An atypical 'honeymoon' election? Contextual and strategic opportunities in the 2017 French legislative elections

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Abstract

This paper places the 2017 French legislative elections in the broader context of confirmatory legislative elections in France. It argues that Emmanuel Macron's victory, whilst rooted in the specific political opportunity structure of the 2017 elections, is also a by-product of the broader institutional logic of 'honeymoon' legislative races. We look first at key aspects relating to the confirmatory status of post-presidential elections in France, and ask to what extent the 2017 elections fit this model. We then examine how *La République en Marche!* (LREM) was able to adapt to the political opportunity structures of this election, particularly the 'goodness-of-fit' of their strategic location as regards previous party attachments and civil society profiles. The paper concludes that, whilst disrupting the traditional bipolar format of French politics, Macron's undeniable success in 2017 was primarily the tactical maximisation of a propitious institutional and political competitive landscape amidst voter apathy and party fragmentation, and not a popular surge of support for a political saviour.

Keywords

France – 2017 legislative elections – *La République en Marche* – Emmanuel Macron

Introduction

How presidential and legislative elections interact in presidential and semi-presidential systems has been the focus of significant research (Shugart and Carey 1992; Shugart, 1995; Golder, 2006; Hicken and Stoll, 2013). Since the 2000 constitutional revision to limit the Presidential term to five years, and the subsequent statutory change to place the legislative elections after the Presidential race (Jérôme et al, 2003), the status of legislative elections as 'honeymoon' or confirmatory elections, designed to secure a working Parliamentary majority for the presidential incumbent, has been consolidated, producing bipolar outcomes and party system simplification. The mid-term legislative elections responsible for cohabitation last pertained in 1997, prior to the election of a UMP majority in the 2002 race. Since the early 2000s, legislative elections have been formulated primarily as a third and fourth round of the presidential elections (Dupoirier and Sauger, 2010).

If Emmanuel Macron's victory in the presidential election overturned the ever-more dominant bipolar logic of the Fifth Republic's institutional framework, the subsequent legislative elections on 11 and 18 June seemingly underlined a more normal determinism from presidential victor to legislative majority. Yet, there are sufficient elements of discontinuity with the broader trends in recent French electoral history to suggest that, whilst the president could always rely upon a legislative majority of sorts, the extent of the seat majority in the National Assembly was delivered by something more than a simple confirmatory vote. This paper argues that Macron's victory is rooted in the specific political opportunity structure which framed the 2017 elections, as well as being a by-product of the broader institutional logic of the *quinquennat*, and entirely in line with the post-presidential 'honeymoon' legislative races since 2002. In the light of the unpopularity of the Socialist incumbents, LR's presidential campaign disaster, and the continued inability of the radical wings of French politics to capitalise upon popular discontent, LREM's landslide victory in the legislative elections looks therefore as much the tactical maximisation of a propitious institutional and political competitive landscape which failed to proffer a consistent opposition to the presidential party, as simply the product of an institutional machine, and even less of a popular surge of support for a political saviour.

In trying to unpick the bases of the LREM victory, then, this article begins by presenting the context of the 2017 legislative elections, and asks whether the latter provided specific opportunities for Macron's centrist bid. The emphasis in on a number of key dimensions relating to the 'confirmatory' status of post-presidential legislative races, which traditionally account for the electoral success of the presidential party and the making of disproportional legislative majorities. We then turn to the analysis of LREM candidate performances in the first and second rounds of the legislatives. We consider various sets of competitive opportunities across *circonscriptions* and the 'goodness-of-fit' of LREM candidates' strategic location as regards previous party affiliation and the distribution of civil society candidates with no previous political experience or attachment. Using open-source data on candidate profiles, the second section looks at patterns in the political offer, and how LREM candidates differed from those of traditional parties. It then focuses specifically on the LREM vote, to understand if any trace of the old Left / Right logic still had an impact on this party's performance. In particular, it looks at the structure of party competition across the *circonscriptions*, and how incumbency and political experience weighed upon candidates' performance relative to Macron's own scores by *circonscription* in the presidential race.

The presidential context to the 2017 legislative election

In 2017, disruption to the increasingly bipolar format of the French party system (Grunberg and Haegel, 2007; Evans and Ivaldi, 2013) through the centrist presidential candidacy of Emmanuel Macron, and subsequently through his party, *La République en Marche!* (LREM), and its contestation together with its *Mouvement Démocrate* (Modem) alliance partner of 537 *circonscriptions*, potentially presented a new logic for political competition. Macron's party, set up only one year before the election from a combination of former Left and Right politicians, as well as a section of previously unaffiliated civil society candidates, challenged both Left incumbents and Right opposition, disrupting the traditional bipolar dynamics of party competition in the French Republic. In June 2017, only 14 *circonscriptions* held what could be termed Left/Right run-offs in the second round *ballottage* – compared with 391 in 2012. LREM was able to play a politically chameleon role in competition with the other parties. In many seats, it replaced the traditional Left as the Right competitor, but equally challenged many Socialist candidates having beaten *Les Républicains* (LR) into third place. Similarly, it was able to see off *Front national* (FN) competition as a centrist / moderate candidate against the radical right party. In the end, LREM achieved a majority comfortably, garnering with their Modem partners almost 50 per cent of the vote and 350 seats in the National Assembly.

Macron's legislative victory was a multi-stage process exploiting the political opportunity structure of the 2017 elections. Political distrust and a profound aspiration by voters for a renewal of French politics, stronger than ever after Hollande's widely perceived disastrous presidency, were conducive to the success of political alternatives both within and outside mainstream politics. Ironically, the first stage of Macron's victory was in the presidential primaries held by the major parties ahead of the 2017 elections, through the unexpected outcomes they delivered. Both the Socialist and Republican nomination races were won by more ideologically extreme candidates i.e. Benoît Hamon and François Fillon, which increased mainstream policy polarization while simultaneously providing further legitimacy to proximal radical alternatives embodied by *La France Insoumise* (LFI) and the FN. Remarkably, in both the PS and LR, the primary resulted in the potentially most competitive candidates against Macron, namely Manuel Valls and Alain Juppé, being simply wiped out of the presidential race, leaving wide open the centre political ground available to Macron's centrist bid.

The second stage occurred in the first round of the presidential where party fragmentation and the rise of the two radical alternatives reduced support for traditional parties of the mainstream, which in the case of LR candidate François Fillon dropped further after major allegations of financial impropriety in what would become the 'Penelopegate' scandal. In the first round, Macron's presidential vote share picked up a large proportion of 47 per cent of Hollande supporters from 2012, compared with only 15 percent for Hamon's leftist platform which had taken the PS closer to Mélenchon's LFI.[1] Even among PS sympathisers, Macron won 42 per cent to Hamon's 27 per cent. In the second round, Macron won almost the entirety of the Socialist sympathiser vote (94 per cent)

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[1] http://www.ipsos.fr/sites/default/files/doc_associe/ipsos-sopra-steria_sociologie-des-electorats_23-avril-2017-21h.pdf .

but only 7 in 10 of the LR sympathiser votes.[2] Meanwhile, Macron had sealed a tactical alliance with François Bayrou's Modem just before the first round, which gave him a critical 5 per cent bonus in polls, allowing him to secure an even firmer monopoly over centrist politics and to create political momentum at a time where support for both the PS and LR was dropping. Finally, the atypical presidential runoff against a weak competitive Marine Le Pen with little credibility and presidential stature offered a seemingly large victory to Macron, providing him with an easy narrative of national unity and, more strategically, allowing him to consolidate *En marche!*'s attempt to by-pass traditional left-right identities in the subsequent legislatives.

Entering the legislative campaign with his renamed *La République en Marche!* (LREM), Macron moved onto the final, and most difficult, stage of the process of disrupting the bipolar polity, moving from a highly personalised national competitive area to confront the complexity and diversity of France's local politics. The main challenge to LREM was evidently its infancy as a political party, as well as the far from landslide victory of Emmanuel Macron in the presidential race.

Media characterisations of Macron's sweeping victory had certainly exaggerated its extent. Macron's success was not based upon a popular wave of support for his party. In the first round of the presidential election, less than 5 percentage points separated the first four candidates. The race was also marked by high abstention only exceeded significantly by 2002 in the first round, and lower than even that election in the second round, with less than 75 per cent of the electorate casting a vote compared with about 80 per cent in 2002. Unlike 2002, Macron's margin of victory over an essentially unelectable Marine Le Pen was very large (66.1 per cent), but not Chirac's *raz-marée* – and due to low turnout, still accounted for less than half the electorate (43.6 per cent of registered voters). With fewer than one-in-five registered voters supporting Macron in the first round, the degree to which a one-year old organisation would be able to return a legislative majority on the back of this victory was unclear.

The political opportunity structure of the 2017 legislative election

Specific opportunities and incentives

Coming immediately after an atypical presidential election, the 2017 legislative race provided specific opportunities for Macron's alternative to the major established parties. As the French media underlined repeatedly during the presidential campaign, in the likely event that Emmanuel Macron was elected as president, his efficacy as the leader of a self-styled 'revolutionary project' would depend upon his party's ability to obtain an absolute majority, or, prior to opinion polls indicating the possibility of such an outcome, how he would form a government and a majority from members of the old political guard, notably *Les Républicains* (LR). Macron's appointment of Edouard Philippe as Prime Minister, as well as Bruno Le Maire and Gérald Darmanin to the Ministries of the Economy and Budget, all three from LR, gave a clear indication of the new president's direction in government formation and electoral strategy. Given his employment reform, market-oriented economic policy, centre-right *Juppéistes* offered the closest ideological partners and, as well as destabilising LR itself,

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[2]

http://www.ipsos.fr/sites/default/files/doc_associe/ipsos_sopra_steria_sociologie_des_electorats_7_mai_20h15_0.pdf .

securing a degree of support on the Right was much more a priority. The efficacy of this tactic was apparent in shifts in polling scores with, for instance, an almost doubling of the number of first-round presidential voters for François Fillon declaring they would vote for LREM, subsequent to the announcement of the Philippe government.[3]

In government nominations, there were certain exceptions – most notably, two former Socialists in *Ministères régaliens*, Gérard Collomb appointed to the Interior Ministry and Jean-Yves Le Drian, former Defence Minister moved to the Quai d'Orsay. However, these were notably to areas which, in the former case, had featured more as broad programmatic areas rather than specific proposals, as was the case with the economy, or fell firmly within the Presidential domain. Latecomers who tried to affiliate themselves with LREM, most notably former Prime Minister Manuel Valls, were formally disowned, although in some cases tacitly acknowledged, as with other 'compatible' politicians such as LR's Franck Riester, UDI centrists such as Yves Jégo, and Socialists like Jean-Marie Le Guen and Stéphane Le Foll, through the party not fielding an opponent in their *circonscriptions*. Whilst their support would not necessarily be required in forming a majority, this strategy avoided wasting resources on local battles with strong *notables* which LREM, even with a presidential boost, would be unlikely to win. Macron's apparent leniency against those candidates contrasted sharply with the far more aggressive campaign in Paris, attesting to the strategic importance of the capital city for LREM's political consolidation in the future. Reflecting its gentrification, Paris had provided very large support for Macron's presidential bid in 2017, giving him 34.8 percent and 89.7 percent of the vote in the first and second round, respectively. Apparently receptive LR candidates such as Nathalie Kosciusko-Morizet, who had even been suggested as a possible Prime Minister, found themselves in competition with LREM candidates – only former Minister of Employment Myriam El-Khomri in the 18th *circonscription* and the incumbent Socialist, George Pau-Langevin, in the 15th *circonscription* were not challenged by Macron's party. Of the 18 *circonscriptions*, split broadly East-West in 2012 to the Socialists and UMP, respectively, LREM secured 13 of the 16 it contested, losing the conservative bourgeois 4th and 15th – which had backed François Fillon in the LR primaries – to LR, and the 17th *circonscription*, a radical left stronghold, to LFI.

To the right of LR, a previously triumphant FN had also seen its fortunes decline markedly after the presidential election. Having led in voting intention polls for much of the early campaign, Marine Le Pen's second place in the first round, and mediocre second-round score after a parlous debate with Macron, resulted in demobilisation of FN support. Divisions within the party over its position on the Euro – a hobby-horse of FN Vice-President, Florian Phillipot – and its increased emphasis on economic protectionist tools more reminiscent of a party of the left, weakened its capacity to mobilise in the legislative race. On the radical left, a similar demobilisation after the presidential campaign was apparent. Jean-Luc Mélenchon had seen a surge in polling support in the final days of the campaign, bringing him into apparent contention for the *ballottage*. His eventual fourth place behind a François Fillon candidacy represented a greater disappointment. Whilst in certain key seats LFI was able to mobilise support – for example, the 4th *circonscription* of the Bouches-du-Rhône where Mélenchon stood, as well as former Communist strongholds in Val-de-Marne and Essonne – broader mobilisation outside these pockets of support proved impossible.

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[3] http://harris-interactive.fr/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2017/05/Rapport-Harris-Indeed-Intentions-vote-elections-legislatives-LCP.pdf

The peculiarity of 2017 (I): low turnout, high fragmentation

The 2017 election was primarily characterized by record low turnout and high party fragmentation. Whilst the foregone conclusion undoubtedly demobilised many potential supporters of the new president, it equally saw many of those critical of Macron's programme stay home. Abstention rose to 51.3 per cent in the first round and peaked at 57.3 per cent one week later. For the first time in the history of first-order elections in the Fifth Republic, more of the electorate abstained than voted. Exceptionally low turnout was mixed with increased party fragmentation: the first round featured a total of 7882 candidates, giving an average of 13.7 candidates across the 577 *circonscriptions*. With a total of 6.8 effective parties (Laakso and Taagepera, 1979), the 2017 legislatives were substantially more fragmented than the previous races of 2007 and 2012 (with 4.3 and 5.3 parties, respectively), resembling the more competitive legislative elections of 1993 (7.2) and 1997 (6.7) in that respect.

One inevitable corollary of this was the simplification of competition at the second round. The cocktail of low turnout and high fragmentation produced a de facto inflation of the 12.5 per cent of registered voters threshold for second round participation, favouring the larger parties, most evidently LREM, and also resulting in a sharp decrease in the number of three-way runoffs, with only a single occurrence in 2017 compared with 35 in 2012.[4] Located at the centre of the political spectrum, two-way runoffs would provide more propitious competitive opportunities for LREM candidates cross-cutting the traditional left-right divide, and attracting moderate voters from either camp.

The peculiarity of 2017 (II): the decline in support for traditional alternatives

The most marked break with the political past was in how LREM became the principal pole of competition, with the PS and LR forced to adapt to its ostensibly hegemonic status in the system. Both parties, in presenting their legislative campaign programmes, moved towards the LREM position. The PS abandoned Hamon's universal income policy, and instead adopted the expansion of unemployment benefit, as well as appropriating many elements of the president's programme on education, international trade agreements and the environment. LR moved away from Fillon's proposed rise in VAT and CSA contributions, as well as endorsing a more moderate line on immigration policy and social policies.

This was very much in keeping with the public profile of the parties themselves. The PS did little to dissimulate its appearance of a political animal in its death throes. Benoît Hamon announced almost immediately after his first-round defeat that he would be setting up a new political movement in the summer. Similarly, Anne Hidalgo, Martine Aubry and Christiane Taubira, Mayors of Paris and Lille, and former *Garde des Sceaux*, announced a new movement, *Dès Demain*, to oppose Macron's centrist programme. Even the First Secretary of the party, Jean-Christophe Cambadélis, announced well before the second round of the presidential election that *'[l]e parti d'Epinay est mort et bien*

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[4] The only *triangulaire* took place in the 1st *circonscription* in Aube, with the FN candidate, Bruno Subtil, receiving 24.9% of the vote on a turnout of 51.8%, thus clearing the bar by a mere 64 votes.

mort.' Whilst evidently avoiding declaring the party *in toto* to be defunct, this death-notice could do little other than demobilise already demoralised PS activists.

Despite claims of seeking an absolute majority in the legislative elections, major LR leaders such as Juppé, Sarkozy and Fillon were almost totally absent from the campaign. Whilst presenting some semblance of a united front to voters, the Right was in fact deeply divided underneath. The appointment of François Baroin to lead the party in the elections was portrayed as a positive compromise from a united party, but in reality the divisions between moderate centrists such as Alain Juppé, Christian Estrosi and Natalie Kosciusko-Morizet, who wished to work constructively with Macron's government, and conservative traditionalists such as Bruno Retailleau and Brice Hortefeux, who wanted to oppose the social liberal programme along the lines Fillon had taken in the presidential campaign, were clearly discernible.

Whilst the performance of all major parties fell short of expectations, the outcomes of the 2017 elections saw in particular a marked decline in support for the two main party alternatives, the PS and the LR-UDI coalition, showing a heavy 'negative' presidential coat-tail effect in both cases. Together with their traditional EELV and PRG allies, socialist candidates received 14.8% of the first round vote, compared with 39.9% five years earlier. Most strikingly, the legislative election confirmed the political marginalization of a wretched Green party which clearly paid a heavy electoral price for its internal division and erratic strategies throughout Hollande's presidency. In 2017, EELV ran candidates across 459 *circonscriptions*, winning less than 5% nationwide, and no deputies (the only ecology deputy ran under the *Majorité présidentielle* label in the 2nd *circonscription* of Le Doubs). In the case of the PS, their expected vote share had been so parlous that their eventual first-round share (7.4%) was, relatively speaking, positive. Nonetheless, there were a number of high profile losses, including first secretary Jean-Christophe Cambadélis in the 16th *circonscription* in Paris, Patrick Mennucci in the 4th *circonscription* of Marseilles, and Benoît Hamon in the 11th of Yvelines. A more coherent Right, with the electoral coalition of LR and the UDI, and greater cooperation with the *divers droite* candidates, ensured relatively greater success for this bloc at 18.8% of the first-round vote, yet contrasting with 27.1% in 2012 when the UMP had returned to the opposition, and well below the 39.5% secured by the party immediately after Sarkozy's election in 2007.

Did 2017 fit the general model of a 'confirmatory' election?

In many respects, the 2017 legislative race followed the general model of 'honeymoon' confirmatory election (Shugart, 2017), however, showing the distinctive features of post-presidential legislatives since 2002.

Vote utile *and premium for the presidential party*

Inevitably, the principal reason for the aforementioned poor performance of the PS and LR was the success of LREM. The first-round performance of LREM clearly demonstrated that the institutional confirmatory effects had indeed played to the party's benefit, typically corroborating the *vote utile* and electoral premium to the presidential party in 'honeymoon' elections. In the first round, LREM and Modem candidates totalled 32.3% of the vote, winning on average almost 9 percentage points on Macron's performance in the first round of the presidential election. The spill-over was similar

compared with previous coat-tail effects - for Hollande in 2012, the PS only enjoyed a one-point premium, but 8 points if PRG and EELV are included; similarly, the UMP had around an 8-point increase on Sarkozy's first-round score in 2007.

As the presidential party which would allow Macron the best chance of implementing his suite of reforms, the confirmatory nature of the legislatives gifted him a large working majority, despite relative ambivalence both in his personal polling scores (57 per cent approval[5]) and even in the desire of the electorate to give him the majority he hoped for (52 per cent[6]). Whilst not giving their wholehearted support to Macron, tactical voters were nevertheless keen to avoid another period of divided executive which potentially would plunge the country into crisis. As has been noted elsewhere (Elgie, 2017) cohabitation per se was not a possible outcome of the legislative elections. Where cohabitation had occurred previously was in mid-term elections (1986, 1993 and 1997) where Presidents were obliged to nominate Prime Ministers from an opposing party legitimised by their legislative majority. Instead, Macron might have faced a situation akin to François Mitterrand in 1988, when the confirmatory legislative elections only provided a minority Socialist group requiring coalition with centre-right parties to secure any majority. But even this looked unlikely.

Decline in the radical vote

Also consistent with the model of 'confirmatory' elections, where support for the more peripheral parties is typically lower, both LFI and the FN suffered substantial losses relative to their presidential candidates, chiefly as a result of lower turnout among their disgruntled voters.[7] Compared to presidential performance, the biggest loser was the FN, slipping some 8 per cent in terms of national vote share, by far the largest depression in FN post-presidential performances since 1988. At the end of an electoral cycle where the FN has outperformed itself in second-order elections where it has historically done poorly – for example, its huge increase in councillors and mayors in the 2014 municipal elections, and 27.7 per cent in the 2015 regional elections – the legislative race fell back into the traditional line. At no point was a stronger performance from the party than its presidential candidate to be expected, but Le Pen's stagnation in the polls prior to the first round, dire second-round debate, a lack of clarity on its policy messages, particularly on Europe, and the likely success of a brand-new party diametrically opposed to the FN sociologically and ideologically, resulted in a very high level of abstention among Le Pen's voters from the first round of the presidentials – some 57 percent of Le Pen voters did not turn out in the first round of the legislatives.[8]

In LFI, the performance at 11.0% of the legislative vote was disappointing relative to Mélenchon's vote intention share in final polls before the first round of the presidentials. Having hovered around the 15% mark since March, a sharp increase in popularity towards the back end of the campaign,

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[5] TNS-Sofres presidential popularity score, June 2017 (http://www.tns-sofres.com/dataviz?type=1&code_nom=macron)
[6] http://www.bfmtv.com/politique/legislatives-la-moitie-des-francais-souhaite-que-macron-ait-une-majorite-1161161.html
[7] High abstention was, of course, not the preserve of radical voters. Even 4 in 10 Macron voters stayed at home on 11 June.
[8] Estimate from Ipsos exit poll - http://www.ipsos.fr/decrypter-societe/2017-06-11-1er-tour-legislatives-2017-sociologie-electorats-et-profil-abstentionnistes

largely at the expense of Hamon, had raised hopes of a presidential second-round position. In the end, his final score of 19.6 per cent was well short of that needed for the *ballottage*, back in fourth place. In the legislative campaign, Mélenchon's parachuting into the Mennucci's Marseille *circonscription* ensured strong media coverage, but elsewhere FI candidates found it difficult to gain traction in light of the disappointing presidential result and a broad demobilisation of their activist base. More broadly, the fragmentation of the Left, across FI, PCF, other radical left candidates, PS/PRG and ecology parties, with only a few cooperative agreements among the last two, reduced the viability of many candidates of the Left to progress to the second round.

Resilience of local notables and other local factors

Finally, while conducive to large presidential majorities, the size of national presidential coat-tail effects is typically mediated by local factors, most particularly the local presence of well-established *notables*. Candidate traits and previous political career are important factors of electoral outcomes in legislative races (Brouard and Kerrouche 2013). However, the literature finds mixed results as regards incumbency effects in French legislative elections. Scholars such as Lemennicier and Katir-Lescieux (2010) and Loonis (2006) report that incumbency has a significant and positive effect on legislative electoral outcomes, whilst others such as Murray (2008) find only scant evidence of incumbents performing better. When it is found, the electoral advantage related to incumbency is strengthened by the prevalence of *cumul des mandats* i.e. politicians holding multiple local offices simultaneously. Foucault (2006) suggests for instance that incumbents with long political experience increase their vote share, as do MP-Mayors (*députés maires*).

The complex interplay between national and local factors was well in evidence across a number of *circonscriptions* in the 2017 elections. The 2014 legislation on the *cumul des mandats* certainly placed more stringent constraints on MPs accumulating positions. Combined with life-cycle attrition and a number of young MPs disillusioned with politics, the new *cumul* law led to the retirement of over 200 incumbents (that is, about 40 per cent of all MPs), profoundly reshaping the supply of candidates locally, while simultaneously widening the breadth of opportunities for new party alternatives such as LREM. Moreover, substantial *dégagisme* resulted in no less than 124 outgoing MPs being eliminated in the first round, the vast majority of whom were socialists. Elsewhere, however, more electorally resilient candidates on both left and right, such as Manuel Valls in Evry, Nicolas Dupont-Aignan in Essonne and Eric Ciotti in Nice, attested to the strength of incumbency and a local political career. Did, then, the presence of incumbents from traditional parties have a significant impact on LREM performances in those *circonscriptions*, decreasing support for the presidential party? By extention, did LREM candidates with an incumbency profile performed better than their more inexperienced counterparts?

Parsing LREM's legislative success

Local specificity to party competition requires French parties to tailor their offer by *circonscription*. Unlike the candidates from traditional parties, who stood largely as a homogeneous group, LREM's leadership had underlined the diversity of their candidates. LREM's recruitment process in the lead-up to the legislatives was a major operation, receiving some 19,000 applications to stand for the new party. First, around half of the candidacies were reserved for members of *la société civile* (although in a number of cases possessing previous political affiliation), to demonstrate renewal of the political class under Macron's movement. In practice, many of these candidates had some previous form of political allegiance, but had not held office at the national level.

Second, strict gender parity, following the law of 2000, was imposed. Given the choice of candidates by LREM's panel behind closed doors, little is known of how candidates were selected and how they were placed by *circonscription*. No stated distribution of previous political affiliation was enforced, nor were indications of tactical placement of candidates by political predisposition given. As we have highlighted above, however, Macron had a clear strategy in trying to destabilise the Right, particularly LR, having 'conquered' the Left electorate in the presidential race.

Looking at the scatterplot of Macron's first round vote and LREM candidates' equivalent vote by *circonscription* (Figure 1), there is a clear association between the two votes, but equally there is still significant variation around the mean, suggesting it is worth considering the extent to which candidate profile determined eventual performance, and whether this differed across the two rounds of the election.

Figure 1 Scatterplot of Emmanuel Macron, first round scores in presidential election, and LREM-Modem, first round scores in legislative election, by *circonscription*, 2017
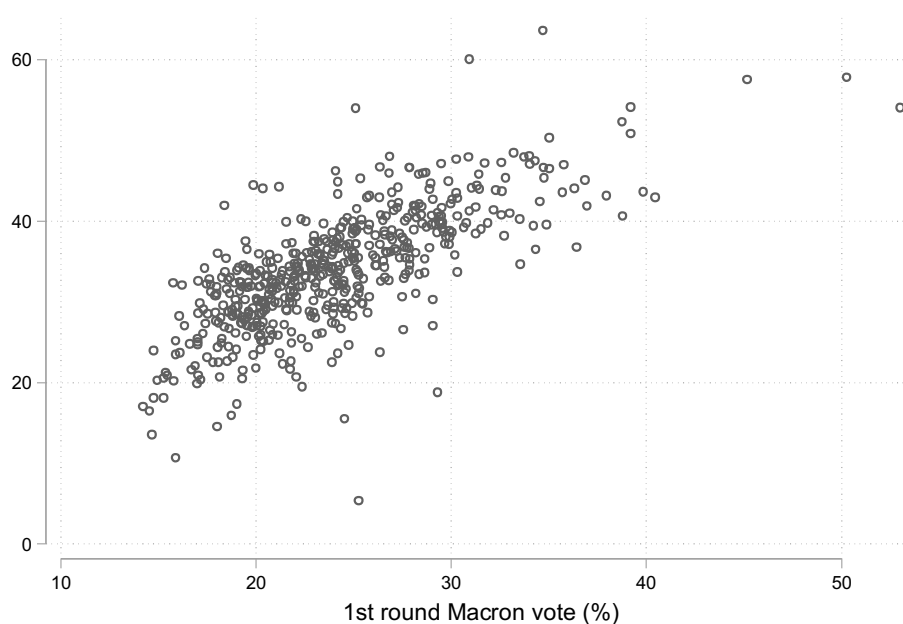
To this end, we build a multiple regression model of LREM candidate performance, using candidate traits as predictors. As an archetypal confirmatory election, we use LREM candidate performance in relation to their presidential candidate's performance in the *circonscription*. Macron's first round vote share in the *circonscription* provides a baseline vote which picks up variance in support for LREM's political programme by *circonscription*. A naive regression model indicates that the confirmatory effect gave on average around a 9 percent bonus to LREM candidates.[9]

We control for regional variations in support by including a set of 12 dummy regressors, using *les Français à l'étranger* as the reference. We use five predictors in the model, relating to LREM's selection criteria and tactical incentives. Candidate gender is coded 1 for male. Of the incumbent deputies who stood for re-election, female candidates fared much worse than men, with only one-fifth securing re-election.[10] We would therefore expect male candidates to perform better than female. Second, we control for incumbency, expecting that the 29 LREM candidates who were already deputies will enjoy a premium on their challenger counterparts. In similar fashion, we also include a dummy variable coded 1 for five of the six members of the Philippe government standing for election – Bruno Le Maire, Marielle de Sarnez, Richard Ferrand, Christophe Castaner, and Mounir Mahjoubi (all of whom secured election). For consistency, we exclude Annick Girardin who, whilst a minister of Philippe's government, was running under the colours of the PRG.

As noted above, incumbency works for parties other than LREM. To that end, we include a variable to tap the political bloc of each *circonscription*'s incumbent candidate, if present. We contrast Left and Right incumbents with a reference category comprising *circonscriptions* with no returning deputy or those where the returning candidate is LREM. We would expect LREM candidates facing an incumbent to fare less well than in a *circonscription* vacated by the 2012 winner. Finally, we include a variable that controls for the tactical alignment of the LREM candidate with their *circonscription*. Using civil society candidates with no identifiable political affiliation as the reference category, we break the remaining candidates down by their previous Left / Right affiliation, and that of the *circonscription* winner in 2012, producing a matrix of 'concordant' and 'discordant' candidacies. We expect that, on average, candidates standing in a concordant competitive situation – where Left-wing candidates contested previously Left *circonscriptions*, and vice versa – will perform better than those in a discordant context.

Our full dataset contains information on 527 candidates running under the LREM label,[11] as well as the Modem label in *circonscriptions* left unchallenged by LREM as part of the two parties' electoral agreement, but not those Modem candidates that were not recognised by the presidential party. For the sake of brevity, we will refer to the cases in the dataset as 'LREM'.

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[9] The equation is LREM vote T1 = 9.0 + 1.0*Macron vote T1 (R^2 = 0.54, n= 527).
[10] http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2017/06/20/age-sexe-parti-et-mandats-locaux-quel-a-ete-le-sort-des-deputes-sortants_5147716_4355770.html
[11] This paper uses an updated version of the list of 525 LREM candidates published by the newspaper *Le Monde* (http://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2017/06/06/qui-sont-les-candidats-de-la-republique-en-marche-l-enquete-du-monde_5139646_4355770.html).

LREM candidate performance at round 1

Table 1 Multiple regression models of Macron / LREM first-round vote differential and second-round vote-share

	First round (differential)[1]		Second round (vote share)[2]	
	B	s.e.	B	s.e.
Intercept	6.09***	.97	58.43***	1.99
[Regions – not shown]				
Male	.95*	.41	1.43†	.74
Deputy	4.31***	1.07	4.58*	1.82
Minister	.40	2.12	1.05	3.76
Incumbent				
None	-	-	-	-
Left	-2.63***	.50	-1.83*	.90
Right	.26	.54	-4.42***	.97
LREM match				
None	-	-	-	-
Left concordant	.07	.67	.73	1.20
Right concordant	1.55*	.67	.09	1.21
Left discordant	-.02	.81	-2.47†	1.46
Right discordant	-1.71**	.66	-.53	1.19
Adjusted R^2	.21		.13	
n	527		508	

Notes:

[1] Difference between LREM legislative candidate's vote share and Macron's first round vote share in the presidential (as % of valid vote)

[2] Vote share of LREM legislative candidate (as % of valid vote)

† $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

The first column of Table 1 presents the regression model for the first round. The dependent variable is the difference in support for the legislative candidate and Macron's vote share in the *circonscription*. For space, we do not report the regional effects.[12] However, as an example interpretation, the intercept indicates that, on average, a candidate with the reference category profile – one of the *Français de l'étranger* candidates, female, no political experience or previous affiliation, and standing in an 'open' *circonscription* – would win 6 percent more than Macron did in the same *circonscription*. We can regard this as the baseline performance of LREM candidates.

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[12] Compared with 'French abroad' and DOM-TOM regions, metropolitan regions all saw a significant rise on Macron's score: from a 'low' in Hauts-de-France of + 2.8 percent, to a high of + 5.7 percent in Pays de la Loire.

Male candidates did consistently perform better, relative to Macron, than female, but at only around 1 per cent. A much stronger differential can be seen for the incumbent deputies, with around 4.5 percent improvement, whatever their previous political affiliation. While the revolutionary aspects of the 2017 elections are apparent, candidates with local presence and support still performed better than their new counterparts. The ministerial effect, however, is less easily discerned. Unsurprisingly, with only five cases in this category, the effect does not reach significance, with larger variation around a small coefficient. The two political competition variables show much more consistency in their effects, though not necessarily in the expected direction. LREM candidates standing in *circonscriptions* with Left-wing incumbents found it more difficult to build upon their leader's vote, dropping behind 'open' *circonscription* and Right incumbent candidates by about 2.5 per cent. Similarly, the political match between candidates and *circonscription* mattered. While the newcomers did not suffer electorally from their non-alignment, Right-concordant candidates – previously affiliated with a party of the Right and standing in a Right *circonscription* from 2012 – gained an additional 1.5 per cent on average. Conversely, a formerly Right-affiliated candidate standing in a Left *circonscription* lost on average the same amount than a baseline candidate. In Right *circonscriptions*, however, the opposite political mismatch of LREM candidates had no effect.

We would explain this asymmetry in effect to Macron's success in the presidential election in depriving the PS in particular of its social liberal support, visible in the early weeks of the presidential campaign in Hamon's low support among this group, and Macron's over-representation. Even after François Bayrou's declaration of support for Macron, the LR right remained more impervious to Macron's appeal. LREM candidate from the Left thus had less scope for attracting broader pools of support, and even less so where a Left-wing incumbent, with strong local roots,[13] was standing. Conversely, a government led by a Republican, with politicians of the Right in key ministerial positions, together with an identifiably Right LREM candidate, provided a pull for former LR voters that Macron in the first round had still lacked.

Again, we cannot say with any certainty how conscious placement of candidates was in the way that the model formulates this. However, it seems very likely that candidates were deliberately placed in winnable *circonscriptions* where possible, and the evidence is that Macron's strategy to win over the Right, in anticipation of a possible (though, as it turned out, not actualised) need for LR support in the National Assembly, did reap some benefits. From our model, the most successful profile for an LREM candidate was a defecting male incumbent from the Right, with a 6 per cent increase on a baseline newcomer, and some 12 per cent above Macron's score. This was perfectly exemplified for instance by Bruno Le Maire's performance in Eure with 44.5 per cent of the first-round vote.

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[13] There is evidence that candidates elected for the first time in 2012 were particularly vulnerable (http://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2017/06/13/legislatives-82-nouveaux-deputes-de-2012-ont-ete-elimines-des-le-premier-tour_5143683_4355770.html) – again, more embedded *notables* were less impervious – if not invulnerable – to LREM's challenge.

Round 2: the making of an LREM majority

How well does the model explain LREM's second round performance? The second column of Table 1 gives the coefficients for the percentage vote share of LREM candidates in 508 run-offs in which they qualified and which were duels in all but one case. Again we see a gender effect, of around 1.4 percent differential for male over female candidates. Similarly, incumbent LREM candidates did better by around 4.5 percentage points, and again the ministerial coefficient is not significant due to small numbers. As we would expect, LREM candidates standing in *circonscriptions* which had an incumbent from traditional parties did less well, particularly against Right incumbents. Traditional party resilience was much less pronounced on the left, reflecting Emmanuel Macron's absorption of a large proportion of the Socialist electorate, a process which was prolonged throughout the legislative race: by 18 June, the PS would see its 280 seats in the National Assembly reduced to a mere 30.

The capacity for LREM to eat into Right support once LR candidates in particular had reached the second round was diminished. The Centre-Right proved somewhat less amenable to LREM's appeal, with LR and their UDI allies managing 130 deputies. Whilst LR could in no way reach the majority they had hoped for, losing over 80 seats in comparison with 2012, equally they could stem the tide which had seemed likely to inflict losses approaching those of the Socialists. This is reinforced by 'Left discordant' candidates, who are the ones to do less well in previously Right-wing *circonscriptions*. A basic set of means confirm this story – if we look at change in vote share between Round 1 and Round 2, LREM candidates contesting *circonscriptions* with Right-wing incumbents on average secured a 15 percentage point increase in their vote share, as compared with between 20-21 percentage point increase in Left-incumbent and no-incumbent *circonscriptions*.

There is one further nuance to the Right's relatively strong second-round resistance to LREM's encroachment, which concerns the convergence between the Republicans and the FN in the 93 *circonscriptions* where the second-round duel placed an LREM candidate in opposition to the FN. Since the mid-2000s, the radicalization of the UMP on immigration issues in particular has increased the porosity between the mainstream and the radical Right, facilitating voter shifts within the party sub-system of the Right (Gougou and Labouret 2013). Since 2011, the *front républicain* has been increasingly under threat, particularly from the Right following the endorsement by the UMP of a 'neither nor' line rejecting both the FN and the Left in second round run-offs. In the presidential election, François Fillon called for his voters to support Macron in the second round, but only around a half did, with at least 1 in 5 voting instead for Le Pen.[14]

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http://www.ipsos.fr/sites/default/files/doc_associe/ipsos_sopra_steria_sociologie_des_electorats_7_mai_20h15_0.pdf

Figure 2 Scatterplot of first-round LR vote and second-round FN vote, by *circonscriptions* holding FN-LREM *ballottage*
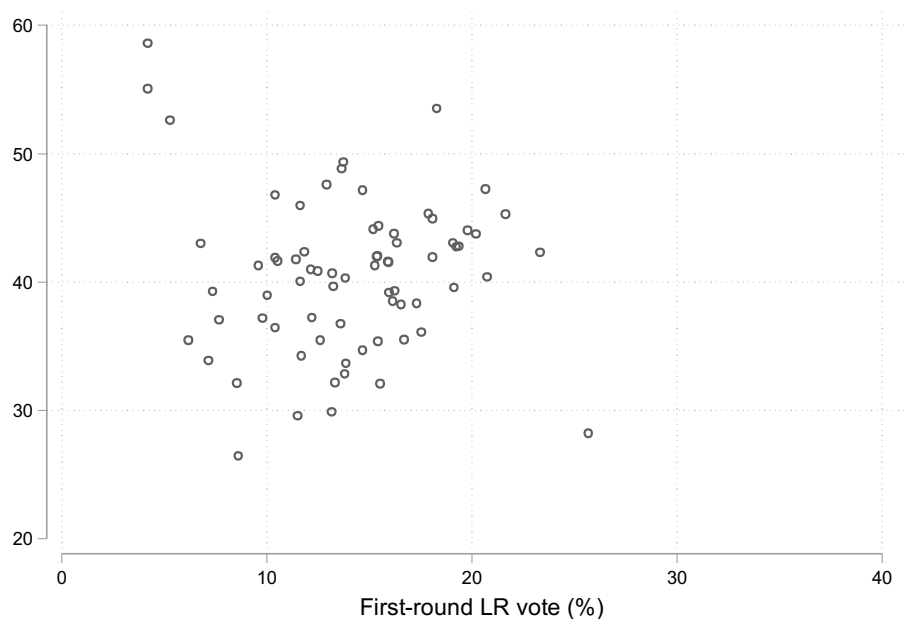
Is there any evidence that, in the legislative elections, where FN candidates faced LREM in the second round, LR voters from the first round moved to the radical right rather than to Macron's party? As Figure 2 shows, there is a broadly positive association between the two vote shares. The better the LR candidate did in the first round, the better FN candidate did in the second round, suggesting larger numbers of LR candidates moving to the radical right rather than to LREM. There are four outliers in the scatterplot – three *circonscriptions* with very high FN support but almost non-existent LR support, and one with almost equal vote shares across the two round for the two parties. The FN successes are the 10th, 11th and 12th *circonscriptions* in the Pas-de-Calais where Ludovic Pajot, Marine Le Pen, and Bruno Bilde, respectively, won seats. In these traditionally Left-wing, now Radical Right, areas, LR support is very low precisely because of the dominant political tendencies. In the remaining outlier, the 1st *circonscription* of l'Eure, the low vote share is due to its holding the only three-way run-off of the election. If these four outliers are excluded, the correlation between the two vote shares is 0.37 (p < .001). On average, FN candidates did significantly better in *ballottage* where LR had been stronger, suggesting that the ethno-conservative pole of the French right may have consolidated further in the 2017 elections, to represent the main force of opposition to Macron both sociologically and ideologically.

However, the FN, which looked set to secure double-, if not triple-, digit seats in the 2017 Assembly, managed to add only six further deputies to its previous total of two, and only Gilbert Collard managed to retain his 2012 seat following Marion Maréchal-Le Pen's retirement from politics. In contrast, Jean-Luc Mélenchon's LFI and their hostile Communist neighbours managed 27 seats – nowhere near the halcyon days of Radical Left support in the 1970s, but nonetheless a victory for a populist Left agenda whereby LFI may establish its leadership over radical politics in France.

Conclusion

This paper has illustrated the dynamics of LREM's legislative success and the making of a majority for the newly elected president, Emmanuel Macron, in the 2017 French elections. Looking at how presidential and legislative elections traditionally interact in France's semi-presidential system, the paper has argued that, whilst reflecting specific contextual opportunities produced by voter distrust of traditional party alternatives and aspiration for a renewal of French politics, the 2017 elections underlined a more normal determinism from presidential victor to legislative majority, thus showing continuity with previous post-presidential legislative races since 2002.

On the one hand, the 2017 presidential election had shown substantial realignment and disruption to the increasingly bipolar format of the French party system, challenging both the Left and the Right, resulting in an unprecedented runoff that opposed two candidates from outside traditional party alternatives, over European integration and globalization conflicts only partially overlapping with France's dominant left-right divide. On the other hand, more continuity was found in the outcome of the legislatives in which LREM enjoyed the typical presidential honeymoon effect – a parliamentary seat majority of 60.7 per cent for LREM and Modem, a share which was remarkably similar to the average of 60.5 per cent found across all 'confirmatory' legislative races since 2002, despite the profound reshaping of party competition. A substantial degree of disproportionality in the final outcome (21.5) was not much greater, however, than the average of previous confirmatory legislatives since 2002 (17.7).

Finally, the 2017 legislatives did not depart from previous 'honeymoon' post-presidential races as regards the more formal institutional party system that is traditionally engineered by those elections: notwithstanding higher fragmentation in the first round, simplification occurred as usual in the second round, producing three effective parties in the National Assembly, which was very similar to the 2.8 parties in the 2012 *Palais Bourbon*.

Tactically, as this paper suggests, chameleon LREM candidates and strategies were clearly able to maximize the propitious institutional and political competitive landscape provided by the 2017 race. Voter apathy and record high abstention rates resulted in a mechanistic elevation in thresholds for second-round entry in a fragmented and highly competitive race, which created a favourable context for LREM positioning as a centrist force with a cross-cutting appeal to moderates on both sides of the political spectrum. Featuring virtually no three-way runoffs, the 2017 legislative race produced perhaps more than ever Jean Charlot's 'great simplifying duel' of presidential elections. As our findings suggest, LREM candidates were able to occupy a winning strategic location at the centre ground of France's electoral politics, giving them a decisive advantage against both the mainstream left and right, and, in an even more pronounced manner, against radical alternatives such as LFI and the FN. In the latter case, LREM simply represented the best possible political materialization of the otherwise nearly defunct *Front Républicain*.

Finally, the 2017 elections have confirmed once again the different competitive opportunities which are typically found across the various electoral arenas of French politics. The presidential race was conducive to a significant reshaping of party competition, featuring in particular strong centrist and radical alternatives to traditional parties, and showing discontinuity with the broader trends in recent French electoral history. Nonetheless, the 'honeymoon' legislative determinism still held – and there were still strong traces of the old Left / Right politics to boot. Whether the more fragmented and polarized properties and mechanics of the 2017 French party system will endure in the future remains to be seen. But Macron's success did not show any unified surge in popular support for the 'new boy' in French politics. Loveless honeymoons tend not to last.

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