

FRANCE: Why turnout matters

- Support for President Emmanuel Macron ahead of next April's presidential election has remained relatively stable in recent weeks, with polls suggesting a strong first-round lead and a comfortable runoff victory for the president.
- A key factor to watch is whether any of Macron's challengers can meaningfully tap the existing reservoir of demobilized voters.
- Turnout will also play a key role in a likely second round between Macron and a right-wing candidate, as the president's electoral fortunes will hinge on his ability to mobilize enough left-wing voters in his favor.

State of the race

With less than six months to go to the April presidential election, Emmanuel Macron leads all opinion polls and is currently the frontrunner to win the contest. Macron is polling at around 24%, followed by far-right Eric Zemmour and Marine Le Pen, who are tied at around 16%. None of the key contenders in the primary of The Republicans (LR) taking place on 4 December is polling above 13%, with polls consistently showing Xavier Bertrand as the most competitive center-right candidate. The left's situation is even direr, with far-left Jean-Luc Melenchon polling at around 9%, followed by green candidate Yannick Jadot at around 7% and Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo at around 4%.

Except for Zemmour's rise, poll trends have remained remarkably stable over the last few weeks. The left's chances continue to be handicapped by structural and tactical problems. Public opinion data suggests the country has ideologically shifted to the right in recent years, making it difficult for left-wing candidates to make their voices heard. Former minister and Socialist Party (PS) politician Arnaud Montebourg's recent proposal to freeze bank transfers to countries that do not accept migrant repatriations backfired spectacularly, illustrating how difficult it is for progressive candidates to show toughness on migration issues. For the left to have a chance to make the second round, their candidates would probably have to agree on a unified bid, which remains unlikely given the candidates' personal and policy differences.

On the right, Zemmour has still not formally declared his candidacy, with rumors suggesting he might announce his bid in December to overshadow the election of LR's candidate. Assuming that he can obtain the necessary 500 signatures to run in the election (which have to be filed at least ten weeks before the first round), the key question is whether the formalization of his candidacy will allow him to get a boost in the polls, given his momentum seems to have stagnated in the last days.

Get out the first-round vote

A key factor to watch in the coming weeks is whether any of the candidates vying to get in the second round against Macron can mobilize those who are saying they will not participate in the election. A recent Ipsos poll showed that 59% of voters were certain to go to the ballot box in April, eight percentage points less than a poll conducted five months before the 2017 presidential election. Given that participation tends to be lower among young and lower-income individuals, candidates such as Melenchon are explicitly targeting these voters with social policy proposals. However, the strong focus of the campaign on security and migration issues crowds out the space for the discussion of economic topics, complicating Melenchon's strategy.

It is also unclear whether any of the candidates on the right will be able to mobilize hardcore non-voters. Some have compared the rise of Zemmour to the ascent of Donald Trump because of his ability to attract individuals who normally do not participate in elections. While polls suggest that this is the case (to a certain extent), his ability to draw demobilized voters is at this stage not significantly stronger than that of Macron (see below).

Support from 2017 non-voters/blank

	Emmanuel Macron	Eric Zemmour	Marine Le Pen	Xavier Bertrand
Did not vote/Voted blank	20%	22%	14%	7%

Source: ELABE - 11 November

Another factor to watch is whether any of the main candidates end up withdrawing from the race. Prominent far-right politician Marion Marechal suggested last week that, while Zemmour or Marine Le Pen should both run, they should withdraw right before the first round if the other is ahead. However, such an outcome looks unlikely at this point. Zemmour seems to be planning to stay in politics for the long haul, which entails differentiating himself as much as possible from Le Pen to take over the radical right space after next year's election. Overall, the probability of withdrawals of relevant candidates and subsequent endorsements seems low, but they would shake up the first-round race were they to materialize.

Hard choices

All recent opinion polls show that Macron would defeat any of the other candidates in the second round. As previously [explained](#), the more radical the rival, the easier the incumbent president would have it to win the runoff. In any case, given he would likely face a right-wing candidate, his main challenge would be to mobilize left-wing voters who are not Macron supporters but do not want to see a right-wing politician in the Elysee Palace. A study by Fondapol recently suggested that around 40% of Jean-Luc Melenchon voters would stay home in a second round between Macron and Le Pen. Thus, the challenge for Macron is to convince enough voters on the left of the spectrum that there is a real risk that a radical candidate might be elected President of the Republic.

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