Introduction: Forecasting the 2022 French Presidential Election

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The French presidential election of 2022 forms a domestic and international pivot in the world of established democracies. It is not coincidental that, for the first time, *PS: Political Science and Politics*, offers a symposium on forecasting these contests, bringing together the work of nine researchers (or research teams). The French presidential election has become key because of its economic and political weight, especially within the European Council, where France exercises a leading governance role, more so in the context of the Covid-19 crisis and its long-term internal and external consequences. This presidential race also raises serious concerns about the structuring of a nation’s political life around the great left-right divide, in France and in several other contemporary democracies. Will the centrist “shock” observed in the 2017 French presidential and legislative elections (but not in the local elections held thereafter), reassert itself in 2022, ushering in a durable change in the traditional left-right French political equilibrium?

More specifically, will the moderate forces gathered around the incumbent President Emmanuel Macron, either from a divided left or the classic right via Valérie Pécresse, be able to recover from their 2017 debacle and reach the second round of the contest? Will Marine Le Pen create history by lifting the extreme right to the second round for a second consecutive election? Will Eric Zemmour and his new party Reconquête! upset the old game of the installed rival parties? Or, will Macron again take advantage of his enfeebled moderate opponents, winning by default against a candidate most voters considered too radical? These are among the many questions that our symposium, dedicated to the forecasting of these French elections, can help clarify.

Academically, over the past three decades, an extensive literature has grown up around election forecasting in leading democracies. But, perhaps oddly, the French case remains understudied. The use of forecasting models to predict the results of French presidential elections dates back, especially, to the publication of Lewis-Beck (1995). A few years later Jérôme and Jérôme-Speziari (2001) provided another model using regionalized data to address the small-n problem (see also Foucault and Nadeau 2012). Finally, Fauvelle-Aymar and Lewis-Beck (2002) rolled out the *Iowa model* to predict the French presidential elections. Apropos, in this symposium, Stegmaier and Adou (2022) look back at these 27 years of French presidential election forecasting, with modelers adapting to the complexities of a two-round balloting system impacted by new issues and changes in the party system. Turning to the future, they herald the new challenges that forecasters will have to face in the spring 2022 contests.

To meet the 2022 challenge directly, our symposium presents six different forecasting methodologies, as applied to the French presidential case. Revisiting the classic *Iowa model*, Bélanger, Turgeon and Feitosa (2022) propose a modified specification and a new definition of the dependent variable. The paper by Jérôme-Speziari and Bélanger (2022) follows the tradition of disaggregated voting analysis on a regional basis but offers in addition a seemingly unrelated regression (SUR) model. Innovating on two levels, the efforts of Jérôme, Mongrain and Nadeau (2022) develop a “synthetic” model to predict the outcomes of French presidential elections (combining it with the SUR approach). Taking a pioneering turn, Dufresne, Jérôme, Lewis-Beck, Murr and Savoie (2022) test the utility of citizen forecasting, whereby respondents...
provide voter expectations, rather than voter intentions. Andreas Graefe’s (2022) contribution represents the first attempt to use the Polly Vote approach to forecast national elections in France, including combining forecasts and adding a panel of French experts. Lastly, Facchini (2022) tests an innovative approach involving the use of political party popularity scores to predict the results of the next French presidential elections.

In addition to forecasting models per se, the symposium has invited two papers more focused on electoral process and institutions. Since the reform of the five-year term, the legislative elections immediately follow the presidential elections, meaning the majority that will govern France actually arises from a “four-round election,” as Jean-Luc Parodi (2007) put it. Dolez and Laurent (2002) employ forecasting results of the French legislative contests, in order to foretell whether the new president-elect could rely on a majority in the French National Assembly. Finally, Berg, Gruca and Rietz (2022) discuss something never before tried in the French presidential election context: how and under what conditions can the Iowa Electronic Market approach be applied to forecasting 2022?

Looking at the Results: A Shift Towards the Right?

In Table 1, we take a systematic look at the projections provided by the different forecasting models (at the time of writing, February 2022) in order to highlight points of convergence and divergence (see Table 1). The first important finding is that the models agree in concluding that the incumbent president Emmanuel Macron should finish first in the first round, with a significant lead over his closest opponent. The average forecast for the sitting president in the first round is indeed 25.5% of the votes, giving him a significant lead (according to the models) of almost 6 percentage points (5.9 to be exact) over his most serious competitor. All the models also predict a clear victory for the incumbent in the second round, regardless of who his opponent is. It would therefore seem surprising, given the forecasts presented in Table 1, if the centrist candidate Emmanuel Macron were not only excluded from the second round of the 2022 presidential election, but if he were to suffer defeat in it.

The models’ forecasts also converge on several other points. All the models predict that the left will underperform in the presidential elections. No model predicts the presence of a duel including a left-wing candidate in the second round. The Left would therefore be excluded from the decisive round of the French presidential election for a second consecutive election, another first in the history of the Fifth French Republic. Thus, it appears the French left has not recovered from its 2012 collapse, following the presidency of François Hollande. The desert crossing for the French left is not yet over. The political dynamic in this country will continue to be dominated in 2022 by the opposition between candidates of the center or the right on the political spectrum.

Another point of convergence in the forecasts is also notable. No model predicts that Eric Zemmour will reach the second round. The support this candidate has garnered thus seems insufficient to allow him to further shake the French party system, one which seems to have evolved from a traditional left-right divide to a quadripolarization of the political game- left, center, classic right and extreme right. That said, the presence of this polemical candidate could weigh heavily on the identity of Emmanuel Macron's opponent in the second round, depending on whether he draws more support from the candidate of the classical right, Valérie Pécresse, or the far right, Marine Le Pen. This element of uncertainty is reflected in the forecasts presented in this symposium, since three models predict that Marine Le Pen will make it to the second round, while two conclude that it is the candidate of the classic right, Valérie Pécresse, who will take this step.

In any case, the forecasting models in this symposium predict a significant shift of the French electorate to the right, reflected in two ways. First, as noted above, by the exclusion of
a left-wing candidate from the second round for a second consecutive election. Second, this shift may also manifest itself in a possibly "historic" performance by Marine Le Pen, should she reach the second round. Admittedly, the models predict a clearer victory for Emmanuel Macron in the second round against Marine Le Pen (58.9%) than against Valérie Pécresse (53.5%). But Macron's victory over Le Pen may not be as decisive as in 2017 insofar as the models allow for the possibility that the far-right candidate could cross the 40% threshold of support in the second round.

Only the results of the presidential election will confirm the validity of the conclusions that emerge from the forecasts presented. But it already seems that their richness demonstrates electoral forecasting in France has reached maturity and, after having been largely inspired by work from elsewhere, the French case could now enrich the electoral forecasting work in other democracies. It is from this perspective that this unique PS symposium was conceived.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Forecasters</th>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Candidate</th>
<th>Vote share</th>
<th>Candidate</th>
<th>Vote share</th>
<th>Most likely winner</th>
<th>Vote share</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bélanger, Feitosa, and Turgeon</td>
<td>Historical Forecast Model</td>
<td>Right-wing candidates</td>
<td>52.7</td>
<td>Left-wing candidates</td>
<td>47.3</td>
<td>Emmanuel Macron (LREM)</td>
<td>51.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bélanger and Jérôme-Speziari</td>
<td>SUR Regionalized Model</td>
<td>Emmanuel Macron (LREM)</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>Marine Le Pen (RN)</td>
<td>19.2</td>
<td>Emmanuel Macron (LREM)</td>
<td>58.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dufresne, Jérôme, Lewis-Beck, Murr and Savoie</td>
<td>Citizen Model</td>
<td>Emmanuel Macron (LREM)</td>
<td>25.3</td>
<td>Marine Le Pen (RN)</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facchini</td>
<td>Party Ratings</td>
<td>Emmanuel Macron (LREM)</td>
<td>29.0</td>
<td>Valérie Pécresse (LR)</td>
<td>24.2</td>
<td>Emmanuel Macron (LREM)</td>
<td>53.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graebe</td>
<td>Polly Vote</td>
<td>Emmanuel Macron (LREM)</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>Marine Le Pen (RN)</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>Emmanuel Macron (LREM)</td>
<td>59.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jérôme, Mongrain, and Nadeau</td>
<td>Multi-bloc Popularity-Economy Model</td>
<td>Emmanuel Macron (LREM)</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>Valérie Pécresse (LR)</td>
<td>18.6</td>
<td>Emmanuel Macron (LREM)</td>
<td>53.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unweighted average 1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Emmanuel Macron (LREM)</td>
<td>25.6</td>
<td>Valérie Pécresse (LR)</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>Emmanuel Macron (LREM)</td>
<td>53.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unweighted average 2</td>
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<td>Emmanuel Macron (LREM)</td>
<td>25.4</td>
<td>Marine Le Pen (RN)</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>Emmanuel Macron (LREM)</td>
<td>58.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Note. Results for Average 1 are calculated from models predicting a Macron-Pécresse contest in the second round whereas results for Average 2 are calculated from models forecasting a Macron-Le Pen duel. Note that the results from the first model (Bélanger, Feitosa and Turgeon) are not included in the calculations since their methodology is somewhat different from the other models.

A Word of Caution

We should note that Emmanuel Macron is not yet an official candidate. Further, according to scattered public opinion results, incumbent presidents running for re-election have tended to lose support between their official declaration of candidacy and the first round in April. For example, Giscard d’Estaing (1981) lost, on average, between 1.5 points, while Mitterrand (1988) and Chirac (2002) lost, on average, 4 points. Only Sarkozy (2012), on average, neither gained nor lost. Given the threshold of qualification to the second round now appears very low, at around 17 to 18 percent, the possibility exists that Macron could lose his first place status, on the first and even the second round, leaving the French political landscape balkanized. But, on the basis of our collection of scientific forecasting models, we judge that Macron will almost certainly retain the presidency.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST
The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

References


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