

Lessons from the French Presidential election 2017

A half-day conference at the University of Bristol, 17 May 2017, sponsored by the ASMCF.

The event attracted an audience of approximately 70 people, comprised of academics, students, members of the public and a delegation from the Northwest Bristol Sixth Form Centre at Cotham School, which has partnered the University of Bristol in some of its widening participation initiatives.

The proceedings opened with a paper by Gino Raymond (University of Bristol) which examined the implications of what appeared to be an election where the old left-right oppositions and party loyalties had been made largely redundant. Raymond examined the shifts by traditional constituencies away from those mainstream parties that had habitually counted on their loyalty, but also the way those parties had shifted away from their traditional bases and seen a degree of voter differentiation that had left them vulnerable at the ballot box. More profoundly, Raymond questioned whether there were now new fault-lines in society that could no longer be envisaged in the old socio-economic terms. Philippe Marlière (UCL) focused on the ambiguities inherent in Emmanuel's Macron project to launch a novel and unifying brand of centrist politics. A centrist renewal of the French political system by a new young moderniser had been attempted before, for example by Valéry Giscard-d'Estaing, but the way politics was configured in the Fifth Republic militated against this. The legislative elections and the subsequent administration would reveal whether what Macron had to offer was genuinely new or a refreshed version of centre-right economic liberalism. Vincent Latour (Université de Toulouse – Jean Jaurès) took the theme of 'une identité heureuse' and the debate that has raged around the issue of national identity in France in recent years, and applied it to an analysis of François Fillon's campaign, notably the regression to a hard-edged form of identity politics. Latour then broadened this analysis to include the major candidates and the distinction between those driven by an optimistic vision for France, and those governed by pessimism. Nadia Kiwan (Aberdeen University) evoked the troubled backdrop to the election in France's deprived suburbs that was brought sharply into focus by 'l'Affaire Théo', following the brutalisation of a young man by the police that was caught on video. She described the mobilisation that this provoked and analysed the way the constituency represented was now trying to give itself a voice politically. Finally, Michelle Cini (University of Bristol) underlined a series of questions the election posed regarding forthcoming elections in other EU member states, and the future direction of the EU itself.