

Event Report Plus

BÖLL LUNCH DEBATE

Reconnecting Europe III

The First Round of the French Presidential Election – And the Winner Is?¹

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[Teresa Pullano: Transcending Austerity? Macron, the German Election and the Future of Europe](#) and [Péter Krekó: Five Lessons for Europe from the French Presidential Election](#). **More posts will follow after the legislative election in June.**

*After the Dutch parliamentary election in March which did not bring the spectacular triumph for populist Geert Wilders expected by many and will probably produce a government coalition consisting of liberals (VVD), social-liberals (D66), Christian democrats (CDA) and the greens (Groen-Links), it is now the French voters' turn to decide on the political direction their country will take.² The first round of the presidential election on 23 April will be an indication of things to come in the run-off (7 May) and the parliamentary election scheduled for 11 and 18 June. Of the eleven candidates running in the first round, only five can be considered serious contenders: **François Fillon**, representing the right wing of the centre-right Les Republicains, once traded as the sure winner, but in the meantime probably involved in one scandal too many to have a realistic chance of winning; **Benoit Hamon** representing the left wing of the Parti Socialiste who has come to an alliance with Europe Ecologie Les Verts, the French centre-left Greens; **Marine Le Pen** whose name and politics need no further introduction; **Emmanuel Macron**, the centrist runner-up and President Hollande's former advisor and economy minister who joined the campaign in November; and, last but not least, the current Member of the European Parliament **Jean-Luc Mélenchon**, a break-away from the PS who founded the new far left movement La France Insoumise in February 2016 and has been gaining ground according to the most recent polls. Current polls also show a neck-to-neck race between Le Pen and Macron, but leave Le Pen chanceless in the run-off, which would be a second setback for the populist right in this year's European elections. But, as over a third of the French voters is still undecided, will this really be the case? What have been the deciding issues during the election campaign? What are the expectations for the run-off and the upcoming parliamentary election? Will the European Union be spared the right-wing populist wave many feared for this year and how will the French election results impact the EU and European policy?*

The first election round is over; the votes have been counted: 81% of the French population made their way to the polling booths and put Emmanuel Macron in first place with 24% of the votes, followed very closely by Marine le Pen with 21,3%. The general relief that it was not Marine Le Pen who won the first round but a Europe-friendly liberal candidate, is accompanied by astonishment that the French party system has been seriously shaken up, maybe even destroyed for good.

¹ The event took place on 26 April 2017. The **panellists** were: **Edouard Gaudot**, Strategic Advisor to the Greens/EFA Group in the European Parliament; **Marc-Olivier Padis**, Director of Research at Terra Nova and **Aline Robert**, Editor in Chief EurActiv, France. The moderator was **Klaus Linssenmeier**, Director Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung European Union.

² In the meantime the negotiations got stuck and the Greens pulled out.

The results leave us with two main questions: how is it possible that a candidate without a political party can defeat all established parties and how can the radical right gain so many votes?

The sidelining of the established parties Les Republicains and Le Parti Socialiste is probably the most striking result of this first electoral round. A similar trend was already seen during the presidential election in Austria last year where the candidates of the two major parties did not make it into the second round. However, that a successful candidate runs without a political party, only with the support of a movement is new not only for France but also for Europe. Still, what we have to keep in mind is that whoever of the two candidates surviving the first round will win, was originally backed by less than a quarter of the votes, meaning that s/he will face a rather tough job as a president.

After the first round everybody seems to be convinced that Emmanuel Macron will win the runoff, but after Brexit and Trump's victory in the States, we should be careful with predictions.³ Yet, if Macron indeed becomes the new French president, what is his perspective? Macron is not totally without political experience, but forming a government without a political party is something completely different. Many questions will have to be answered: Will he achieve to establish his own party in time for the legislative election in June? What are his options? Will he be a good mediator and candidate also for the left and right wing or will he, like most others, be defeated in the long run by the complicated and divisive French political system? Also, what will Macron's vision on Europe be, once he is established as president? Will the French-German motor be revived? Will France and Europe have to face more major shake ups in the near future?

Populism is not dead

Even though Le Pen's Front National has not come in first place in the first electoral round, the party still has to be considered a winner because what it has achieved is to really appoint itself as THE alternative to a system that is running out of steam. If there was one dominant thread in this election, it was the system itself. This anti-system sentiment was and is very present including the two front runners Le Pen and Macron who declared themselves out and out anti-system. Every candidate seemed to be against something during this election: against the media, against Europe, against the 5th Republic or against the establishment. Of course the FN profited most from this anti-system wave. Worth mentioning is the role former Socialist minister Jean-Luc Mélenchon and his movement 'La France Insoumise' played in the course of events. In spite of clearly fundamental differences between Mélenchon and Marine le Pen and her Front National, he followed a pattern very similar to hers: instead of trying to build up the political left he directly addressed the people and created a new brand of left-wing populism. In addition to the traditional division of left and right another division has risen during this campaign, perhaps replacing that between left and right, a division Marine le Pen referred to as: 'les mondialistes' and 'les nationalists', those who advocate globalisation and those who prefer nationalistic views on politics even though France always supported globalisation and felt that it had something to deliver to the world. It is this new division that has caused the established political parties to slowly implode, with an especially heavy impact on the Parti Socialiste. Both Mélenchon and Macron were members of le Parti Socialiste and decided to quit and form a new independent movement.

³ Macron won the runoff with 66.1% against Le Pen's 33.9%. This time the predictions were correct almost to the percentage point.

Another worrying trend in France but also in other countries is the open mistrust against the media in a way which threatens to put fundamental rights as freedom of information and freedom of opinion in jeopardy. Even though this trend has not taken quite the proportions as it has in the US under Trump, it is very obvious. Judging the media as good or bad, depending on whether it is serving the own opinion or those of the opponents, creates a situation where media lose their objectivity and polarise society and the political debate. François Fillon was among the greatest critics of the media by proclaiming himself their victim. The distrust of the media however marginal it might have been before the campaign, has magnified during the presidential election and has reached heights that no one expected it to, like the intellectual left claiming that it is because of the media that Mélenchon did not reach the second round of the election. The scepticism towards the media runs deep in French society. People are making them responsible for not knowing whom to trust and to vote for anymore. Stories in the newspapers almost only covered the candidates' private lives and slip-ups instead of politically relevant facts. The whole presidential campaign was built on drama rather than on political topics. But one cannot put all the blame on the media. The former political top dug their graves slowly and deep all by themselves. A truly honest and serious discussion about the obvious social cleavage and the rising right sentiment in the country is still nowhere near.

The French political system has often been perceived as rather antique by observers outside of France, so was the shock caused by the results of the first round necessary and long overdue? The question whether France has voted for stability or renewal can be answered very simply. French voters definitely yearn and therefore will rather vote for renewal. But this will be a long and slow process. Still, what has happened is nothing less than a political upheaval. Until now there were three main characteristics absolutely necessary to become president, firstly, profound political experience in a high political office, then the back-up of your political party and thirdly a strong local political base. With Emmanuel Macron we have a front runner who has none of those. Marine le Pen on the other hand is not new at all in the political field and has the unconditional back-up of her political party. Nevertheless she has also successfully fought the French political system so her personal victory of getting into the second round also marks an upheaval itself as does the big defeat of the two main political parties. All this shows that there is an almost overwhelmingly desire for political renewal in the country. Although the Front National is anything but a new phenomenon, we should not forget that in 2002 Jean-Marie Le Pen already succeeded in getting into the second round of the presidential election, so this time round the shock of a win of Front National is far less intense. What contributed to Marine Le Pen's success, were her efforts to neutralise the Front National, getting rid (at least at the outside) of extreme racism and turning it into a party eligible for everyone.

Renewal of the political system

Now we should ask ourselves: 'How is the renewal going to proceed?' As already stated, both Macron and Le Pen have promised renewal but when you look into Macron's political programme you will actually find a very traditional approach in the areas of economic and European policy. In fact, it is not so innovative at all, but rather a continuation of François Hollande's political guidelines. However, what will really change is the composition of the next national assembly with Macron and Le Pen both bringing new MPs and one third of the old MPs deciding not to run for the general election anymore. This is already a small step towards improvement since the majority of the MPs have been white males over 50 who have been in office for a long time. But if Macron is not really proposing great new directions why did the two major parties Les Républicains and Parti Socialiste lose so tremendously? There are very different reasons for the failure of each party. The reason why François Fillon and his Republicains were defeated lies simply in the fact that Fillon was not a good candidate. His

discourse about morals was refuted by his own actions. But since he had strong support in the primary election the party was unable to replace him after the news about fraud and deception came to light. Many analysts think that the Republicanains will try to compensate their grave loss by building a majority in the parliament and initiate cohabitation with the future president.

Macron will not be able to reach a majority because the candidates selected by him will be completely unknown – the French political frame conditions simply do not allow it.

So even if the voter turnout in this year's election was very high, 55% didn't vote for any of the two remaining candidates. That means that in the following round these 55% will also have to decide who becomes president. Therefore predictions about the future president are very hard to make. There are a lot of theories circulating, one of them saying that if you vote for Emmanuel Macron now you vote for le Pen's victory in 2022. But this is totally unforeseeable and a rather abstruse argumentation. Two years ago people were sure that this election would be decided between Hollande and Sarkozy, none of which have even become candidates. In order to prevent a further normalisation of the Front National, the French voters now have to stand up and vote for Macron and become vocal about it. It is very scary that even Mélenchon who had around seven million voters refused to speak up against Le Pen and did not call publicly on his supporters to vote for Macron. Behaviour like this and the general silence about the terrifying perspective of Marine Le Pen becoming the next French president contribute very much to the social acceptance of a party that is right-wing extremist at its very core. Yet Macron will have to overcome many prejudices and antipathies since many voters say they do not want to vote for a rich banker who continues the policies of the current president François Hollande. But the real question is whether it is really worse to have a banker as president than a right-wing extremist. The answer to this should be more than clear but seems to be hard for quite a lot of people and if they cannot make up their minds they may stay at home on election day and the regions mobilised by Le Pen will have an even bigger impact.

But if we proceed on the assumption that Macron will win the presidency, the question arises what his stand in the parliament will be. There is a small chance that he has already made plans and tied some knots for that case; nevertheless there are still three possible scenarios: a cohabitation where Macron has a majority against him, a hung parliament where nobody achieves to gain a majority because there are too many disagreements between Macron and the Republicanains. Last but not least there is the possibility of a minority government, which would be a novelty in French politics and therefore highly unlikely.