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France votes on Sunday. Can an “enemy of the Republic” pull off a victory?

By Alexandre Afonso May 2

The French vote again this weekend — it’s the second and final round of the French presidential election. Centrist Emmanuel Macron finished first in the first round with 24 percent, followed by the National Front’s Marine Le Pen (21.3 percent).

Both are now through to the runoff on Sunday, May 7. Three others were eliminated: conservative candidate François Fillon (20 percent), radical left candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon (19.6 percent) and Socialist Party candidate Benoît Hamon (6.4 percent).

The latest polls for the second round give Macron the lead with 60 percent vs. 40 percent for Le Pen. In France’s two-round majoritarian system, one candidate needs to get more than 50 percent of the popular vote in the second round. What matters now is how many votes Macron and Le Pen pick up from the candidates eliminated in the first round.

The first-round winner doesn’t always win the runoff

How do France’s runoffs play out, historically? In 1974, the Socialist candidate François Mitterrand came in well ahead of Valéry Giscard d’Estaing (center-right) in the first round (43 vs. 32 percent), but Giscard d’Estaing won the second round (50.8 percent) because he could draw on a larger reserve of votes on the right.

In 1981, the situation was reversed: Giscard d’Estaing claimed the first round, but Mitterrand won the second, notably by drawing on vote transfers from the Communist Party. In 1995, Socialist Lionel Jospin received 750,000 more votes than Jacques Chirac (RPR, a party on the right) in the first round, but Chirac won in the second round.

In 2002, when far-right leader Jean-Marie Le Pen (Marine’s father) made it to the second round for the National Front, he only marginally increased his vote share from the first round because he wasn’t able to draw on a substantial transfer of votes from the candidates defeated in the first round (see Figure 1). Chirac won 82.2 percent of the vote when voters who had backed all other parties rallied behind him in a “Republican Front” against Le Pen. This election took place with the lowest turnout ever (71.6 percent). There were 16 starting candidates in the first round.

How will things look this time around? I have taken the official results published by the French Interior Ministry and reallocated the votes for each candidate, drawing on an average of polls for the second round asking respondents who they voted for in the first round (see Figure 2).

A number of second-round polls foresee a clear victory for Macron — he would be the main beneficiary of vote transfers in the second round, especially after having been endorsed by most mainstream political leaders on the center-right and left.

According to these projections, Le Pen could draw on some substantial vote transfers (about 2 million votes) from conservative François Fillon, in spite of his having endorsed Macron. She could also draw on half of the votes of Euro-skeptic Nicolas Dupont-Aignan, who endorsed Le Pen after she promised him the post of prime minister if she becomes president. However, according to current polling, she wouldn't be able to draw on much else, and surely not enough to beat Macron. On average, 50 percent of Mélenchon voters (3.4 million) and 75 percent of Hamon voters (1.7 million) said they would back Macron, many would abstain, and only a small share would rally for Le Pen.

This projection should be considered with some caveats because it relies on a number of — sometimes fairly strong — assumptions. First, I assume that voters who backed a successful candidate in the first round will stick with them in the second one, and none of them switches or abstains. In 2002, some first-round voters for Jean-Marie Le Pen then switched to Chirac (more than the other way around), perhaps wanting to give a “warning” to the political class in the first round but not feeling comfortable with actually giving responsibility to Le Pen in the second.

Second, abstentions in the first round are not factored into this analysis. In 2002, Chirac could draw on a fairly large number of voters who abstained in the first round but participated in the second to block Jean-Marie Le Pen. Electoral turnout for presidential elections in France is fairly high, and higher for second rounds where the stakes are higher. For comparison, turnout in France since 1960 has been about 80 percent, compared to 55 percent in the United States.

Third, my analysis assumes that voters without a preference will abstain. This probably overestimates abstention, but the lack of preference surely signifies that there is no likable alternative for these voters in the second round. This can be expected from many voters who had backed Mélenchon, who has refused so far to endorse Macron. In contrast, Socialist candidate Benoît Hamon called for his voters to back Macron rather than Le Pen, arguing that “there's a clear distinction between a political adversary and an enemy of the republic.”

Even if Le Pen voters have been the most convinced and determined throughout the campaign — notably with a larger share of voters saying that they wouldn't switch their vote, and deciding earlier than for other candidates — Le Pen has little appeal for voters beyond her core base to successfully convince a majority of the French electorate. Nevertheless, current polling still predicts her to double the score of her father 15 years ago. This would have been unthinkable then.

Alexandre Afonso is an assistant professor at Leiden University in the Netherlands. He works on political parties and labor markets. He tweets at [@alexandreafonso](#) and blogs at www.alexandreafonso.me/blog. This is an updated and edited version of a post published on the [London School of Economics Euromag blog](#) and on the [author's website](#).

