



French President Emmanuel Macron reviewing troops in the gardens of the Elysee Palace in Paris, following his inauguration on Sunday. France's adoption of open party primaries saw its two main parties choosing "hard-left" and "hard-right" candidates, which allowed Mr Macron, a centrist, to reclaim the political space vacated. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

French elections: The effect of party primaries, and redefining the left and right

Yvonne Guo

For The Straits Times

On May 6, Mr Emmanuel Macron, a 39-year-old former Socialist economy minister and investment banker who was unknown to the French public barely two years ago, was elected President of the Republic of France with 66 per cent of votes. Two weeks before that, he had catapulted to the top of the first round of the French elections, defeating 10 other veteran candidates.

For the first time in the Fifth Republic, neither representative of the two main parties on the left and right managed to win either of the top two spots in the first round to move into the next. The result is a direct outcome of France's move to democratise the party political process with open primary elections.

This election was the first in which the two main parties in France – the conservative Les Republicains and the Socialist party – chose their candidates in primaries. Traditionally reserved for party members, now any eligible voter could sign up to vote for their preferred candidate in party primary elections.

Paradoxically, this resulted in ideologically moderate, relatively centrist candidates being rejected in favour of "hard-left" Benoit Hamon, who proposed a universal basic income, and "hard-right" Francois Fillon, who advocated Thatcherite economic policies.

Such candidates may have appealed to party bases, but not to voters at the national level, leaving the field wide open for Mr Macron, a centrist, as he became the unaffiliated candidate reclaiming the political space vacated.

In France, as in the United States, the logic of party political primaries and presidential elections appears to be at cross purposes.

Just how future elections will evolve in response to the new wave of primaries remains to be seen.

REDEFINING LEFT AND RIGHT

For now, it is already clear that this presidential election has redefined the political left and right in France. A recent National Front campaign pamphlet emphasised the convergences between the extreme left and extreme right in France. It listed 16 similarities between the policy programmes of far-right Marine Le Pen and far-left Jean-Luc Melenchon, including both candidates' anti-European positions and their calls for increased employment protection, although they diverged significantly in other important areas such as immigration policy.

The convergence at the extreme ends of the French political spectrum was accompanied by a similar coalescing of the political establishment around Mr Macron in the centre. Young and forward-looking, Mr Macron openly styled himself as "neither left nor right", creating a new independent movement, En Marche (Onward), that explicitly aimed to overcome political partisanship on both sides.

When it was clear that he was gaining momentum, senior politicians from the Socialist Party and Les Republicains rallied around him, openly defying instructions to support their own parties' candidates, while the centrist Democratic Movement formed a political alliance with him.

In fact, Mr Macron's policies as economy minister had been unpopular in France. His proposals to liberalise the employment market had made it easier for employers to fire workers and decreased overtime pay, leading to widespread strikes. But by resigning from political office a year before running for president, Mr Macron had managed to put some psychological distance between the much-maligned establishment and his progressive political platform. Speaking to a class of primary schoolchildren in a recent documentary, he explained that "the right traditionally represents liberty, and the left, equality". By taking elements from both the left and the right, he would bring them together in fraternity.

RESHUFFLING THE DECK: THE COMING LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS

Will Mr Macron will be able to reform France? This depends on whether his new party, La Republique en Marche (The Republic on the Move), can form a governing majority in the June 11 legislative elections.

Three main scenarios are possible: absolute majority, coalition and cohabitation.

Obtaining more than half the seats in the National Assembly would give Mr Macron an absolute majority that would facilitate his reform agenda. Obtaining a relative majority but less than half the seats would compel him to form a coalition government and share decision-making authority with another party.

A situation of cohabitation would occur if another party obtains absolute majority instead. Traditionally, the majority party's leader would become prime minister. If the party were to oppose Mr Macron, institutional deadlock would render reform difficult, if not impossible.

Forestalling this, Mr Macron has swiftly named centre-right MP Edouard Philippe as Prime

Minister, an unprecedented strategic move in the history of the Fifth Republic that served to further divide the French right, while inviting centre-right politicians to join his reformist political movement. Indeed, two dozen MPs on the centre right released a press communique expressing support for Mr Macron's cross-partisan gesture and recommending that their parties respond in kind.

In championing political renewal, Mr Macron's party has had to navigate some delicate dilemmas. Mr Macron's former boss, ex-Socialist prime minister Manuel Valls, had also expressed a desire to represent La Republique en Marche in the legislative elections. However, the party refused his candidacy to avoid giving the impression that it was a "recycling centre" for career politicians now out of a job. Mr Valls, however, was assured that the party would not send a candidate to stand against him in the legislative elections, thus leaving open the possibility of future collaboration between Mr Macron and the left-wing Socialists, and further consolidating his position as arbiter in the centre. Thus, Mr Macron will have to find a way to leverage on existing political expertise even as he upholds his promise to inject new blood into the system and respect gender parity in the upcoming legislative elections.

As the French presidential election shows, concepts once taken for granted in politics – the definition of "left" and "right" and

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the logic of sequential electoral processes at party, national and legislative levels – have been fundamentally challenged.

After Brexit and the election of United States President Donald Trump, the French election is yet another reminder that the real divide is no longer between the two traditional sides of a political spectrum, but between two different visions of a country's role vis-à-vis the outside world. While traditional left and right parties at least had a consensus on globalisation being a force for good, this consensus is gradually being challenged by those experiencing social decline.

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This onerous four-stage process of fashioning a governing majority in France, while ostensibly more democratic, may result in a lower degree of political coherence, as different alliances and coalitions form and later dissolve at each stage of the process, making it hard to distinguish genuine rallying cries from fleeting but strategic political alliances.

Moreover, the threatened collapse of the two main parties has been accompanied by a slow demise of ideological consistency. Neither Mr Macron nor Ms Marine Le Pen – the two top performers in the first round who faced each other in the run-off – were very much shackled by ideology, but conveniently borrowed ideas from across the political spectrum that fit with their perspective of France's place in Europe and the world. Both employed unabashedly populist methods and created social movements with their own momentum.

Ultimately, the key takeaway from the French elections may be that no one has a monopoly on populist methods but, in themselves, these methods provide no guarantee for the durability of a stable governing structure. However, the potential for cross-partisan partnership founded on the emerging principle of "putting country before party", as the new Prime Minister Philippe put it, may yet herald a new dawn for political reform in France.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• Yvonne Guo holds a dual master's degree in International Affairs from Sciences Po, Paris and the University of St Gallen, Switzerland. She is completing her PhD at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore and her J.D. at Singapore Management University.