What's in Store for the French Presidential Election in April 2022?

Julie Fette, Ph.D., Baker Institute Rice Faculty Scholar and Associate Professor, French Studies, Rice University
William Tsai, Will Rice College ’24, Rice University

With the presidential election just months away, a looming question rests on the minds of the French people: who is best fit to lead the nation—the seventh largest economy in the world, a permanent member of the UN Security Council, and a cradle of the West’s cultural history? While there are over a dozen candidates in the running, the race is predicted to come down to a historic rematch of the 2017 election, with the incumbent center-right president Emmanuel Macron facing off against extreme-right politician Marine Le Pen. This could be the third time in modern French history that a far-right candidate makes it to the second round of the presidential election, a phenomenon caused in part by the collapse of the left-wing parties. In this crucial election, the people will choose which path France takes in rebuilding a new society since the COVID-19 pandemic began. If Le Pen were to emerge victorious, it would be an unprecedented political shock underlining a global shift toward right-wing populism, a trend marked by the election of Donald Trump in the United States, Andrzej Duda in Poland, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Janez Janša in Slovenia, and the rise of right-wing parties such as Vox in Spain and Lega Nord in Italy.

Although she has never held a cabinet position, Marine Le Pen’s influence in French politics is not to be underestimated. Prior to running for president, she was a member of the European Parliament while simultaneously leading the Front National (FN) party. Le Pen can be credited with the Macron administration’s appreciable shift to the right. Since his term began in 2017, Macron has reduced the time that refugees can remain in the country while waiting for asylum, enacted laws restricting religious expression, replaced his left-leaning Minister of the Interior with a right-wing hardliner, and tried to restrict press coverage of French riot police operations. Few would have expected these moves back in 2016, when Macron quit the Socialist Party to form his then center-left party La République en Marche (LREM). The party was founded as an alternative to both the left and the right, with Macron’s private-sector background helping him get the better of career politicians whom he disparaged for ineffectual weakness.

Macron’s rightward shift throughout his presidency is due in part because political threats have come more often from the right than the left. Few rivals have emerged on the left since the end of socialist François Mitterrand’s second presidential term in 1995. Mitterrand’s prime minister, Lionel Jospin, was expected to take over the presidency but lost to Jacques Chirac. For 26 years, conservatives retained control of the Élysée Palace until the election of François Hollande in 2012. A one-term president, Hollande’s five years were plagued with crises and personal scandals, making him the most unpopular president of the Fifth Republic according to approval polls.1
A year before the 2012 election, a bid by a frontrunner on the left, Dominique Strauss–Kahn, the International Monetary Fund director at the time, was derailed by his highly publicized arrest for sexual assault. The French left as a whole has progressively lost its influence since the 1990s, in part due to divisions and identity crises. Today, the left consists of four main parties: the Socialist Party (PS), Communist Party (PCF), Europe Ecology The Greens (EELV), and the far–left France Unbowed (La France Insoumise or FI), as well as numerous marginal parties. While multiple parties have always existed on the left, partisanship had been secondary to policy until now. Philosophically, the French left has not resolved an identity crisis that began in the 1990s. Originally, the left was the home of the working class, a voting block that has since shifted increasingly to the extreme right. Leftist party leaders are now divided as to whether their primary constituency remains the working class or minorities.

LESSONS FROM THE 2017 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

These internal disputes chiseled away at the left’s unity, resulting in two candidates from the left in the 2017 presidential race—Benoît Hamon (PS) and Jean–Luc Mélenchon (FI)—who refused to drop out to endorse the other. In the first round, Macron ended up receiving 24% of the votes while Le Pen came in second at 21.3%, just barely edging out the mainstream conservative candidate François Fillon (20%) representing Les Républicains (LR). If Hamon (6.4%) and Mélenchon (19.6%) had joined forces, they would have had the most votes in round one, and would have pushed Macron to second place and eliminated Le Pen. Whereas the French regard the American electoral college as an absurdity, the first round of the 2017 presidential election proved that stubbornness and political miscalculation in France’s multiparty system also have real impact on the nation’s political destiny. The French left as a whole has progressively lost its influence since the 1990s, in part due to divisions and identity crises. Today, the left consists of four main parties: the Socialist Party (PS), Communist Party (PCF), Europe Ecology The Greens (EELV), and the far–left France Unbowed (La France Insoumise or FI), as well as numerous marginal parties. While multiple parties have always existed on the left, partisanship had been secondary to policy until now. Philosophically, the French left has not resolved an identity crisis that began in the 1990s. Originally, the left was the home of the working class, a voting block that has since shifted increasingly to the extreme right. Leftist party leaders are now divided as to whether their primary constituency remains the working class or minorities.

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pushed for France to move away from the euro and back to the franc, she has since withdrawn this unpopular proposal. Some RN politicians disagree with the rebranding and believe that the RN can achieve victory without softening its stances. Unlike the United States with its increasing polarization since Trump, the French center-right and extreme-right have moved toward each other, at least in their rhetorical posturing.

2021 CAMPAIGN MANEUVERINGS

Macron and Le Pen are the current frontrunners in the polls, polling at 24% and 17% respectively, according to the latest survey from Politico Europe’s aggregated algorithm. Mainstream conservative Xavier Bertrand (LR) is behind Le Pen at 14%. On the left, notable candidates include Mélenchon (FI) at 8%, Yannick Jadot (EELV) at 8%, and socialist mayor of Paris Anne Hidalgo (PS) at 5%. Two former one-term presidents—Nikolas Sarkozy and François Hollande—are technically eligible to run, but have not expressed interest in joining the race. Trends were disrupted since September by the sudden rise of extreme-right pundit Eric Zemmour, Holocaust denier, convicted racist, and Trump admirer. Though he has not officially declared himself a candidate for the presidency, Zemmour is rapidly siphoning voters from Le Pen, especially those disillusioned with her mainstreaming of the RN. Despite or more likely because of his incendiary discourse, Zemmour’s popularity demonstrates that some of the French electorate is leaning even further to the right of Le Pen’s Rassemblement national.

ASSESSING MACRON’S FIRST PRESIDENTIAL TERM

Before the pandemic put a sudden halt to his plans just over halfway into his term, much of Macron’s policy agenda was focused on the economy. His reforms were generally favorable to corporations and the wealthy, such as the elimination of the wealth tax imposed by his predecessor. One of his major crises was the “yellow vest” protests against the increased taxes on gasoline; they lasted from October 2018 until the pandemic lockdown in March 2020. While Macron claimed his intent was to reduce emissions, lower-class exurban and rural inhabitants without access to public transportation saw the tax as an attack from an urban elitist. In the end, Macron withdrew the tax. Some anti-vaccination protesters in 2021 wear yellow vests to express their persistent dissatisfaction with the Macron administration.
Macron’s 2017 campaign platform also included reforming the sacrosanct pension system. While Le Pen proposed lowering the age of retirement from 62 to 60, Macron argued that his opponent’s idea would cripple the economy, and instead advocated for a minimum retirement age of 64. Although wildly unpopular, his policy would cut down on social security spending, which combined with a consolidation of more than 40 pension systems into one, would drastically reduce bureaucratic bloat. However, the pandemic put a hold on Macron’s plan.

In his crusade against the inefficiencies of the French economy, Macron also had his eye on termination laws. A longtime critic of the notorious obstacles that French companies face when trying to lay off or terminate employees, Macron attributes the unemployment rate—especially among youth—to underperformers who are too costly to fire given the laws protecting them. His 2017 labor reform package reduced collective bargaining rights and simplified dismissal procedures. Despite immediate public protest, unemployment rates fell from 9.6% when Macron took office to 7.8% just prior to the start of the pandemic. France nevertheless remains near the bottom of EU metrics for unemployment.

While Le Pen has softened her rhetoric of “France for the French,” Macron has taken increasingly intolerant stances regarding the place of Islam in the nation.

THE CONVERGING OF THE CENTER AND THE EXTREME RIGHT

Similar to Donald Trump in the United States, Le Pen attributes economic problems, social unrest, and cultural change to immigration. This has long been the linchpin of the RN platform. Le Pen, like her father before her, claims that immigrants fail to assimilate—to learn the French language, history, and values; since they are unwilling to become “French,” France has no business extending its generosity to them. In her rhetoric, most illegal immigrants profit from French welfare programs. Under Le Pen’s new RN, however, the previously overt hostility to outsiders has become more nuanced in an attempt to attract mainstream conservatives who saw her father as being too blunt to support.

Xenophobia and Islamophobia have been stoked by recent terrorist attacks on French soil, such as the beheading of middle-school civics teacher Samuel Paty in 2020. As a result, Macron’s rhetoric surrounding the subject has been staunchly for the rule of law, with sharp denunciations of any activities that may have the potential to incite terrorism. His Minister of Higher Education went so far as to propose an investigation to root out Islamogauchisme in French academia, alleging that French social science research explaining the social, economic, and political roots of terrorism actually foments radical Islamism. The McCarthyist spirit of the investigation, though now stalled, is a significant manifestation of Macron’s rightward shift. Macron’s party apparatus has also become less tolerant of diversity within its ranks. When LREM candidate Sarah Zemmahi wore a Muslim headscarf in a campaign photo during the 2021 regional elections, the party dropped its support for her and declared that the wearing of religious symbols on election material is not compatible with LREM values.

The 2022 French presidential election represents much more than just determining who will lead the nation for the next five years; it is a referendum on the values of modern France. The election is crucial in determining France’s future, particularly because the pandemic has provided unprecedented opportunities for political leaders to break free from the status quo. Will France remain an active member of the global community, work on gradual economic reforms, and prioritize the public health of its citizens under another Macron term? Or will the French be ensnared by Le Pen’s attempt to make herself more palatable and—for the first time in modern history—elect an extreme-right president? This is the choice that the French people may have to make at the ballot box in April 2022. During the campaign, many things can change. Will an Eric Zemmour candidacy split the extreme-right vote? Will the left be able to produce a single unifying candidate? The answers will undoubtedly reveal themselves by Election Day, but for now, we can only wait and see.
ENDNOTES


AUTHORS

Julie Fette, Ph.D., is a Baker Institute Rice faculty scholar and an associate professor of French studies at Rice University. Her research interests include xenophobia, immigration, and gender. At Rice, she teaches courses on modern French history, society, and culture.

William Tsai, Will Rice College ’24, is a sophomore from Brookline, Massachusetts, majoring in political science and French studies and minoring in Politics, Law and Social Thought and German.

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