

France: The Left Is Alive

Tuesday 25 April 2017, by [MARTELLI Roger](#) (Date first published: 23 April 2017).

Le Pen is in the second round, but Sunday showed us that the French left isn't dead after all.

The results of France's first-round elections are in, and few are surprised: Marine Le Pen and Emmanuel Macron will face off in the second round. But Jean-Luc Mélenchon's historic result opens up a new chapter in the French left's history.

We won't be able to offer closer analyses until we have the local voting data, so the reflections below remain at a very general level, based on the estimates provided by the polling companies and the partial results provided by the Interior Ministry as of midnight on April 23.

1. In the days leading up to the election, the Left had been largely written off, while the Right was buzzing, convinced that it could still pull off a triumph. The results were more complex than they expected. If we add up the votes of Arthaud, Hamon, Mélenchon, and Poutou we get 27.3 percent for the Left against 48.6 percent for the Right. But if we consider that part of Macron's votes came from the Left, we instead find a balance of around 42 percent to 58 percent.

	1968	1969	1974	1981	1988
Seconde de gauche		26		18,7	11,3
Seconde	35,7	31	47,2	48,6	45,4
Centre	57,1	69,1	49,3	49,3	50,6

	1994	2002	2007	2012	2017 1 ^{er} tour	2017 2 nd round
Seconde de gauche	13,9	13,8	8	11,7	21	25,1
Seconde	48,5	42,9	34,4	43,8	27,3	41,6
Centre	58,4	57,1	63,6	56,3	48,6	58,1

2. With a vote of around 22 percent, Marine Le Pen improved on her score in the last presidential election by 4 points and beat her father's 2007 score by 10 percent. The National Front (FN) is continuing to take over a greater part of the political space, but its result seems disappointing when compared to the polls at the start of the campaign, which placed Le Pen at around 27 percent. Indeed, against past contests, we might consider yesterday's results even less fruitful: the FN won 25.2 percent in the departmental races and 27.3 percent in the regional elections. Le Pen was counting on turning this election into a fight with the Socialist Party government, but she had to compete with a radicalized right-wing opposition and socialist opponents who had moved more sharply to the left than she had expected.

3. The most significant score belongs to the Left and marks a historic upheaval. As the surveys predicted, the Socialist Party (PS) candidate Benoît Hamon could not escape from the pincers trapping him between the push to the center by the Hollande-Valls duo, which Macron intensified, and the desire for a rupture carried forth by Mélenchon and his supporters. The 2012 Hollande electorate split: half opted for Macron (out of conviction or as a lesser evil compared to the Right), a quarter for Mélenchon, and barely a fifth went for Hamon.

The primary for the "belle alliance populaire" — in effect, the Socialist Party and small allies — was supposed to save the PS by giving it the blessing of the entire left. In the last analysis, it only precipitated the party's decline. The PS has almost been reduced to Gaston Defferre's disastrous 5

percent score in 1969. That defeat forced the Socialists to completely reorganize under Mitterrand with the 1971 Épinay Congress. Almost fifty years later, everything is starting over again. As we expected, the PS of Épinay is dead, finished off by a disastrous term in government.

4. Speaking of historical comparisons, we might note that Mélenchon's score is not so far off from what the Communist (PCF) Jacques Duclos got in 1969 (21.4 percent). At that time, the radical left — *la gauche de la gauche* — set the tone. Mitterrand's PS put an end to a long phase inaugurated by the anti-Nazi resistance. Now, Jean-Luc Mélenchon may have helped put things straight again.

In 2007, the Left of the Left missed the opportunity for a relaunch presaged by the dynamic 2005 campaign against the planned European Constitutional Treaty. The energy we saw 2005 rose up again this year, and the remarkable result has made a real impression.

5. Mélenchon has gained 8 percent relative to last time, and he alone did better than the whole radical left has done since 1981. He owes this to his commitment and his capacity to articulate the universality of his discourse — a classic of the French left — with the singularity of his words and his energy. Ultimately, how he states his political principles doesn't matter all that much. He is sensitive to the notion of left populism and wary of referring to the Left as a movement, a notion that recent history has discredited in the eyes of many. But in practice he has given the Left back its dynamism, its energy, and the open expression of its values.

Recognizing this does not invalidate any critique of his rhetoric or his proposals. But it is impossible not to recognize that he made these values and this energy speak to sections of the population who no longer believed in them and to young people who had never heard them. This table, using IFOP data, shows the France Insoumise leader's spectacular progress among the youngest and the lowest income brackets [1].

Année de l'ÉCOP planning 2015						
	Avant-Est	Reçut		Émission		
	01 02 03 04 05 06 07 08 09 10 11 12	01 02 03 04 05 06 07 08 09 10 11 12	01 02 03 04 05 06 07 08 09 10 11 12	01 02 03 04 05 06 07 08 09 10 11 12	01 02 03 04 05 06 07 08 09 10 11 12	
EXPENSES						
ACTES (INTERVENANCES)						
24 11 ans	53	25	29	18	14	25
24 12 ans	26	28	25	18	13	23
24 13 ans	27	18	18	15	12	20
24 14 ans et plus	9	8	9	7	5	27
24 15 ans et plus	9	8	9	7	5	27
ACTES DE L'ÉTAT (COTIS ET VOTE)						
TOTAL ACTES	98	26	29	18	13	26
TOTAL PCH	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 15 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
TOTAL PCH	98	26	29	18	13	26
Émission	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 15 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
TOTAL BAVOIS	9	12	18	15	8	15
EXPENSES DE CONSERVATION						
ACTES EN ACTIF						
24 11 ans	98	26	29	18	13	26
24 12 ans	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 13 ans	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 14 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 15 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 16 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 17 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 18 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 19 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 20 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 21 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 22 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 23 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 24 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 25 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 26 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 27 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 28 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 29 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 30 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 31 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 32 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 33 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 34 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 35 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 36 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 37 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 38 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 39 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 40 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 41 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 42 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 43 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 44 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 45 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 46 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 47 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 48 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 49 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 50 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 51 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 52 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 53 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 54 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 55 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 56 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 57 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 58 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 59 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 60 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 61 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 62 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 63 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 64 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 65 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 66 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 67 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 68 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 69 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 70 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 71 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 72 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 73 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 74 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 75 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 76 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 77 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 78 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 79 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 80 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 81 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 82 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 83 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 84 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 85 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 86 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 87 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 88 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 89 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 90 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 91 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 92 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 93 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 94 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 95 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 96 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 97 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 98 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 99 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 100 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
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ACTES EN PASSIF						
24 11 ans	98	26	29	18	13	26
24 12 ans	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 13 ans	9	12	20	12	7	20
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24 34 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 35 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
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24 40 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
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24 58 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
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24 70 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 71 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 72 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
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24 74 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
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24 20 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 21 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
24 22 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20
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24 24 ans et plus	9	12	20	12	7	20

6. Deeper analyses should seek to understand the success of this unprecedented campaign, one that goes beyond what we saw in 2002. Here we will note just one aspect: like Macron, Mélenchon benefited from a campaign fought outside the traditional party framework. In an election in which strong turnout did not imply satisfaction with the status quo — quite the contrary — this dimension is an important one. The surveys IFOP cited thus suggest that three-quarters of those who declare themselves “without party preference” split equally between Mélenchon, Macron, and Le Pen.

7. In two weeks — alas, but without hesitation — we must again act to block the expansion of the National Front. Its growth has slowed, but it continues relentlessly. It would have been better if we could stop it by voting for Mélenchon again, but there is no reason for rancor: the score achieved this Sunday is remarkable. It tells us, quite simply, that it is not true that the Left is dead. It also

tells us that the Left is only truly dynamic when it is indeed on the Left, and Mélenchon's dynamism proved as much with its own lightning advance.

But if the Left is indeed still here, though the forms it takes are no longer at the height of their power — or, at least, not the forms that the twentieth-century left bequeathed to it, dominated by the tête-à-tête of the PCF and PS. Once this impressive election cycle is over, it will be time to get on with the French left's now inevitable refoundation.

Roger Martelli

P.S.

* Jacobin. 4.25.17:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/04/french-election-macron-le-pen-fn-melenchon/>

* Translated by David Broder, adapted from *Regard*.

* Roger Martelli is a historian of French communism and co-director of the website Regards.

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.regards.fr/IMG/png/presidentielle-rm-analyse-2-big.png>