

# Macron's 2017 victory was supposed to usher in a new politics - instead, France remains gripped by political crisis

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With four months to go until the first round of France's 2022 presidential election, candidates from the main parties are already campaigning hard.

Emmanuel Macron, who has not yet officially announced his candidacy, is giving [frequent public speeches](#) to showcase his achievements and underline the need to continue his agenda.

Yet the political situation remains far more volatile than it has ever been before at this relatively early stage of the campaign. The upcoming election is taking place in an unprecedented context, marked by a splintered range of candidates, a persistent structural political crisis, and continuing uncertainty about the pandemic.

## The legacy of 2017

In a sense, this is one unusual campaign following another. The 2017 French election was itself a departure from the norm as it ushered in the victory of a candidate from neither of the two main parties that had alternately held power since the 1960s. It heralded a breakaway from the Fifth Republic, hitherto defined by [a right/left divide](#).

For only the third time in ten elections, the second round of the 2017 elections did not pit a candidate from the traditional right against a representative of the socialist left.

Instead, newcomer Emmanuel Macron, who claimed to be ["neither right nor left"](#) faced off against far-right Marine Le Pen. The two previous such cases were in 1969 (when the second round saw centrist [Alain Poher](#) face Gaullist Georges Pompidou) and in 2002 (when right-wing outgoing President Jacques Chirac took on the role of the French Republic's guardian against far-right candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen).

Most importantly, the two main parties traditionally seen as fit to govern – the Parti Socialiste and Les Républicains – found themselves edged out by an atomised spectrum of new players in which fresh faces (Macron) and protest figures (Le Pen and left-wing firebrand Jean-Luc Mélenchon)

proved more attractive.

This splintering explains why [neither of the second-round candidates](#) got more than 25% of votes in the first round for the first time since 2002. The weakening of the major parties also helped hand victory to a fresh majority formed around the new president in the parliamentary elections that followed.

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At the time, some pundits thought France's political spectrum would restructure itself around this majority ["of both the left and right"](#).

Five years on, this has clearly not happened. The spectrum of political choices for French voters has splintered even further. During his term of office, Macron has not managed to widen his electoral base, which still stands at 20-25% of voters. In the European Parliament elections in May 2019, the [coalition backing Macron](#) garnered 22.4% of votes; in December 2021, pollsters were putting him at an [average of 24%](#) for the 2022 election.

Instead of changing politics, Macron has simply shored up his voter base, shifting it to the centre-right. This theoretically leaves a certain space on the left free, but one that no candidate seems able to occupy today.

### **A profusion of candidates**

The French left has failed to overcome the rifts that keep its clans apart. Even the anti-establishment left that united around Jean-Luc Mélenchon in 2012 and 2017 is now putting forward two candidates, with Mélenchon running for the far-left party La France Insoumise, and Fabien Roussel representing the Parti Communiste.

Though the established right has managed to field a single candidate, Valérie Pécresse, the far-right has two candidates for the first time since 2002, in Marine Le Pen and Éric Zemmour.

As in 2002 and 2017, this profusion of candidates makes the election result less predictable because it lowers the threshold for qualifying for the second round.

The incumbent president is the only figure to solely occupy the political space he claims – the centre ground. But his position is less secure than that of his predecessors when they sought re-election (Nicolas Sarkozy in 2012, Jacques Chirac in 2002, François Mitterrand in 1988, and Valéry Giscard d'Estaing in 1981) since he has to ride out rebukes from both the left and right. This means his current [front-runner status](#) remains fragile.

### **An enduring crisis**

The splintering of the parties is symptomatic of a deeper problem that has gnawed at French democracy since the 1980s – a crisis of political representation.

The French have grown alienated from politics in the form it has taken since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, based on mass parties and universal suffrage. There are fewer campaigners and [fewer people voting](#).

This is due to several factors: [disillusionment among voters](#) given the failures of alternating governments since 1981; scandals that have marred the image of politicians, who are suspected of being promise-breakers at best and corrupt at worse; and the rise of [an individualistic society](#) that prefers personal, casual pledges to political rallying.

## The people vs the elites

Macron's election victory in 2017 resulted from this crisis of traditional political representation. He ousted those upholding what was then tellingly referred to as "the old world" because he looked like a fresh kind of candidate from outside the "system" – especially the party system – and championed disruptive innovation.

But his inability to restructure France's political offerings in a lasting fashion or to change political narratives and practices in the long term have only heightened this sense of crisis.

A gap is widening between ordinary people and an elite they deem to be arrogant and disconnected from the [realities French people face](#). And, in many minds, Macron epitomises this elite.

Like their predecessors, France's president and his government have faced a stubborn lack of popularity: after their first few weeks in office, their approval ratings have [rarely exceed 40%](#).

This discontent throughout French society has also been reflected in a series of protests. In recent years, protesters have rejected traditional political mediation, expressed exasperation with political decisions thought to be disconnected from ordinary French people's needs, and sometimes even revealed a temptation to use violence.

In 2016, then-President François Hollande had to contend with the Nuit Debout protests and, more broadly, street demonstrations against his new labour law. In November and December 2018, his successor faced social unrest on an entirely different scale – the *gilets jaunes* or "yellow-vest" movement, which laid bare a rift between political power and ordinary French people who live in semi-rural areas and on urban fringes who [fear increasing impoverishment](#).

These protests compelled Macron to enter into direct contact with common French people and offer a new form of citizen participation in public decision-making via a national debating initiative in the first half of 2019. But this idea never led to any tangible political results and ultimately proved a dead-end.

## The role of the pandemic

The sudden onset of an unprecedented health crisis did not put an end to the French political crisis, even though it may have bolstered the legitimacy of executive power. In autumn 2021, movements opposed to France's health pass borrowed aspects of the *gilets jaunes* protestors' [mobilisation strategy](#).

Meanwhile, elections that took place during this peculiar period were unfavourably affected by an [unprecedented level of abstention](#): 55% in the local elections in March and June 2020, and 66% in the regional and departmental elections in June 2021.

The presidential election will take place amid the same health crisis, which makes it difficult to directly call campaigners to action and get voters to go to the ballot box.

Rising tensions throughout French society will be a fundamental feature of the presidential election this year. Over the first months of campaigning, this crisis has been as evident in the profusion of candidates intending to reject the “system” (such as Arnaud Montebourg on the left and Éric Zemmour on the far right) as it has in the widespread emergence of topics relating to national identity in public debates.

What is still missing is a renewal of ideas and practices, which is what will ultimately determine whether most French people ever turn back to politics.

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*Translated from the French by Thomas Young for [Fast ForWord](#)*

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## **P.S.**

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