

A Guide to French Elections

France went to the election on April 23 to pick their new president. After a wave of populist upsurge in BREXIT referendum and US presidential elections, experts around the world are keenly watching the events that unfold in this election and its consequences.

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Why is the French government called as The Fifth republic?

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- The Fifth Republic is the period of the fifth and current republican constitution of France, which was introduced on October 5, 1958.

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- The Fifth Republic emerged from the ashes of the French Fourth Republic, replacing a weak and factional parliamentary government with a stronger, more centralized democracy.

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- **The impetus behind the creation of the Fifth Republic was the Algerian Crisis.**

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- Although France had since parted with many of its colonies, such as many of those in West Africa and Southeast Asia, it still retained Algeria, which had a large French population. Algeria eventually became independent on July 5, 1962.

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- The former general **Charles de Gaulle** used the crisis as an opportunity to create a new French government with the stronger office of President.

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- French Presidents were given a very long term and currently still have more internal power than most of their European counterparts.

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- On September 28, 1958, a referendum took place and 79.2% of those who voted supported the new constitution.

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- Under this government, **the president has substantial power**, holds a term of 5 years (it was originally 7) and, following a change to the constitution in 1962, is directly elected by the French people.

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- This system of government differs dramatically from previous republics, which relied on parliamentary rule.

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- In the Fifth Republic, **the head-of-state appoints a prime minister to lead the Parliament** (which is comprised of a Senate and a National Assembly), controls the armed forces and France's nuclear arsenal, can dissolve Parliament, and can hold referendums on laws or constitutional changes.

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- One restriction to the president's powers is the possibility of "cohabitation," when the president is from a different political party than the majority of politicians in the parliament.

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- In these cases, the president must choose a prime minister who will be accepted by the parliament, and the two share powers of governing more equitably.

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How the French Election system is different?

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The French election system under the Fifth Republic is quite different from many other countries as it encompasses two voting rounds. Here's how it works:

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- The election takes place every five years.

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- Potential candidates must secure 500 signatures from elected officials, such as mayors and members of parliament, to secure a spot on the ballot.

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- The **election is then split up into two rounds.**

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- In the first round, people can vote for any of the candidates that have gathered the 500 signatures. The number of candidates since 1965 has fluctuated between 6 and 12.

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- **If no candidate receives an absolute majority of votes during the first round, the two candidates who received the most votes go on to the second round of the election.**

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- No candidate in French history has ever secured a majority after just one round of voting.
- **French people can then vote for either one of these two candidates.** The candidate with the most votes is then confirmed as the new President of the Republic.

The National Assembly Elections:

The two rounds of voting for the National Assembly will be on June 11 and June 18, just over a month after the Presidential election ends.

- For the National Assembly elections France is split in to 577 constituencies, each who elect one depute (the equivalent of an MP).
- To win in the first round a candidate must gain more than 50 % of votes and have a number of votes equal to at least one quarter of all registered voters in the electorate.
- If no candidate meets both those requirements in the first round, all candidates who got above 12.5 % of the vote go in to the second round. If fewer than two candidates reach the 12.5 % mark then whoever were the top two candidates go in to a runoff.
- Whichever candidate has more votes in the second round wins, regardless of whether they reach 50 % mark.

President vs National Assembly

- In France the President is the one who picks the Prime Minister and also **has the power to dissolve** the National Assembly and call fresh elections.
- However the National Assembly has a lot of power, including the capacity to remove a Prime Minister and ministers.

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- So to govern effectively, the President needs the majority of the National Assembly support and whoever their choice for Prime Minister is.

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- If the National Assembly is hostile to the President, **the President can be reduced to a largely ceremonial role, unable to legislate or govern.**

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- In almost all elections the winner of the Presidency belongs to the same party who also gains the most seats in the National Assembly. However this it could become more complex.

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Why French election has become so important?

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- The election has been marked by anger over **sluggish economic growth, high unemployment, political scandals, and the EU's perceived incompetence.**

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- It has also been marked by **fears of terrorism.** Indeed, repeated terrorist attacks have forced France to live in a continuous state of emergency since November 2015.

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- The result has been a significant decline in support for the two traditional ruling parties: Republicans and Socialists.

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- For the first time since the founding of the Fifth Republic in 1958, odds are that the candidates of these two parties will not make it past the first round of the presidential election.

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- Another surprise has been the recent surge in support for the far left candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon to a virtual tie for third place in the first round.

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- Another victim of France's current economic and political climate is the EU.

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- The French increasingly feel it has failed to deal with Europe's many challenges ranging from sluggish economic growth to the migrant crisis.

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- The percentage of French citizens with a favorable view of the EU dropped from 69% in 2004 to only 38% in mid-2016. This suggests the **EU may actually be less popular in France** than in Britain

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- Much of Europe like is divided between multilateral institutions on the **one hand, nationalism and protectionism on the other hand**. The French election will be seen by the world as a referendum on these two visions.

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- Le Pen has promised to eliminate the euro and bring back the franc. Such a move would fracture the Eurozone at its Franco-German heart, dealing the common currency a wound it might not survive.

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- The Institute Montaigne has said that a French euro withdrawal would result in a 9% long-term drop in French GDP (at best), a 20% drop in the exchange rate of the new franc, and **the potential for 500,000 French jobs to be lost** in the longer-term.

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- Marine Le Pen not only wants France out of the Eurozone; she wants France out of the European Union itself.

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- To proponents, EU represents free trade, open societies, and pan-European solidarity. To its detractors it is a stealth empire wherein unelected officials hold undue sway over the EU's constituent nations. It is no exaggeration to say the EU's future hangs in the balance of the French vote.

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- Germany's September 24 election looks set to be a contest between two pro-Europe, anti-populist candidates: the incumbent Angela Merkel and the SPD's Martin Schultz.

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- A Le Pen victory in France is unlikely to push Germans to the political right in any significant number, but it would leave Berlin in relative isolation as the sole champion of a Eurozone and EU in total disarray.

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- A Macron victory, meanwhile, would likely be taken by markets and political observers alike as a dramatic show of support for the Franco-German alliance that acts as the EU's key axis of support.

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