both came from the centre-right, as did other key ministers such as Bruno Le Maire (economy) and Gérard Darmanin (interior). For many voters on the left, during his first-term Macron had become a president of the right, as well as of the rich (Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot 2019).[1]

For his critics and opponents Macron's defects lay not just in substance but in style: his top-down vertical presidential style, the early Jupiter of his first term, that was the manifestation of Macron's attachment to the idea of the republican monarch; the clear disdain he showed towards many journalists and mainstream media outlets (with the notable exception of the right-wing *Valeurs Actuelles*); the lack of consultation with trade unions and other 'corps intermédiaires' over proposed reform measures, notably pension reform. His supporters would argue that 'gouverner c'est choisir'. And, of course, in the five-year term instituted since the 2000 reform presidents have to govern as well as incarnate; to manage as well as to lead; to link any pursuit of 'grandeur' on the international stage with the necessity of 'intendance' on the home front.

At times Macron gave the impression of being concerned only with the successful and not really caring about those left behind, less well off, less fortunate: the modern-day 'sans culottes'. In 2022 Macron came behind Le Pen in answer to the pollsters' question: does the candidate understand your problems? Many voters judged that he lacked empathy. He did, however, score highly on the quality of arrogance. Levels of antipathy towards Macron during his first presidential term were high, with vicious personalized attacks against him on social media and in demonstrations.

While his verbal remarks may not have attained the level of Sarkozy ('casse-toi, pauvre con'), Macron was certainly capable of infelicities of language. In June 2017 in a visit to new technology start-up campus in Paris, he remarked: 'Une gare, c'est un lieu où on croise les gens qui réussissent et les gens qui ne sont rien' and in early 2022 when speaking about the non-vaccinated, 'J'ai tres envie de les emmerder'. And while the latter was a sentiment no doubt shared by many of the vaccinated, perhaps as father of the nation *Un président ne devrait pas dire ça*.[2] The least one can say is that Macron did not always conform to the advice put forward by Michelle Obama, 'When they go low, we go high'.

## The presidential election campaign

The 2022 presidential election, the eleventh direct presidential election of the Fifth Republic, was contested over two rounds in a single national constituency of over 48 million registered voters: truly, in Joseph Schumpeter's famous definition of democracy, 'a competitive struggle for the people's vote' (Schumpeter 2010). The presidential election lies at the heart of representative democracy in contemporary France; it is *the* central political contest. Stakes are high, media coverage intense and voters participate in far greater numbers than in any other electoral competition. In 2022, for instance, there was over 70% voter turnout in the presidential election compared with less than 50% in the parliamentary contest a few weeks later.

The official list of candidates was published by the Constitutional Council on 7 March and this is formally regarded as the start of the first-round campaign, even if the long pre-campaign had started well beforehand. The candidates did not arrive as blank pages. They

were all representatives of or closely associated with established political formations and/or sets of values that allowed voters to place a particular candidate on the ideological spectrum. In 2022, no fewer than seven candidates had previously contested presidential elections—Marine Le Pen (2012 and 2017), Jean-Luc Mélenchon (2012 and 2017), Philippe Poutou (2012 and 2017), Nathalie Arthaud (2012 and 2017), Nicolas Dupont-Aignan (2012 and 2017), Jean Lasalle (2017) and Macron (2017)—while the five new candidates—Anne Hidalgo, Valérie Pécresse, Yannick Jadot, Fabien Roussel and Éric Zemmour—were all prominent political and/or media personalities.

After what was perceived as the counter-productive effects of 'open' primaries on the centre-left and centre-right in 2017, party primaries were much less of a feature of the 2022 pre-campaign than five years previously when they had been such an engrossing political and media spectacle involving such heavyweights as the former President Sarkozy and three former prime ministers: Juppé, Fillon and Valls. In 2022 there was also no equivalent of the drip-drip revelations of the Fillon scandal in *Le Canard enchaîné* and other media. Finally, there was no inevitability of a new occupant of the Élysée. In 2017 the combination of party primaries, 'Penelopegate' and the premature departure from the battlefield of both Sarkozy and Hollande had served as copious pre-campaign appetizers; in 2022 voters had to be content with largely unsatisfying amuse-bouches. In addition, Macron's absence from the electoral stage—he was the last candidate to declare, only days before the closing date for the submission of candidacies—meant that the long pre-campaign period resembled Hamlet without the Prince. Not surprisingly, compared with 2017, voters expressed less interest in what was described by one political commentator at the start of March as 'une campagne fantôme' (de Royer 2022). Some issues, such as the environment and climate change, never really became central in the campaign.

Even after Macron entered the fray, the first-round campaign seemed less engrossing than five years previously. The intense political and media focus on the war in Ukraine diverted attention away from the election, even if the Russian invasion became a stick with which to beat those candidates such as Le Pen and Zemmour who had previously expressed sympathy with Vladimir Putin. Zemmour definitely did not have a good war. The sense of shadow boxing was reinforced by Macron's refusal to debate on television with the other candidates (another contrast with 2017). Macron argued, correctly, that no previous incumbent president had ever previously participated in such televised debates. This was yet another reminder that in 2022 Macron was now the established incumbent rather than the new hopeful of 2017; with a presidential record to defend he not unreasonably feared being the object of attack by all other 11 candidates combined: 'Tout sauf Macron'. A pre-first round television debate might have been engrossing for voters; it was certainly not in Macron's self-interest and there was no legal obligation on him to appear.

In the first-round campaign Macron fought as a statesmanlike president-candidate. His opinion poll ratings went up in early March (peaking at over 30%) as he focused on his role as a key player in the Ukraine crisis. The downside of this Gaullian approach to a presidential election—de Gaulle only belatedly realized the need to campaign actively in the 1965 election (Radio France 2022)—was that Macron came to be regarded as an absent figure: 'Too much president, not enough candidate' (Politico 2022). His contact with voters was limited, with only one major public meeting. Policy announcements, for

example on raising the retirement age to 65 and linking employment benefits to work placement schemes, were controversial.

Prior to the first round Le Pen, who had declared her candidacy in January 2020, focused her attention on the issue that dominated voters' concerns: cost of living ('pouvoir d'achat'). The detoxification ('dédiabolisation') of the far-right brand, the origins of which pre-dated the 2017 campaign, had been solidified by the change of name to Rassemblement National in 2018. Le Pen sought to soften her personal image, posing with her cats on her Instagram account. In contrast to her father (and to Zemmour) Le Pen appealed to women voters as much as to men. Yet while the form and presentation may have softened at the edges, her critics argued that in essence the policy stances remained much the same, including hostility to the EU (though no explicit proposal for French withdrawal from the EU or from the single currency), a strong emphasis on national sovereignty, anti-immigration and criticism of aspects of Islam within French society.

Le Pen fought a campaign focusing strongly on the cost of living, combined with immigration, law and order and patriotism. More specifically, she promised to: reduce VAT on gas, electricity, petrol and diesel from 20% to 5.5%; abolish social security contributions for lower salaries; remove income and business tax for under 30 year-olds; renationalize motorways and privatize state-owned media; and inject 20 billion euros into the health service. These were the measures designed in particular to appeal to poorer voters and also to detract somewhat from the abiding scape-goating of 'immigrants' on which the Front national had relied for its rise and consolidation and on which the RN continued to depend. Le Pen promised to organize a referendum on measures to reduce immigration, to ban the wearing of the Islamic headscarf in public places and to bring in 'French-first' policies for jobs, benefits and healthcare.

An added advantage Le Pen had in 2022 (yet another contrast with 2017) was the presence of Zemmour, which helped her present herself as the more moderate of the far-right candidates. Zemmour was not a professional politician, but a journalist, television personality, writer and polemicist (Girard 2021). He was well-known through his appearances on CNews, the Bolloré-owned rolling news channel (Prolongeau 2022), and renowned for his extreme views on immigration and Islam, having published a series of polemical books on what he regarded as threats to France and French identity posed by alleged uncontrolled immigration (Alduy 2022). He had been convicted three times for racial hatred, the most recent in January 2022 for comments made on CNews. Zemmour was an advocate of the great replacement theory ('le grand remplacement'), a white nationalist far-right conspiracy theory, disseminated by the French author Renaud Camus. His campaign received the support of Marion Maréchal, Marine Le Pen's niece.

In theory Zemmour's candidacy could have proved damaging for the possible presence of Le Pen or indeed of any far-right candidate progressing to the second round: there was the distinct possibility that the two far-right candidates, even if appealing to different electorates, would engage in mutually assured destruction. Yet just as her father had seen off the first-round challenge of Bruno Mégret in 2002, Le Pen successfully cultivated her relationship with her long-standing 'populaire' electoral base. In a poll published in *Les Échos* on 18 February Zemmour was running neck and neck with Le Pen at 15% vote share each (Les Échos 2022). From then on, their poll ratings went in opposite directions.

Mélenchon's presidential manifesto was comprehensive, even dramatic, and was the result of extensive consultation with trade unions, climate change activists, a range of other pressure groups and many individual experts. It was somewhat less radical and in particular less anti-EU than the equivalent in 2017, while his personal rhetorical style was slightly less angry and self-centred. But the manifesto and the campaign generally were still unashamedly 'populist', in keeping with the views of one of his ideological influences, Chantal Mouffe (2018). The programme described how Mélenchon would roll back many decades of what were seen as attacks on poorer workers, the unemployed, women, pensioners and others. Specific proposals included: freezing prices of everyday essentials, including food, electricity, gas, petrol and diesel and eliminating some recent tariff increases; raising the minimum wage from €1,269 to €1,400 per month and putting the minimum pension at the same level; reducing the retirement age to 60; creating 100,000 new health workers' posts; the establishment of publicly funded grants for people in higher or professional education; detailed ecological planning; phasing out nuclear power; pouring resources into combatting domestic abuse; and eliminating animal cruelty. The manifesto did not propose leaving the EU but did advocate leaving NATO, which, it was argued, had become a largely expansionist organization. One of the most remarkable proposals was to replace the Fifth Republic with a Sixth, which would draw up a far less top-heavy and more democratic constitution and whose detail would be established via widespread popular consultation; once the Sixth Republic was in place, President Mélenchon would resign.

The second-round campaign is short (under two weeks), simple (only two candidates) and in 2022 was more gripping than that of the first round. Macron campaigned much more actively, seeking to win over first-round Mélenchon voters with visits to 'quartiers populaires', toning down some of his reform measures and placing more emphasis on his environmental agenda. Le Pen continued to focus on the cost-of-living issue. While Le Pen received support from Zemmour and Dupont-Aignan, several of her policies including national preference and France's position within the EU became the focus of sustained attack, not just from the Macron camp but from a variety of political and media actors in a French version of 'Project Fear'.

The theatrical highlight of the second round campaign was the head-to-head debate in the middle of the second week (Perry 2022). Since 1974 the debate has become an integral part of the ritual of presidential elections (with the exception of 2002 when Chirac refused to debate with Jean-Marie Le Pen). Le Pen performed disastrously in 2017 and was desperate to do better. She achieved this minimal standard. However, Macron was perceived by voters to have 'won' the debate. One poll put the result at 59% for Macron and 39% for Le Pen. Not surprisingly 97% of Macron first-round voters declared that their man had won the debate. But even 15% of Le Pen first-round voters came out for Macron, while first-round Mélenchon voters split roughly two to one in favour of Macron.

## Presidential election results

### *Turnout*

Voter turnout is considered important in France, with statistics published on the Ministry of the Interior website (and distributed by mainstream media) at 12 noon and 5pm on

the day of the election as well as after polls close. While voting is not compulsory in France, there is a strong sense of its being a civic duty. At 73.69%, first-round turnout was lower than in 2017 (77.77%); only in 2002 had first-round turnout been lower (71.6%). Second-round turnout (71.99%) was also lower than five years previously (74.56%); only in 1969 had second-round turnout been lower (69%). If voter participation from the two rounds combined is averaged out, then the overall 2022 turnout (at under 73%) was the lowest ever in the history of presidential elections in the Fifth Republic.

Recent presidential elections have tended not to achieve the very high turnout of earlier contests in the Fifth Republic—for instance, in the four presidential elections that François Mitterrand contested (1965, 1974, 1981 and 1988) turnout never dropped below the 80% threshold in either round and was over 87% in the second round against Valéry Giscard d'Estaing in 1974. Yet it is important to note that there is no inevitability of linear decline in voter turnout. In 2007, for instance, turnout was again over 80% in both rounds and in 2012 it hovered around the 80% threshold. In short, voter turnout is not predestined to go down; it can go (back) up. Moreover, across developed democracies a general (though not linear) trend of lower turnout in first-order elections is by no means unique to France. Compared to recent US and UK first-order elections, for instance, the turnout in the 2022 French presidential election was more than acceptable: in the 2020 US presidential election about 66% of registered voters participated (by far the highest percentage for a very long time), while in the 2019 UK general election turnout was just over 67%.

Two sets of questions have dominated research on turnout in France. First, who votes and who does not? The important sociological categories in this respect are not sex (no major difference between men and women) but rather age, level of education and employment status. The young, the less well-educated and those in lower-level occupations tend to abstain more readily. Age in particular receives a lot of media coverage and academic attention (Muxel 2018). In 2022 roughly 40% in the 18–34 age group abstained in both rounds; conversely older voters participated in large numbers. Of course, not voting should not be equated with a lack of knowledge of or interest in politics; many young people may be politically informed and active and at the same time not vote in elections. Moreover, young people do get older and may acquire the habit of voting in later life; and in certain circumstances they can be persuaded to vote.

The second question is: why do some voters (choose to) abstain? Of course, one could also ask: why vote? A rational calculation would suggest that in an electorate of 48 million, one vote is not going to make a crucial difference to the final result. It has to be acknowledged that the act of voting has to be explained as well as that of non-voting. There has been a huge amount of research on voter non-participation in France. The well-known sociologist Anne Muxel has written about two types of abstention voter: 'hors le jeu' and 'dans le jeu' (Jaffré and Muxel 2000). The 'hors le jeu' are structural abstentionists; citizens who feel cut off, excluded or alienated from the political process and who never participate in elections. They may not even be registered. The 'dans le jeu' are conjunctural abstentionists: they dip in and out depending on their evaluation of the importance of the issues and stakes involved. They are capable of being mobilized by candidates, by mainstream and social media, by friends and family, but they need to be persuaded of the importance of voting on any particular occasion. In 2002, for example, the presence of Jean-Marie Le Pen in the second round and the widespread and vocal call for a republican

front against the extreme-right candidate encouraged three million more voters to participate than had been the case in the first round only a couple of weeks previously, with turnout going up from under 72% in the first round to almost 80% in the second.

## *First round, 10 April*

The result of the first round (see Table 1) revealed the dominance of three poles—radical left (Mélenchon), far right (Le Pen) and centre (Macron)—across the ideological spectrum, with just under 73% of combined vote share.

All three leading candidates improved their vote share compared with 2017, by roughly a couple of percentage points in the case of Mélenchon and Le Pen, but nearer four points (a significant increase for the incumbent) in the case of Macron (see Table 2).

The three leading candidates could be said to be the winners of the first round of voting within their own particular broad segment of competition: centre/centre-right (Macron, Pécresse), far right (Le Pen, Zemmour and Dupont-Aignan) and left (Mélenchon, Jadot, Roussel and Hidalgo, plus Poutou and Arthaud). All three benefited to differing extents from voter perception of the need for a 'vote utile' (a French tactical vote) to maximize the chance of a candidate from the voter's broad ideological family going through to the second round. While the classic refrain regarding a French presidential election is that in the first round voters choose their preferred candidate and in the second they eliminate, in the first round in 2022 many voters did the opposite.

Macron's electorate was older, affluent and highly educated. Conversely, Mélenchon was by far the most attractive candidate for young voters, winning the support of about one-third of those in the age group between 18 and 34 (Knapp 2022). Many young people were drawn towards voting in the election by the candidacy of Mélenchon, responding to

**Table 1.** Presidential election 2022, first round result, 10 April.

| | Votes | Percentage of votes cast |
|---|---|---|
| Emmanuel Macron | 9,783,058 | 27.85 |
| Marine Le Pen | 8,133,828 | 23.15 |
| Jean-Luc Mélenchon | 7,712,520 | 21.95 |
| Éric Zemmour | 2,485,226 | 7.07 |
| Valérie Pécresse | 1,679,001 | 4.78 |
| Yannick Jadot | 1,627,853 | 4.63 |
| Jean Lassalle | 1,101,387 | 3.13 |
| Fabien Roussel | 802,422 | 2.28 |
| Nicolas Dupont-Aignan | 725,176 | 2.06 |
| Anne Hidalgo | 616,478 | 1.75 |
| Philippe Poutou | 268,904 | 0.77 |
| Nathalie Arthaud | 197,094 | 0.56 |

Source: Ministère de l'Intérieur (2022a)

**Table 2.** Vote share, first round presidential elections, 2012–22.

| | 2022 | 2017 | 2012 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Macron: | 27.85 | 24.01 | — |
| Le Pen: | 23.15 | 21.30 | 17.90 |
| Mélenchon: | 21.95 | 19.58 | 11.10 |

his communicative style, his leftist positioning and the possibility that he might overtake Le Pen (Kuhn 2022).

Vote share is of necessity a zero sum game with losers as well as winners. Nine of the twelve candidates failed to get into double figures on vote share; indeed, the two candidates of the extreme left, Philippe Poutou and Nathalie Arthaud, received less than 1% of the vote each. Among the main losers of the first round were Hidalgo, the Socialist party candidate, and Valérie Pécresse, the candidate of Les Républicains. Hidalgo and Pécresse had a *combined* score of barely over 6.5% of the vote, whereas in 2012 their equivalents Hollande and Sarkozy had had a combined first-round vote of over 55%. In 2017 Fillon, massively tainted by financial scandal, had managed to finish in third place with over 20% vote share, fewer than 500,000 votes (1.3% of vote share) behind Le Pen (Stefanini 2017). In contrast Pécresse, untainted by any personal scandal, finished in a humiliating fifth place overall, almost 6.5 million votes (13.35% of vote share) behind Le Pen.

Contributory factors to the disastrous Pécresse result included Macron having adopted many of the centre-right's policies since 2017, thus posing the question as to what Les Républicains stood for. In addition, the LR was split between those who wanted to work closely with Macron and those ideologically closer to the far right. Finally, Pécresse fought a lacklustre campaign, illustrated by a poorly received first large public meeting in February where her performance was widely regarded as disastrous—a 'Titanic flop' was the headline of the France 24 news channel (France 24 2022). Hidalgo's campaign never took off, plagued by divisions within the left as a whole and by the lack of whole-hearted support within her own party (Kuhn 2022).

The scores of Hidalgo and Pécresse were not just an electoral debacle, but also a financial headache, because of the need to secure a 5% threshold of vote share to qualify for significant state reimbursement of candidates' electoral expenses. While her low poll ratings of around 2% would have prepared Hidalgo (and the Socialist party) for this eventuality, it is clear that Pécresse and Les Républicains were shocked by her abysmal performance. Polls prior to the first round had certainly shown Pécresse dropping in support, but not to anywhere near the 5% threshold. The candidate was said to have been personally indebted to the tune of 5 million euros and after the vote asked for donations to help bail her out. While Zemmour, safely negotiated the 5% expenses hurdle, his 7.07% vote share put him well behind Le Pen on the far right of the spectrum and represented a failure in electoral terms, whatever his success in gaining substantial media coverage and a platform for his ideas.

## *Second round, 24 April*

With Mélenchon narrowly failing to make it through to the second round, as in 2017 the decisive run-off was between Macron and Le Pen. For much of the presidential campaign a Macron victory was by no means a foregone conclusion. Immediately after the first round of voting polls had showed Le Pen within striking distance of Macron (52/3–48/7% in the incumbent's favour). However, as the second-round campaign progressed, the gap widened to produce the final result (See Table 3). Interestingly, Le Pen hugely improved her projected second-round vote share during the *first-round* campaign (three weeks before the first round she had been over 20 points behind Macron in second-round voting

**Table 3.** Presidential election 2022, second round result, 24 April.

| | Votes | Percentage of votes cast |
|---|---|---|
| Emmanuel Macron | 18,768,639 | 58.55 |
| Marine Le Pen | 13,288,686 | 41.45 |

Source: Ministère de l'Intérieur (2022a)

projections), but fell back substantially during the *second-round* campaign when the stakes were raised and voting intentions fully crystallized, with voters having to decide who is going to be their president.

Macron became the first directly elected president to win re-election without an intervening period of cohabitation between different presidential and parliamentary majorities. He succeeded where Giscard d'Estaing (1981), Sarkozy (2012) and Hollande (2017) had all failed. It is true that Macron's second-round margin of victory was significantly less than in 2017 (66/34) and nowhere near Chirac's one-sided triumph in 2002 (82/18). But it was a larger margin of victory than General de Gaulle in 1965 (55/45), Giscard d'Estaing in 1974 (51/49), Mitterrand in 1981 (52/48), Mitterrand in 1988 (54/46), Chirac in 1995 (53/47), Sarkozy in 2007 (53/47) and Hollande in 2012 (52/48). It was similar to that of Georges Pompidou in 1969 (58/42). In short, by historic standards, in terms of margin of victory, Macron's success was a convincing one and wholly legitimate. Yet closer reading showed that many voters, including 42% of first-round Mélenchon voters, had voted for Macron for negative reasons—to keep out Le Pen. The bedrock of support for Macron's reform agenda was much smaller than his margin of victory in the second round might have suggested. The results of the presidential elections were, then, far from being a ringing endorsement for Macron, a fact acknowledged by the president himself in his victory speech given as part of a somewhat muted celebration by his supporters in front of the Eiffel Tower on the Champ de Mars.

In the second round, Le Pen secured a much higher number of votes (over 13 million) and vote share (41.5%) than in 2017 (10.6 million and 33.9%). In 2002, her father had secured 5.25 million votes in the second round (17.8%). The 'republican front' worked spectacularly well in 2002, showed significant signs of wear and tear in 2017 and was beginning to look rather past its sell-by date in 2022 (Knapp 2022). Le Pen's second-round result represented the highest ever vote share for a candidate of the far right in a presidential contest and was followed by her claim of 'une éclatante victoire'. She claimed to be a winner. Was this a realistic claim? In the second round more voters abstained than voted for Le Pen and surely many of her supporters will have regretted a missed opportunity at her third—and, so far, most convincing—attempt to win the presidency. The question, of course, is whether her improved performance in 2022 represents a high-water mark in the fortunes of a far-right presidential candidate or evidence of progress to be continued.

## The parliamentary election, 10 and 17 June

Since the 2000 constitutional reform reducing the presidential term from seven to five years and the inversion of the calendar of presidential and parliamentary elections approved in 2001, parliamentary elections follow a few weeks after the presidential contest. The avowed aim of these linked reforms was, through a renewed

presidentialisation of the regime, to avoid the cohabitation of conflicting presidential and parliamentary majorities that was widely regarded as dysfunctional to the smooth running of the political system. The winners of the four previous presidential elections held since the 2000/01 reforms—Chirac in 2002, Sarkozy in 2007, Hollande in 2012 and Macron in 2017—were all rewarded with parliamentary majorities, helped by a two-ballot electoral system that amplified vote share in terms of the number of seats gained in the National Assembly.

In 2022, the two rounds of the parliamentary election were held in June. The principal feature of the campaign was the formation of an alliance (Nouvelle Union populaire écologique et sociale—Nupes) embracing the four constituent components of the mainstream left—La France Insoumise, Communist party, Socialist party and the Greens—under Mélenchon's dominant and tactically skilful leadership (Kuhn 2022). The Nupes manifesto for the parliamentary election emphasized economic redistribution, social justice and ecological reforms. Fearful of a possible strong showing by a resurgent left, Macron tacked to the right (in contrast to the line he had taken to win over left voters prior to the second round of the presidential election). Nupes was presented by leading figures in the Ensemble ! Campaign as just as extremist on the left as the RN was on the right.

As in 2017, turnout for both rounds of the parliamentary election was low: 47.51% in the first round (48.70% in 2017) and 46.23% in the second (42.64% in 2017). Four main forces dominated voting in both first and second rounds: the left, Macron's centrist coalition, Les Républicains and the Rassemblement National (see Tables 4 and 5).

Contrary to the predictions of major opinion polls, the centrist grouping Ensemble!—an alliance of Renaissance (formerly Macron's La République en Marche [LRM]), François Bayroux's MoDem and former Prime Minister Édouard Philippe's Horizons—won a total of 245 deputies (compared with 350 in 2017), 44 short of an absolute majority of 289. There were serious setbacks for some key Macron loyalists: Amélie de Montchalin, newly appointed minister for Ecological transition, and Brigitte Bourguignon, minister for Health, were both defeated and had to resign from their ministerial posts. Other mainstays of the Macron project who lost their seats included Richard Ferrand, President of the National Assembly, and Christophe Castaner, head of the LRM parliamentary group. Patrick Mignola, leader of the MoDem parliamentary group, was also defeated.

The Nupes result was in some ways impressive, but ultimately disappointing; more deputies of the left than in 2017, but a long way from a parliamentary majority and the alliance was fragile (Kuhn 2022). The number of RN deputies rose from eight in 2017 to a staggering 89, despite the electoral system usually disadvantaging smaller parties; the result testified to the weakness of the 'republican front' in the parliamentary election, with first-round Nupes voters not turning up in numbers to support an Ensemble ! Candidate

**Table 4.** Parliamentary election, first round votes (parties winning more than 5% vote share), 10 June.

| | Votes | Percentage of votes cast |
|---|---|---|
| Nupes | 5,836,079 | 25.66 |
| Ensemble ! | 5,857,364 | 25.75 |
| Les Républicains | 2,370,440 | 10.42 |
| Rassemblement National | 4,248,537 | 18.68 |

Source: Ministère de l'Intérieur (2022b)

**Table 5.** Parliamentary election, second round votes and total seats, 17 June.

| | Votes | Percentage of votes cast | Seats |
|---|---|---|---|
| Various extreme left | 11,229 | 0.05 | 0 |
| Nupes | 6,555,984 | 31.60 | 131 |
| Various left | 443,274 | 2.14 | 22 |
| Various | 18,296 | 0.09 | 1 |
| Regionalist | 264,802 | 1.28 | 10 |
| Ensemble ! | 8,002,407 | 38.57 | 245 |
| Various centre | 99,122 | 0.48 | 4 |
| UDI | 64,444 | 0.31 | 3 |
| Les Républicains | 1,447,877 | 6.98 | 61 |
| Various right | 231,073 | 1.11 | 10 |
| Sovereignist right | 19,306 | 0.09 | 1 |
| Rassemblement National | 3,589,269 | 17.30 | 89 |

Source: Ministère de l'Intérieur (2022b)

against an RN one in the second round (Fourquet 2022). The RN result meant that the party could form a parliamentary group in the National Assembly, a status that brought with it greatly increased speaking rights, membership of parliamentary committees, a significant increase in income from the state and, of course, greater legitimacy.

The result left President Macron and his parliamentary coalition in a very fragile position. The balance of power between president and parliament, between executive and legislature, had, it seemed, almost been inverted. Without an absolute majority the choices were either a government of national unity (never seriously an option), a coalition with Les Républicains (rejected by LR) or ad hoc majorities constructed on an issue-by-issue basis. An early dissolution of the National Assembly by Macron, one of the president's constitutional powers, was a future possibility, although the last time this had been done, by Chirac in 1997, it had backfired spectacularly.

It is true that between 1988 and 1991 the Socialist government of Prime Minister Michel Rocard had governed without an overall parliamentary majority, with Rocard using article 49.3 of the Constitution on more than 20 occasions to get legislation through the Assembly. However, following a constitutional reform of 2008 numerical limits were placed on the executive's usage of article 49.3 in any single parliamentary session (Vie Publique 2022). Macron's government may well benefit from the difficulties faced by the different, and even contradictory, opposition forces of moderate right (LR), radical right (RN) and radical left (Nupes) to combine forces to pass a vote of censure—a highly unlikely outcome in practice. Nonetheless, while the survival of the government may well be assured, it is clear that the 2022 parliamentary election has strengthened the role of the legislature as an institution and made the task of the executive (president and government) much harder in terms of securing a parliamentary majority for controversial policy measures, such as reform of the retirement age.

Macron had appointed a new prime minister following his success in the presidential election. There was speculation that Macron might use the appointment to signal that his second term would be marked by more emphasis on the environment and climate change, as well as more horizontal consultation in policy-making. The new prime minister, Élisabeth Borne, had for a long time been close to the Socialist party. Very much a Macron loyalist, her nomination was no doubt in part designed to show that former Socialist party members were at the forefront of the new government. Borne was only the second

woman prime minister in the Fifth Republic, after Édith Cresson (1991–92) and the fourth prime minister who, on appointment, held no elected position—the previous three being Georges Pompidou (1962–68), Raymond Barre (1976–81) and Dominique de Villepin (2005–07). In the parliamentary election, she was 'parachuted' as a candidate into a constituency in Calvados and won narrowly in the second round against a Nupes candidate. This was a disappointing result for a prime minister recently appointed by a re-elected president and who, given her parliamentary coalition's weakened position, needed all the credibility she could muster.

## Conclusion

What are the key lessons to be drawn from the 2022 presidential and parliamentary elections?

First, voter turnout was by historic standards low in all four rounds, even if not wholly unprecedented in the history of presidential and parliamentary elections in the Fifth Republic. In addition, the low voter turnout was accompanied by high levels of spoilt ballots: 8.66% of vote share in the second round of the presidential contest and 7.64% in the second round of the parliamentary election. Clearly, many voters feel disconnected from the electoral process, while some are unhappy with the choice of candidate/party on offer, notably in the second round. Very low levels of voter turnout, not all of which could be explained by the Covid pandemic, were also apparent in earlier sub-national elections including the municipal elections in 2020 and the regional elections in 2021.

Second, Macron's re-election as president without an intervening period of executive cohabitation was unprecedented (de Gaulle had been re-elected in 1965, but he had not been elected by direct universal suffrage in 1958). Yet while Macron's margin of victory over Le Pen in the second round was at face value significant, it also masked underlying issues regarding his popularity and, perhaps for some voters, his legitimacy. Many voters, notably from the left, voted for Macron simply to block Le Pen. There was little evidence of significant positive support for Macron outside of his core supporters, a contrast with 2017 (although even then 'negative' tactical voting had played a part in his presidential victory).

Third, the scale of the vote for the candidate(s) of the far right in both rounds of the presidential election was hugely impressive. It indicated the considerable progress that the far right has made since Jean-Marie Le Pen failed to secure enough sponsoring signatures even to stand as a candidate in 1981. While much of the early media focus during the pre-campaign was on Zemmour's candidacy, it was Marine Le Pen who once again represented the far right in the second round, improving on her score in 2017. The continued rise of the far right indicates both the degree of disillusionment with centre-oriented politics—perhaps with so-called progressive neoliberalism—and a preparedness on the part of many voters to support racist and xenophobic policies which not very long ago were associated more with the 1930s and the Vichy state than with Fifth Republic France. The spread of far-right ideas in society has been helped, though not caused, by their banalisation across various media outlets (Le Monde 2022).

Fourth, one should note the performance of Mélenchon and Nupes in unpropitious circumstances. The former came close to qualifying for the second round of the presidential election and as in 2017 was by far the most popular of all the candidates on the

left. Mélenchon's qualified success meant that three poles emerged from the first round of the presidential contest—radical left, far right and centre—competing for only two spots in the second round (Knapp 2022). The Nupes results in the parliamentary election in terms of vote share and seats also testified to Mélenchon's capacity (within limits) to galvanize the left as a whole, even if a parliamentary majority proved well beyond the new alliance of left-wing parties.

Fifth, the former parties of government in the Fifth Republic—the Socialists on the centre-left and the various incarnations of the centre-right, currently Les Républicains—seem to be withering away or are at least reduced to pale shadows of their former selves. This is particularly true of the Socialists, but was also the case with the disastrous result of Pécresse in the presidential election. Les Républicains may have carried out a damage limitation exercise in the parliamentary contest, but their result in terms of seats is well down on 2017, which itself was scarcely a vintage year for the centre-right.

Sixth, to the surprise of many, the coalition of parties supporting the newly re-elected president (Ensemble !) failed to win an overall majority in the parliamentary election. This will cause problems for the Borne-led government in trying to secure a majority in the National Assembly for policy reforms. Parliament now has a hold over the president in a way that has rarely been seen in the Fifth Republic outside of periods of cohabitation. Yet cohabitation is not possible in 2022 because the principal forces of opposition (Nupes, RN and LR) are themselves divided. Macron retains the constitutional power to dissolve the assembly and call for fresh parliamentary elections. This worked for de Gaulle in 1968, Mitterrand in 1981 and Mitterrand in 1988 (less successfully), but proved disastrous for Chirac in 1997. If Macron goes down this route, his timing will have to be impeccable.

Seventh, the key issues dominating the presidential and parliamentary campaigns included the cost of living ('pouvoir d'achat) and retirement provisions. Despite the presence of a Green/ecology candidate in the presidential election, environmental issues, including climate change, did not feature highly in either campaign. Prior to the second round of the presidential election Macron made some noises about greater commitment to environmental reform in his second term, but his government will find it difficult to reconcile short-term pressures to relieve the cost of living crisis with the need to introduce environmentally friendly reforms in line with France's international commitments.

Finally, France appears to be a profoundly divided society. This is scarcely novel. Historically France has been riven by social, economic and political conflict: over the constitutional framework, clerical and anti-clericalism, capital and labour, attitudes to Vichy and resistance, colonialism and its legacy. New divisions may simply have replaced old ones that have been long or recently resolved. Nor is deep division unique to France. Other societies in Western Europe also manifest similar tendencies: disagreement over the way to approach crucial social and political issues, resentment towards mainstream politicians, disenchantment with the political process and profound material inequalities between different sectors of the population. A crucial test for Macron in his second term will be the management of social divisions, in terms of both substantive policy and symbolic communication.

## Notes

1. Since *Le Président des riches* (2010) had already been used as the title of one of their previous books on Sarkozy, the sociological duo Michel Pinçon and Monique Pinçon-Charlot decided to call their book on Macron, *Le Président des ultra-riches* (2019).
2. *Un président ne devrait pas dire ça . . .* (Davet and Lhomme 2016) is the title of a book that helped sabotage the re-election chances of Hollande in 2017. Based on conversations with the president, the book revealed a head of state too eager to comment on his decisions in office and too undiplomatic in his remarks about fellow politicians, including those in his own party.

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