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French Election Brings Short-Term Relief, Raises Specter of Long-Term Polarization

by Jeffrey Brown

Pro-reform forces across France breathed a sigh of relief after Emmanuel Macron and his En Marche! movement cracked 24 percent of the vote to advance to the second round of voting on May 7. Wielding a staunchly pro-EU platform emphasizing relations with Germany, support for the euro and a common response to the refugee crisis, Macron's meteoric rise has been heralded as a soothing antidote to the euroscepticism spouted by many of the candidates who competed in the first round of voting. But the viability of Macron's proposed reforms at the EU-level is highly dependent on his ability to first pass domestic reform, targeting everything from the sclerotic labor market to taxation and education.

However, Macron's advance to the second round – and seemingly the presidency – has laid bare divisions over his agenda. With polarization rising and [at least 40 percent](#) of second round voters expected to choose the “France First” vision espoused by far-right candidate Marine Le Pen, Macron's proposals could face rough sailing. Furthermore, it remains unclear if Macron – a newcomer to party politics – can cut deals and marshal the political machinery necessary to secure the ever-elusive holy grail of reforming France.

The peril of polarization

Following the second round of voting, Macron's capacity to steer reform at the EU-level will depend on his ability to advance meaningful fiscal and structural reform at home. But if he prevails during the second round of voting on May 7, the former investment banker-turned-economy minister will govern a divided nation in which [54 percent of citizens](#) view globalization as a threat and where 76 percent of voters in the first round backed a candidate other than Macron.

Widely expected to garner at least 60 percent of the vote on Sunday, Macron's exact margin of victory will be a crucial indicator of his ability to build a broad base of support in the run-up to two-step parliamentary elections on June 11 and 18. Even if he prevails in a landslide, it remains unclear how Macron will shepherd his reform agenda through the National Assembly and the increasingly polarized country.

The final televised debate between Macron and Le Pen earlier this week highlighted the scale of the challenge that Macron faces. During the two-and-a-half hour debate, the candidates largely ignored unemployment -- an issue that [nine in ten French voters](#) cite as a central ‘concern’. Also absent were broad appeals to first-round voters who backed candidates supporting everything from an anti-free trade agenda to a French exit from the EU and ‘Catholic values’.

Increasing polarization can also be seen in voting trends that inconveniently buck Macron's carefully cultivated image as a youth-driven agent of change with a broad base of support. Tellingly, young French voters aged 18 to 34 have drifted away from the mainstream and toward fringe parties. Exit polls show that 30 percent of young voters in the first round backed far-left candidate Jean-Luc Melenchon, and an additional 21 percent supported Le Pen. Meanwhile, conservative standard bearer Francois Fillon and socialist candidate Benoit Hamon split just 18 percent of the youth vote, suggesting that young voters may have sworn off establishment parties for the foreseeable future. With youth unemployment hovering

around [24.6 percent](#) after years of alternation between the center right and center left, young voters may see little alternative to fringe parties and their protectionist, inward-looking visions.

Although Macron garnered a semirespectable 18 percent of the youth vote, the fact that more than half of young voters supported anti-establishment candidates foreshadows how difficult it will be for him to cultivate the support and levers of influence necessary to advance and enact reform in France.

Ground game: Can Macron navigate the streets to advance reform?

In addition to political polarization and electoral headwinds in France, Macron will be subject to more traditional forms of resistance that may be equally as effective in incapacitating reform. Macron has boldly proposed [\\$65 billion in cuts to public spending](#), to be achieved through the digitization of government administration and the elimination of more than 120,000 public service posts by 2022. While the proposal strategically avoids cuts to education and defense, it is likely to draw unions and France's 5.2 million functionaries to the streets in protest.

Indeed, the 2017 election cycle has already divided French unions, which opposed Macron's labor market reforms during his tenure as economy minister. Faced with the choice of Macron, Le Pen or abstention during the second round of voting – and lacking a champion in the Elysee Palace – many unions may see little alternative to five years of protest and blockades.

If this occurs, Macron's ability to build coalitions and cut deals with interest groups will be key to pushing through reform. But having only formally launched his En Marche! movement last April, Macron will need to spend time – and political capital – constructing a party apparatus before he can move forward with reform.

Finally, the recent inability of presidents to advance even modest reform shows not only how highly polarized France has become, but previews the challenge that awaits Macron. For example, in May 2016, President Francois Hollande [was forced](#) to push a watered down labor reform package through parliament without debate or a vote, fracturing his own party. Hollande's conservative predecessor, Nicolas Sarkozy, hardly fared better, failing to pass even modest labor market reforms inspired by then-German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder. Although establishment politicians Hollande and Sarkozy had the backing of well-developed parties, Macron will face street protests without the gravitas of a well-oiled establishment machine.

Creating an ever-closer union – at home

While many external observers hope that a Macron victory will translate into a mandate for the stridently pro-EU politician to advance a slate of labor, education and fiscal reform at home, the electoral campaign has stirred up alternate worldviews that challenge his vision. In charting a path forward, Macron will have to stitch together a pro-reform coalition while soothing mounting polarization and anxiety. If he fails to do so and instead prioritizes EU-level reforms aimed at reinvigorating the Franco-German relationship, he risks fanning further division and the prospect of an even more polarized electorate in 2022.

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