

# Understanding the campaign dynamics of the French presidential election

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Now that the dust has settled on Emmanuel Macron's victory in the French presidential election, what lessons can be derived from the campaign? **Thomas Vitiello** assesses both rounds of the election, highlighting the key campaign dynamics that ultimately shaped the result.



**Credit: [French Embassy in the United States](#) (CC BY SA 2.0)**

In French politics, there is a saying that “in the first round you choose and in the second round you discard”. Voters do not approach the two rounds of the French presidential election with the same expectations and with the same voting strategies. As a result, candidates who qualify for the second round must mould their campaign out of two distinct phases.

The two candidates that moved to the second round were the two candidates that best mobilised their core electorate in the first round. Marine Le Pen ran a strong right-wing campaign articulating anti-immigration, anti-EU, and nationalist stances, appealing to her voter base. Emmanuel Macron ran on an economically liberal and pro-European platform that seduced both centre-left and centre-right moderate voters who agree with his platform but also saw in him the candidate with the best chance to win the election.

It can easily be argued that François Fillon, the Republicans' candidate, did not make it to the second round precisely because he was unable to mobilise his electorate due to the corruption affairs that touched him and his family. Some of his potential voters preferred to vote for Macron in the first round, while others shifted their vote to

Nicolas Dupont-Aignan, a more conservative candidate. Finally, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the candidate of *La France Insoumise*, successfully mobilised left-wing voters and almost made it to the second round. As a matter of fact, each of these four candidates mobilised between 7 and 8.6 million voters in the first round. It was a very tight race: the gap between the candidate ranked fourth and the candidate ranked second was only 600,000 voters. For comparison, in 2012 and 2007, the gap between the candidates ranked second and third was 3.3 and 2.8 million voters respectively.

As soon as the results of the first round were announced, the candidates entered a new phase of their campaign: they had to show they were capable of reaching out to voters beyond their core electorate. In the meantime, voters were also obliged to change their mindset. Macron and Le Pen only received around 45% of the vote in the first round, meaning that a majority of voters were no longer able to select their favourite candidate in the second round, but rather had to opt for the lesser of two evils.

Traditionally, the second round of the French presidential election sees a confrontation between a left candidate and a right candidate; hence, the candidate who successfully attracts the moderate median voter wins the election. But in the 2017 election, the second round confrontation pitted a moderate centrist, already occupying the median voter position, against a right-wing candidate. The result was the most unusual presidential election in the French Fifth Republic to date.

As the centre of the political space was already occupied by Macron, Le Pen's strategy for the second round relied on two elements: the image of a candidate serving the national interest and the reconstitution of the "no camp" of the 2005 referendum on the EU Constitution. On the one hand, she portrayed herself as standing above particular and partisan interests by resigning from the leadership of the Front National and making an electoral alliance with Dupont-Aignan. It is worth emphasising that this was the first alliance the FN has ever made with another party, breaking as such the isolation of the party.

On the other hand, she appeared in the media with striking workers at the company Whirlpool, who are threatened by the transfer of their jobs to Poland, and she repeatedly appealed to left-wing voters in her speeches by copying Mélenchon's mix of anger against political elites and support for an ecological transition. In the meantime, Macron pursued his campaign by standing his ground, without any major shift in his communication strategy. There were signs that this sequence of events may have been working in Le Pen's advantage, as she polled above 40% prior to the debates on 3 May.

However, her strategy fell short during the debate. She aggressively attacked her opponent, trying to tie him to 'the elite', Hollande's presidency, globalisation, and the EU. She never attempted to present her political vision for the country, while Macron took the time to present his project for France and challenged Le Pen on the issues. Unable to properly address content related questions that were raised during the debate, Le Pen came across as unprepared and unfit to be President.

Indeed, the debate was for many viewers a rather awkward moment as she broke all basic rules of conversation: she interrupted her opponent constantly, she failed to produce a coherent discourse fitting the context of a presidential debate, she lacked quality arguments, made a number of inaccurate statements, and effectively sought to slander Macron. It was this poor performance that ultimately tipped the dynamics of the campaign in Macron's favour, securing his already comfortable lead in the polling and ensuring that he would emerge on top in the election. Only time will tell whether Le Pen will learn the lessons from the campaign and derive a more successful strategy for future elections.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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