

## **Presidential election's second round: France's major parties want to block Marine Le Pen - but don't expect a repeat of 2002**

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It's down to two. In the second round of the French presidential elections on May 7, the far-right Marine Le Pen faces a run-off with the centrist independent Emmanuel Macron. Many comparisons have been made to 2002, when Marine's father Jean-Marie Le Pen made it through to the second round against Jacques Chirac. But the social and political context in 2017 is very different to 2002.

Although Macron is the favourite to win the presidency by a long margin, with around 60% of the vote to Le Pen's 40%, and both candidates of the centre-left and centre-right have called on their voters to back him, the "Republican front" against Marine Le Pen is likely to be thinner on the ground than many predict.

In 2002, Le Pen's presence in the second round was widely viewed as a shock, an unexpected breakthrough at a time when the French model of integration and assimilation seemed to be working, heralding a rainbow nation.

The victory of the French football team in the 1998 World Cup final, held on French soil, led politicians and intellectuals from across the political spectrum to embrace the "black, blanc, beur" (black, white and mixed-race) heritage of the French team. Hot on the heels of the release of Matthieu Kassovitz's *La Haine* in 1995 [\[1\]](#), a film which decried the lack of social opportunities for immigrants in France, the victory seemed to herald a new, multicultural and welcoming image of France.

Le Pen's second place in 2002 brought that crashing down, revealing that the reality in France was more nuanced and not everyone hailed the prominent role of second- and third-generation immigrants in French sport and culture.

Leading the national mood, the left-wing daily newspaper *Libération*, a distinct and vociferous critic of Le Pen and the Front National (FN) since the party's inception in 1972, filled the front page with the historic one-word headline "Non". In 2017, instead of attacking the Le Pens the day after the first round, the paper chose to celebrate Macron's narrow first round victory.

Back in 2002, in between the two rounds of voting, mass demonstrations took place on May 1. This is a date historically claimed by both left and right in France as simultaneously both labour day (la fête du travail) and, since the Vichy regime rebranded the festival, as a celebration of Joan of Arc. Around two million people demonstrated against Le Pen in May 2002, leading to a resounding victory for Chirac in the second round of the election, with 82.2% of the vote.

Yes, Chirac - the incumbent - won convincingly, and yes Le Pen was blocked by the mainstream parties joining forces to galvanise their supporters. But in spite of the mobilisation of a "Republican front" to ensure the election of Chirac, Le Pen in fact increased his share of the vote in the second

round, when he gained 720,319 additional votes. These may have come more or less entirely from the camp of fellow extremist and former top lieutenant at the FN, Bruno Mégret, who gained just over 600,000 votes in the first round.

Nevertheless, it's likely Marine Le Pen will also receive a boost from her target voters who chose centre-right and extreme-left candidates in the first round.

### **Different contexts**

May 1, 2017 is due to bring protest rallies against Le Pen and the FN, though they are likely to be smaller than those in 2002. Le Pen's second place is simply not a shock. Success for the FN in 2015 regional elections had been a foretaste of the 2017 presidential campaign [2].

The French election debate was not purely one dominated by issues of immigration, integration and secularism, as it was in 2002. Instead, following five years of unpopular Socialist government under François Hollande, everyday concerns over the economy, working conditions and France's membership of the European Union are also part of the picture. Since the January 2015 attacks on the offices of *Charlie Hebdo*, and the attacks in Paris and Nice which followed, terrorism has become a central concern. Le Pen has thrived on the insecurities that have stemmed from these attacks.

A vote for Marine Le Pen is not purely a vote against immigration, as it was for her father in 2002, but may also be a vote directed against the Eurozone, against globalisation or in favour of better working conditions for the French people. Her long-term plan to detoxify the party image reached its apogee in her temporary withdrawal from her role as head of the party in order to appear exclusively as a presidential candidate [3].

Not only is her presence in the second round simply not a shock, but unlike her father, Marine Le Pen is seeking to appear as an independent candidate, free from the toxic history of the FN [4]. As 2017 is such a different social context to 2002, Le Pen's political nous means it would be foolish for Macron to be complacent.

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### **P.S.**

\* The Conversation. 27 avril 2017, 11:46 CEST:

<https://theconversation.com/frances-major-parties-want-to-block-marine-le-pen-but-dont-expect-a-repeat-of-2002-76529>

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### **Footnotes**

[1] <http://www.empireonline.com/movies/la-haine/review/>

[2] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/06/front-national-wins-opening-round-in-frances-regional-elections>

[3] <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/marine-le-pen-front-national-leader-steps-down-candidate-for-all-french-people-election-party-a7701031.html>

[4] <https://theconversation.com/in-a-bid-to-detoxify-the-far-right-marine-le-pen-wants-to-appeal-to-french-jews-73993>