The French Electoral System Poses High Disinformation Risks

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Introduction

DRI assesses digital risks to elections on the basis of a defined method, which can be consulted here. In this brief, we focus only on one specific risk: The electoral system. The risk assessment method notes: “Majoritarian electoral systems may be more vulnerable, especially when lead candidates/parties are close (high return on investment for manipulative interference)” We look at this aspect for the upcoming parliamentary elections in France.

It is important to note that every electoral system has pros and cons. This brief only points at disinformation risks, which tend to be higher in majoritarian systems. DRI does not advocate for any specific electoral system.

1 — How does the French Electoral System for Parliament (Assemble Nationale) work?

The National Assembly comprises 577 seats. 13 seats represent overseas districts, and 11 constituencies represent French migrants abroad. For an absolute majority, a party needs to win 289 seats.

A candidate wins the seat in the first round of the elections when he/she gains more than 50% of the vote with a voter turn-out of at least 25%. If no candidate is elected in the first round on 30 June, candidates who have not won the support of 12.5% of voters registered in that constituency (not: votes cast) are eliminated for the second round.

The remaining candidates go for the second round on 7 July. Typically, the second round is fought between two or three
candidates. Candidates for the second round can also withdraw their candidature. This happens, for example, if they do not have strong chances and want voters to support another candidate instead.

2 — Why does such a system pose higher disinformation risks?

A majoritarian, constituency-based electoral system is attractive for actors who want to influence election outcomes, because it allows for targeted interventions towards small electorates with the hope of influencing the allocation of seats. As not many voters need to be targeted and they can be potentially geolocated, this type of disinformation is not costly and potentially effective – the disinformation cost-benefit ratio is better than in national elections based on proportionality.

Disinformation actors will look for close races, i.e. situations where forecasts indicate that candidates run neck-on-neck. In such races, it is enough to change the behavior of a small number of voters (change their voting intention, mobilize abstainers, make motivated voters abstain) to change the outcome: the allocation of that seat to the preferred party. It is, of course, for the same reason that parties invest particularly in such races.

3 — Candidates to Parliament are more vulnerable to disinformation

Most candidates for a parliamentary seat are not well-known national politicians. In contrast to government ministers they do not have communication departments of ministries and they do not enjoy the on-going routine protection by security forces.
They cannot count on party HQs giving their cases the same level of attention that leading party representatives receive.

They are more vulnerable across the board:

- Detection: With a small campaigning team, they are less likely to notice disinformation on some platforms quickly.
- Analysis/attribution: They are less likely than government ministers or lead politicians to have tools to understand the extent and spread of a disinformation campaign. They are also less likely to be able to swiftly refute manufactured information, especially things like synthetic media (voice cloning, synthetic video).
- Response: They are also less likely to quickly adopt a systematic communicative response and to establish contacts with relevant platforms, factcheckers or law enforcement.

4 — The French Electorate is polarized

The French electorate is relatively polarized, not only between left and far-right, but also between the left, the far-right and the centrist Macron camp. This is an unusual case of three-way polarization, which will mark both rounds of elections (where other electoral systems typically reduce the choice to two options in the second round). As studies have shown, partisan polarization supports disinformation. Highly polarized voters are more likely to spread disinformation. The parliamentary elections will, therefore, offer fertile grounds for disinformation.

In this context disinformation can try to achieve different types of voter behavior: It can try to mobilize voters of one side (“I have to vote for X, look how bad Y is”) or to demobilize voters (“I
dislike X and don’t want them to win, but look how bad the only opponent Y is; I cannot vote for Y and stay at home”), or to split electorates in three-way races and reduce tactical voting (“I am in favor of X, but should give my vote to Y in order to prevent Z; but I am too angry and want to show what I am truly stand for, namely X”).

5 — What to do?

Social media platforms should give particular attention to close electoral races, especially in the second round of the French elections, based on opinion polls and to the most sensitive time period, the last days before election day. Last-minute disinformation has the advantage that it makes it difficult for concerned parties to respond in time. In addition, the silence period on the election day and the day before means that many media may be hesitant to cover electoral information from candidates.

The platforms’ trust and safety teams should code monitoring efforts to this effect, i.e. giving particular attention to the names and numbers of such constituencies and the names of the relevant candidates. They should be prepared to act fast in enforcing their self-regulation and legal obligations to avoid harms. Fact-checkers and cybersecurity experts should likewise give particular attention to close races.

Political parties should train their candidates and campaigning teams to meet this challenge and to establish rapid reporting lines for candidates to their HQs. Party HQs need to inform platforms and authorities instantly of emerging disinformation attempts.
Media should be prepared to navigate the restrictions of the electoral silence period with the need to counter possible disinformation.

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