



## France's Malaise Will Continue No Matter Who Wins the Presidential Election

**The consequences of France's presidential election, irrespective of the final results, will be less dramatic than many people think.**

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Whatever the final outcome of the French presidential election, the actual consequences for France will likely be less dramatic than many people hope or fear. Emmanuel Macron is a political novice, who enjoys support of the French political establishment only in so far as it is necessary to beat Marine Le Pen. His political party is a year old and it is unlikely that Macron's personal appeal, such as it is, will translate into a parliamentary majority. Let's not forget that Macron was the first choice of just 24 percent of the French electorate.

If Macron does become president, he will likely face a Parliament constituted of political parties that owe him zero loyalty. The French Parliament will be elected in June and the center-right Republicans, the National Front of Marine Le Pen, and an assortment of socialists and communists, are likely to be abundantly represented as well.

Traditionally, French presidents have found it impossible to push through reforms even when they had parliamentary majorities (e.g., Alain Juppe's and Jacques Chirac's attempt to reform the French welfare system in 1995). Unlike his predecessors, Macron will be left alone to face the fury of special interests, such as the powerful public sector unions. That is not a recipe for a successful administration.

If Macron's limited reform agenda fails, France will suffer five additional years of decline and anguish. By 2022, Le Pen's radical platform will be even more appealing to the disgruntled populace.

Should she become president, Le Pen will face similar constraints to Macron's. "France's constitution says that proposed laws on the organization of state powers, reforms relating to economic, social and environmental policy, or a request for authority to ratify a treaty can be decided by referendums. But it stops short of providing the power to withdraw France from an existing international agreement."

To give the voters such power, the Constitution would have to be changed in accordance with Article 89 of the Constitution, which says that "any such change must first be approved by the National Assembly and the Senate." So that too is a non-starter in a Parliament united in opposition to Le Pen's agenda.

That, in any case, is the theory. In practice, Le Pen could try to emulate President Charles de Gaulle, whose 1962 electoral reform was backed by a majority of voters and became law. De Gaulle "did not get the required parliamentary approval for it. He went straight to the French people. It was a revision of the Constitution but he did not use the revision procedure because he knew the two chambers [of Parliament] would be against it."

The French legal community agrees that De Gaulle's action was unconstitutional, but Marine Le Pen could attempt something similar. If that happens, years of legal wrangling will follow.

France's choices aren't good not only because of the shortcomings of the two remaining candidates. Making matters worse is the poor shape of the French economy and national security concerns—both of which require radical changes that the French political system is ill-suited to actualize. No matter who wins in May, expect *malaise* to continue.

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