

Le Pen election win would be disastrous for research, France and Europe

Marine Le Pen is promising to repeal unpopular changes to research institutions. But the wider impact of her presidency would be catastrophic.

In less than a week, French President Emmanuel Macron will face far-right leader Marine Le Pen in the second round of a presidential election. Last time this happened, in 2017, Macron won comfortably, by a margin of 66% to Le Pen's 34%. But this time, opinion polls are predicting a much tighter race.

Macron has struggled to fulfil the promise of a new kind of presidency after his then newly formed party *La République En Marche!* (Republic Forward!) smashed France's two major right- and left-wing parties in the 2017 poll. Macron is now less popular with voters, probably including academics and students. And Le Pen, who leads *Rassemblement National* (National Rally) aims to persuade those who are still undecided that they should back her.

Science is not often a big factor in France's elections, and this one is no different. But Le Pen is appealing to scientists by pledging to repeal controversial reforms to research institutions enacted between 2007 and 2009 by centre-right president Nicolas Sarkozy – which Macron has continued. Both presidents sought to align France's universities, research and funding systems more closely with those of the United States and the United Kingdom by giving universities more autonomy; improving links between academics and businesses; and increasing financial support for research-intensive corporations.

Sarkozy changed the law so that funders and university administrations could have more independence in making decisions. His government also provided generous tax breaks to businesses that invest in research and development. These reforms, however, are not popular among many researchers, and Le Pen's pledge to repeal them might be attractive to academics who otherwise would not consider voting for her, researchers who study France's research system have told *Nature*.

Fears of precarity

France's research system is regarded by the state as a government department – academics are classed as civil servants, positions that receive generous pensions and protection against employers setting too high a workload.

The reforms meant that universities would be able to amend researchers' contracts and many scientists did not

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welcome these changes, partly because of the risk that they could make employment more precarious, or change job terms and conditions. Thousands took to the streets to protest. Some lawmakers also questioned whether companies really need a government research subsidy – one of the highest in the European Union, worth some €5.7 billion (US\$6.2 billion) annually – to boost their own research and development.

Le Pen has said she will roll back these changes, and will use some of the money saved from the tax breaks to boost public spending on science. In a written interview this month with Patrick Lemaire, president of the Council of French Academic Learned Societies in Rennes, she declared: "The state will increase the public research budget, in particular by recovering part of the research tax credit."

Although Le Pen's policy on the Sarkozy reforms might be welcomed by some researchers, National Rally's wider programme for government will be anything but. For one, the party's policy on restricting immigration is likely to hit collaborations with scientists in other countries. And minority communities would face severe discrimination under Le Pen. For example, she has said she wants to ban the wearing of headscarves in public by extending a law that prohibits them in schools.

Severe EU tensions

Furthermore, a Le Pen presidency would put France on a collision course with the EU. Her party is intending to violate European laws and regulations by restricting employment or state benefits for EU citizens from outside France; withholding payments into the EU budget; and ending free movement of people between France and its EU neighbours. Universities and research funders must also confront the possibility that a Le Pen government would seek to restrict academic freedom.

Unlike in 2017, Le Pen is not now advocating leaving the EU, but her policies would no doubt create severe tensions with the bloc, as is already happening between the EU and Hungary. Earlier this month, Hungary's far-right leader, Viktor Orbán, was re-elected. On the same day, his government announced a €500-million investment in university science parks at 20 universities. But two days later, the European Commission in Brussels began a process that could lead to Hungary losing potentially billions of euros in funding, under what's known as a conditionality mechanism.

This can be triggered if a member state, despite warnings, passes laws or enacts policies that are contrary to the rule of law. In September 2020, the European Commission confirmed in a 'rule of law report' that Orbán's government has interfered with the independence of Hungary's judiciary and with the functioning of its universities and media, since coming to power in 2010.

Researchers should consider that any short-term gains in terms of funding would be completely outweighed by the disaster of a Le Pen win. And those dissatisfied with both presidential candidates and considering not voting at all should realize that this, too, is likely to be of benefit to Le Pen. Everyone should look at Hungary for an EU case study of what happens when a far-right leader is elected.