

French Presidential Election 2017

Chris Hanley, Director for Public Opinion and Polling

Introduction

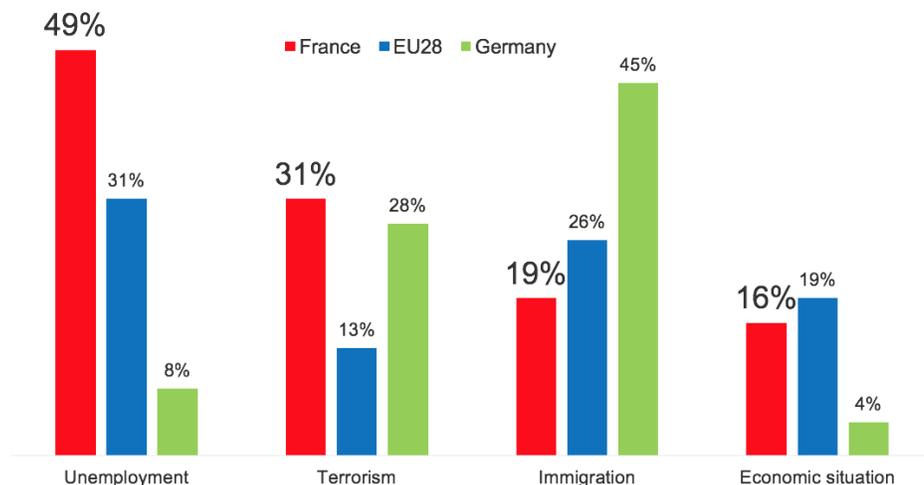
With just a day to go until one of the most important elections to take place in 2017, this article explores the political landscape in France, aims to shed light on where the eleven candidates stand in the polls and discusses the likely outcome and what this will mean for the country.



The landscape

In the months leading up to the election, French political analysts have repeatedly stated that Europe's future rests in the hands of this election. The reality and momentum of Brexit is fresh in the minds of many and provides Eurosceptic politicians and leaders with tangible ammunition to push their agenda. Indeed, many of the eleven candidates are self-proclaimed Eurosceptics and Marine Le Pen, someone whose political platform solely rests on nationalist, anti-immigrant and anti-EU policies, is herself one of the front runners. If she is able to win, France - one of the founding countries and driving forces behind both the EEC and the Euro Area - could find itself heading for its own Frexit.

The political landscape in France is volatile and divided. Over the past couple of years, France has seen some of the most devastating terror attacks to even hit Europe, let alone the country. Its unemployment rate stands at around 10%, compared to less than 5% in the UK, and consequently, according to the 86th Standard Eurobarometer, unemployment is by far the biggest concern for its citizens today¹. When provided with a list of current issues, almost half of respondents (49%) cite this issue, which comes in stark contrast to countries like Germany where only 8% mention unemployment. Concern about terrorism comes a close second, mentioned by just under a third (31%).



France also ranks among the lowest in Europe in terms of the proportions of people that have positive opinions of their national economic situation (23rd)² and of the European Union (25th, the same proportion as the UK)³. In another study, the Eurobarometer also found that more than two-thirds of French citizens believe that the interests of ‘people like them’ are not taken into account by their political system (67%). This same proportion rises to three-quarters among those aged 25-39. By comparison, less than half of the general public believe this in the UK (48%)⁴.

¹ The question asked: What do you think are the two most important issues facing (OUR COUNTRY) at the moment? Crime; The economic situation in (OUR COUNTRY); Rising prices/ inflation\ cost of living; Taxation; Unemployment; Terrorism; Housing; The financial situation of your household; Immigration; Health and social security; The education system; The environment, climate and energy issues; Pensions; Working conditions; Living conditions

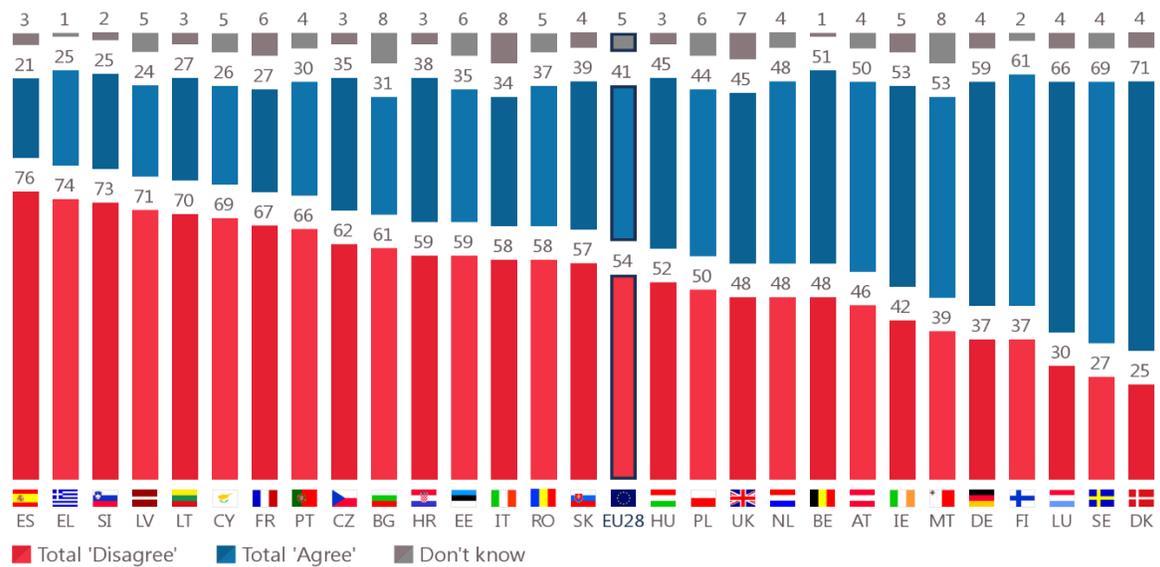
² The question asked: How would you judge the current situation in each of the following? The situation of the (NATIONALITY) economy. Very good; rather good; rather bad; very bad

³ The question asked: Would you say that you are very optimistic, fairly optimistic, fairly pessimistic or very pessimistic about the future of the EU?

⁴ See: https://data.europa.eu/euodp/en/data/dataset/S2137_86_2_STD86_ENG

QB11.5 To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?

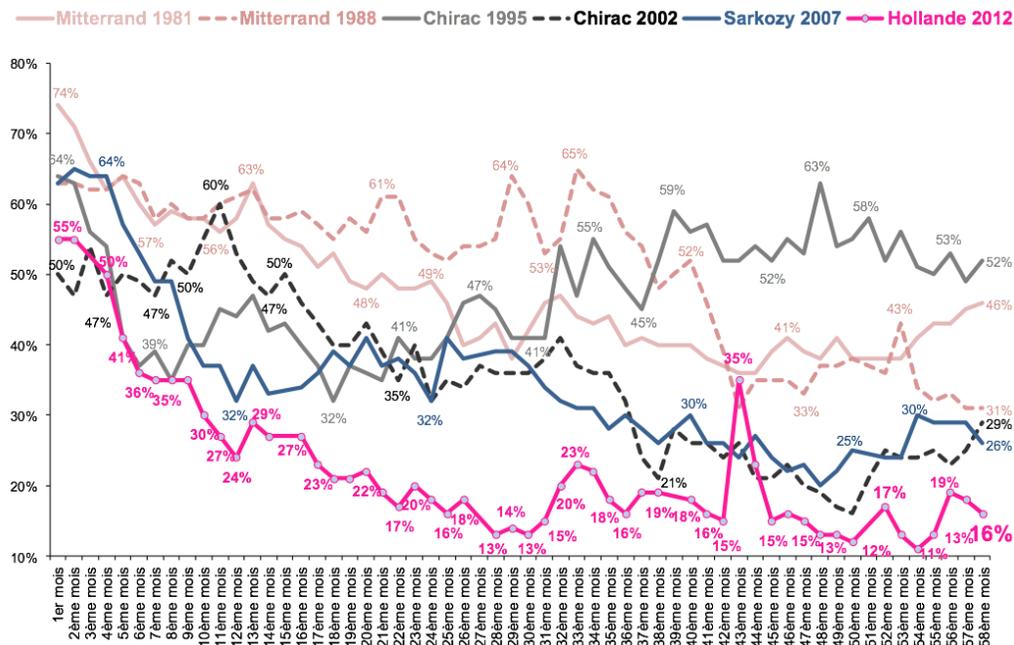
The interests of people like you are well taken into account by the political system in (OUR COUNTRY) (%)



The politics

President Hollande's approval rating is at rock bottom - the lowest any President in the past 40 years has experienced in their 58th month in office (now, at just 16%). The chart below further demonstrates that Hollande has consistently performed much worse than any of his predecessors throughout his whole term in office.

Faites-vous tout à fait confiance, plutôt confiance, plutôt pas confiance ou pas du tout confiance à ... pour résoudre les problèmes qui se posent en France actuellement ?



Translation: Do you totally trust, tend to trust, tend not to trust, do not trust at all to resolve the problems that France is currently facing?

Cazeneuve, France's Prime Minister, also suffers by association, and actually entered into office with the confidence of just 32% of the French public. By comparison, most of his predecessors did not reach a level as low as this even by the end of their tenure. However, it is important to mention that this most likely reflects a general sense of resentment and rejection of the current government more than anything else, particularly since Cazeneuve only assumed office four months ago. The incumbent centre-left PartiSocialiste in general has taken a massive hit in the polls since they formed a government in 2012 but no party has risen to take a prominent position.

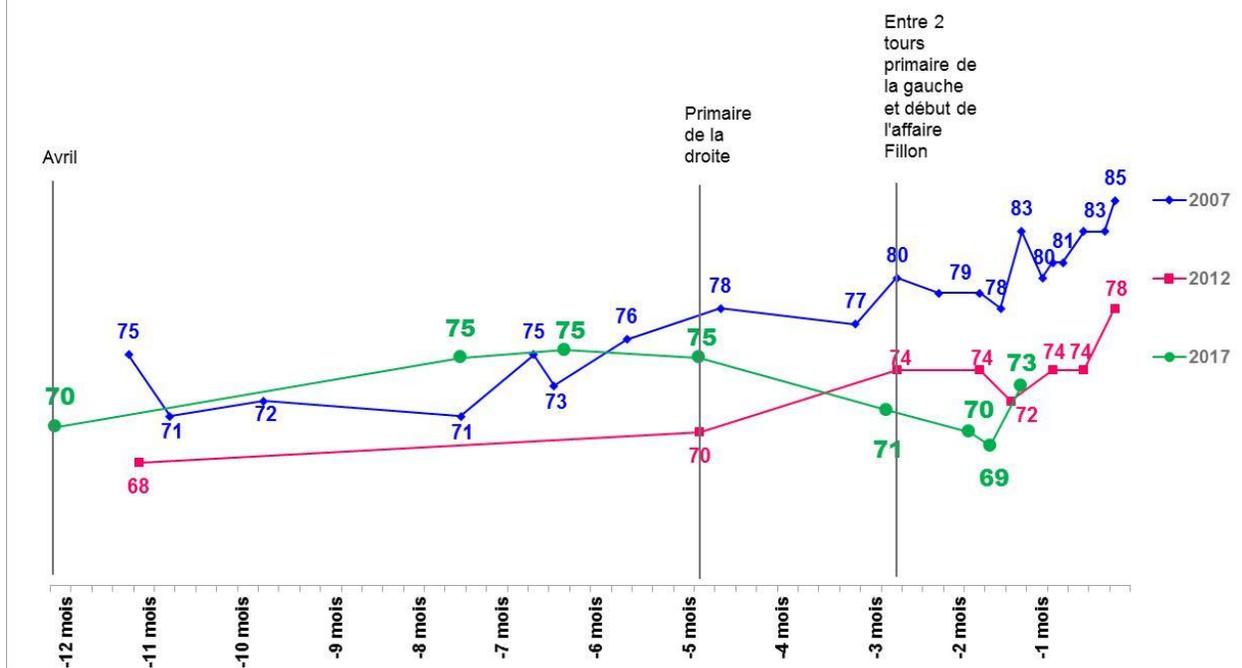
France looks to be in a situation where its traditional two party system is imploding, with the two emerging front-runners for this election coming from the insurgent populist right and a newly created centrist party - candidates from PartiSocialiste and Les Republicains trail by a margin. Traditional party attachment seems to be diminishing and as a result, the polling for this election has been scattered as citizens react to how each of the characters fair in the media rather than simple party alignment. This has been referred to by James Downes as '[A New Form of Politics](#)' that has swept across Europe in the last few years.

And perhaps due to this ongoing uncertainty, intention to vote has been polled comparatively low throughout the election cycle. In February, Kantar Sofres polled intention to vote at around 70%⁵. Of course this sounds very good, particularly when we are used to around 60-65% in Parliamentary elections in the UK, but typically Presidential electoral turnout in France is much higher –and often exceeds 80%. This sense of general apathy has been a big talking point in the French media because it will likely play into the hands of Le Pen's Front National, whose voters are arguably more impassioned and thus more likely to make it to the ballot box. Indeed, the last time Presidential electoral turnout in France dipped as low as the 70's was in 2002, the first time Jean Marie Le Pen made it to the second round⁶.

⁵ See: <http://fr.kantar.com/elections/presidentielle/2017/intentions-de-vote-l-hypothese-d-un-match-a-quatre-se-confirme/>

⁶ See: <http://fr.kantar.com/elections/presidentielle/2017/la-drole-de-campagne-2017-quelles-consequences-pour-la-participation/>

L'évolution de la proportion des électeurs certains d'aller voter aux présidentielles de 2007, 2012 et 2017



Translation: Evolution of the proportion of voters certain to vote in the presidential elections of 2007, 2012 and 2017

It may come as a relief to at least the mainstream candidates that ‘polled intention to vote’ has taken a recent surge (now at 78%)⁷ but despite this, most experts still expect turnout to be notably low this Presidential season.

The system

The political system in France, at least in terms of the presidential election, is fairly straight forward. The President is decided on after two rounds of elections: the first round will be held on the 23rd April and the second round will take place two weeks after on the 7th May.

Virtually anyone can run for the Presidency - all you need is 500 signatures from elected officials in order to become a candidate. This is fairly easy for the front runners since they are either nominated directly by their political parties or compete against others in primaries, like in the US. Others candidates can run as independents.

⁷See: <http://fr.kantar.com/elections/presidentielle/2017/intentions-de-vote-l-hypothese-d-un-match-a-quatre-se-confirme/>

In the first round all candidates will compete for the popular vote. Technically the President could be decided immediately at this stage if one of the candidates receives 51% of the vote. However, with so many candidates splitting the ballot, this is virtually impossible. As a result, the top two polled candidates will pass through to the second round. All other candidates drop out. Typically, in the 'two party system' this has led to a run-off between the centre-right and centre-left candidates. As mentioned before, 2002 took exception to this rule, when Jean-Marie Le Pen benefitted from the low turnout, overtaking the PartiSocialistecandidate.

In the second round, the top two candidates go head-to-head and the vote is opened up to the general public once again. Since there are only two candidates, one becomes President by achieving a majority of the public vote. This provides the French public with an opportunity to vote tactically – to switch allegiances in order to make sure the 'lesser of two evils' does not make it to office. Voting tactically is not uncommon to the French, and is one of the biggest reasons why the Front National only has a handful of seats in the Legislature. Likewise, the majority voted this way in 2002 to block Le Pen, and most pundits are banking on the same thing happening again should history repeat itself.

The candidates

While there are eleven candidates on paper, everyone is only focusing on just five. The front runners are François Fillon, Benoît Hamon, Marine Le Pen, Jean-Luc Mélenchon and Emmanuel Macron.

Fillon

At the beginning of the cycle, Fillon, the candidate for Les Republicains, was placed as a favourite to win the election, primed to take advantage of the centre-left's demise under Hollande. However, at the beginning of 2017, he was struck by 'Penelopegate'. Fillon, who had 'built his campaign on the carefully crafted image of a sleaze-free honourable country gentleman' came under investigation for the misuse of public funds, when a newspaper claimed that he had paid his wife €500,000 over the span of eight years for a job that she never carried out. Since January, his polling figures have seen him sink to 3rd/4th place⁸.



Hamon



Hamon, candidate for PartiSocialiste, has remained scandal free but he suffered from in-battling from his own party. He competed against the former Prime Minister, Manuel Valls, in the primaries which brought to the surface issues that many socialist parties in the EU are currently facing. The fight between the two candidates resembled similar fault lines within the British Labour Party for instance. Hamon is a radical socialist and he managed to bury Valls, who represents the New Labour faction, convincingly. Since the primary race was so divisive, many within his own

⁸ Ibid.

party have openly abandoned him, for more likeable, centrist candidates, such as Manuel Macron. Others defected to another left-wing candidate, Mélenchon. Overall, he has polled disappointingly throughout the race and has lost significant support in the last month.

Mélenchon

Mélenchon has also had an interesting race and the last few weeks have seen him surge in the polls, perhaps as others abandon Hamon for the left-wing alternative. He is naturally from the far-left of the political spectrum which also means that he is anti-EU. He benefitted from positive media exposure, and has performed much better than other candidates in each of the televised debates⁹. Just over the past month, he has seen his chances improve by 6 percentage points, while Hamon by contrast has fallen by 8 percentage points¹⁰.



Macron



The polls all suggest that Emmanuel Macron is the current favourite. He was once an economic advisor for Hollande but has tried his best to distance himself from Parti Socialiste and the current President, which have proved to be toxic associations. In fact, in preparation for the election, he founded a new 'progressive' movement called En Marche! He is pro-business, pro-Europe and has found favour among different parts of the electorate.

Kantar Sofres measured the electoral potential of each of the candidates by asking people to what extent they could see themselves voting for each of the candidates¹¹. Only 33% say that they would never vote for Macron, which proves that he is fairly inoffensive to most people. However, only 14% are certain of their choice, which is in line with Le Pen¹².

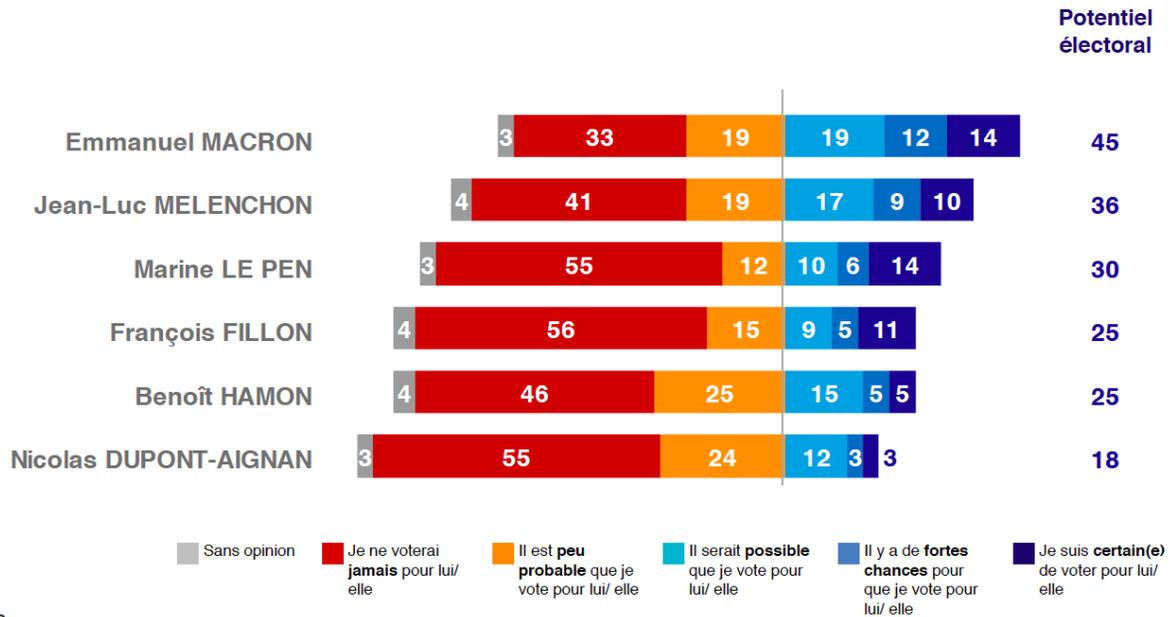
⁹ See: <http://fr.kantar.com/elections/presidentielle/2017/le-deuxieme-debat-la-decouverte-des-petits-candidats/>

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Translation of question: Thinking about the first round of the presidential election, for each of the following candidates, would you say ... I am certain to vote for him/her; there is a strong chance I will vote for him/her; it is possible I vote for him/her; it is unlikely I will vote for him/her; I will never vote for him/her.

¹² See: <http://fr.kantar.com/elections/presidentielle/2017/intentions-de-vote-l-hypothese-d-un-match-a-quatre-se-confirme/>

Question (translation): Thinking about the first round of the presidential election, for each of the following candidates, would you say ... I am certain to vote for him/her; there is a strong chance I will vote for him/her; it is possible I vote for him/her; it is unlikely I will vote for him/her; I will never vote for him/her.



Le Pen

After shock triumphs for Brexit and Trump everyone now looks to France because of Le Pen's success. Well known not only in France but also internationally, she has managed to salvage the Le Pen name and normalise the party. According to recent studies also conducted by Sofres, just under two-thirds (62%) of French people disagree with the ideas of the Front National. This seems high but it is significantly lower than the peaks of 86% under her father¹³.



The chart above also shows that 55% would never vote for her, which is significantly higher than Macron, her biggest threat. This shows that if she reaches the second round, she will likely face strong opposition. However, as discussed already, turnout will play a large role in that scenario.

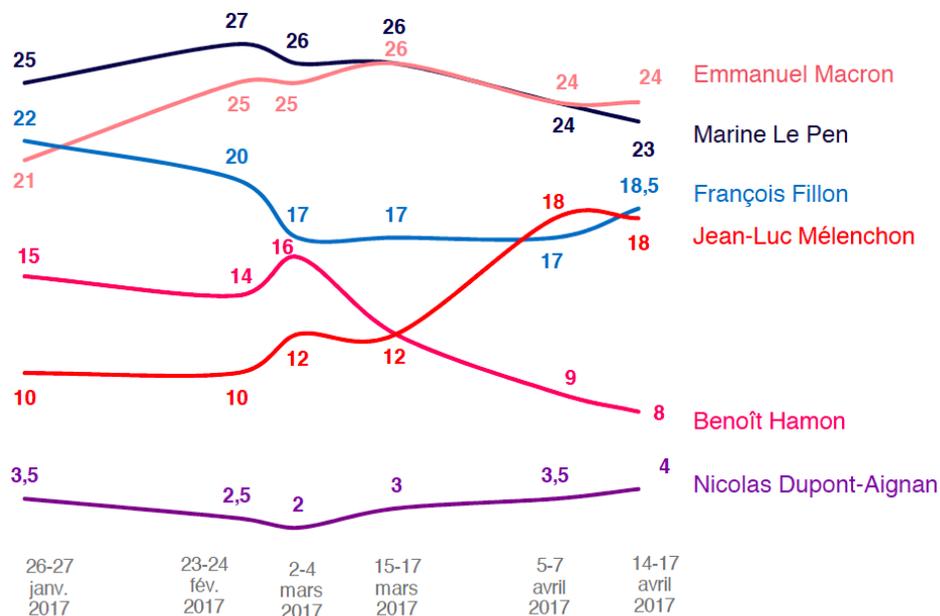
¹³ See: <https://www.slideshare.net/Sofres/barometre-politique-mars-2017-73953204>

The figures

First round

The latest figures¹⁴ show that Macron and Le Pen are neck and neck according to data published on the 18th April, 5 days before the election. They both have just under a quarter of the vote each, while both Fillon and Mélenchon are on 18%. The recent surge in support for Mélenchon in the past month, partly thanks to his performance in the televised debates as well as Hamon's demise, has turned the first round into a four horse race. While at the other end, Hamon is now polling just above Nicolas Dupont-Aignan who has steadily polled below 5% this year.

En %



However, if we also bring in the figures for the percentage of people who are sure of their choice, the picture becomes less clear cut¹⁵. Of the 24% who say they will vote for Macron, just 15% say they are sure of their choice. By stark contrast, 18% of the 23% who say they will vote for Le Pen say the same. Again, this shows that Le Pen supporters know who and what they are voting for and will not change their mind.

Macron on this scale performs significantly worse than the others in the top four. Fillon on the other hand has solidified his support over the past months, potentially due to traditional LesRepublicain voters re-aligning¹⁶.

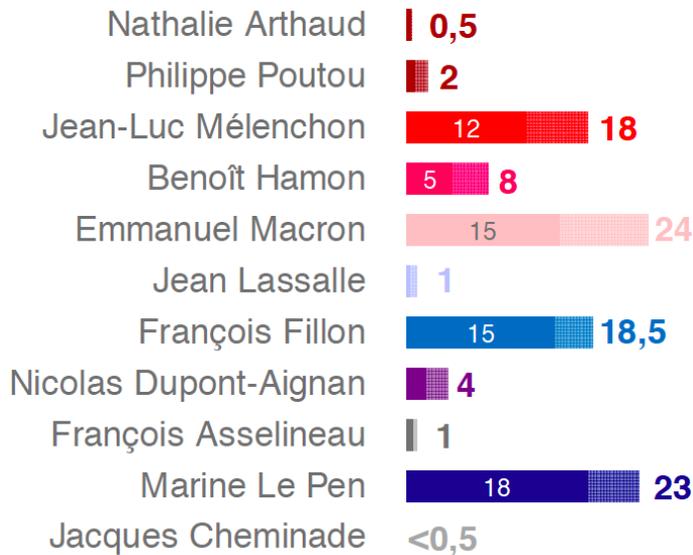
¹⁴ 23% of respondents were not certain of who their vote will go for or did not express a choice

¹⁵ Each of the bars have two shades of colour. The darker/filled colours represent the proportion of people who are certain of their choice.

¹⁶ See: <http://fr.kantar.com/elections/presidentielle/2017/intentions-de-vote-l-hypothese-d-un-match-a-quatre-se-confirme/>

% sûrs de leur choix

Intentions de vote



If nothing drastic happens in the next few days, it looks like Macron and Le Pen will make it to the second round. However, since it now resembles more of a four-way race rather than a typical two party run-off, a multitude of scenarios could play out. As discussed above, the political atmosphere is volatile and French citizens are clearly fed up with the state of affairs. This may lead to significant swings in the coming days and may also have a detrimental effect on turnout. If turnout dips to around the 70-mark as it was once polled to be, we are likely to expect a much wider margin for Le Pen, and Macron could suffer as the 'uncertain voters' would be least likely to turn up. This has been frequently discussed in the French media as the effect of differential turnout.

Some pundits also expect that tactical voting will not just be constrained to the second round. Traditionally the first round election tends to resemble a general expression of the electorate, knowing that they will have a second opportunity to vote for or against someone. First vote with your heart, and then with your head. However, since all four candidates could make it to the second round, many might end up siding with candidates like Macron over their first choice to make sure they have a palatable candidate to vote for in the second round. People may vote this way to prevent second-round match ups like Mélenchon vs. Le Pen, for example.

Second round

Kantar Sofres has modelled each of the various possible scenarios and indicated who would come out on top in each of them. In each of the first three hypotheses¹⁷, Le Pen makes it to the second round but in each case she loses to her opponent. The first is Macron, where it is estimated that he would beat Le Pen by a margin of 61:39, the largest margin of the top three scenarios. This links back to results discussed earlier that showed only 33% of the French public would 'never' vote for him.

Résultats des différentes hypothèses proposées :

	1 ^{ère} hypothèse	2 ^{ème} hypothèse	3 ^{ème} hypothèse	4 ^{ème} hypothèse	5 ^{ème} hypothèse	6 ^{ème} hypothèse
 Jean-Luc Mélenchon			57		42	57
 Emmanuel Macron	61			65	58	
 François Fillon		56		35		43
 Marine Le Pen	39	44	43			
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

This scenario grid shows that Le Pen definitely has the potential to reach the second round but tactical voting will most likely work against her. Once again, differential turnout will be absolutely key in this round too. The lower turnout will be; the better chance Le Pen will have.

It is important to mention that these scenarios should be interpreted with caution since many elements are still unknown. In particular, after the nine candidates drop out following the first round, they will call upon their voters to side with a particular candidate. The impact and effect of this cannot be measured until closer to the time.

¹⁷ See: <http://fr.kantar.com/elections/presidentielle/2017/intentions-de-vote-l-hypothese-d-un-match-a-quatre-se-confirme/>

The aftermath

The formation of government will be the next step for the President, and the legislative elections are set for the same time as the recently announced British elections in June. This will be a time for the new President to appoint a Prime Minister to form a government that will have to command a majority in the parliament.

However, if Macron or Le Pen win, this will be very difficult to establish. Macron has a newly established party with no seats in the legislature and Le Pen herself only has a handful of seats. In the case of Le Pen, French citizens will likely punish the party through tactical voting, as seen in so-called 'second order elections' such as local and legislative elections many times before. While Macron should be able to form a coalition fairly easily, Le Pen would most likely face a push back, which would become a huge stumbling block for her populist policy platform.

If Le Pen loses, this will be by no means an end to the road for her and the Front National. She has turned the party into a credible force, and if issues like the economy, unemployment, Europe do not improve, support will only continue to swing her way. Furthermore, the recurring terrorist attacks on the continent continue to play into her anti-immigrant, anti-Islam, closed border narrative. Public opinion will most likely continue to harden. If 2017 does not provide an electoral breakthrough for Le Pen, it's likely we would face a similar scenario in 2022.