

French general election - Neo-liberal centrist Macron gets expected endorsement

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General elections in France are considered to be the third round of the presidential election and normally they deliver whacking majorities for the president, argues Dave Kellaway. Sunday's election confirmed this even more spectacularly than usual given the disarray in the ranks of the traditional left and right of centre parties. Macron won a landslide on a 50% turn out and 32% of vote according to projections for the second round. In France there is no proportional representation but you have to go to a second round if nobody gets more than 50% on the first. Several newspapers have shown that Macron's République en Marche party would get up to 450 seats (more than two thirds) in the national assembly.

French General Election results first round:

LREM/ MDM (Macron) 32,32 %

LR/ UDI / DVD (traditional right) 21,56 %

FI/ PCF (Mélenchon and CP) 13,74 %

FN (extreme right/Marine le Pen) 13,2 %

PS/ PRG / DVG (Socialist Party) 9,51 %

ECO (Greens) 4,3 %

EXG (Lutte Ouvrière and NPA) 0,77 %

Macron has managed to put together a party that takes in existing MPs from both the right of centre LR/UDI (Republicans/Union of Right) and the left of centre PS (Socialist party). At the same time he gave it a populist, modernising image by ensuring half its candidates were people who have never been politicians. So the new prime minister is from the LR and the ex-PS prime minister was given a free run in his constituency. His movement has also mobilised a layer of young people who support his neo-liberal economic policies but reject the more reactionary social and anti-migrant policies of the traditional right and the Front National.

Although the traditional right wing have lost around 5% compared to the 2012 general election when Hollande benefited from the endorsement effect, the big losers were the Socialist Party who have lost 20% compared to 2012. 93 of its sitting MPs have been dumped. It is historically the lowest score they have received.

People like Hamon, its left leaning presidential candidate, and Cambadélis, the party secretary have been eliminated on the first round. However despite getting less votes than the Mélenchon France Insoumise (FI) movement the PS will end up with more seats because of the way its votes are distributed. Interestingly the *Nouvel Observateur*, a pro-PS magazine headlines a big concern for

parties like the PS – it is likely to lose around 95 million euros in public financing because of the drastic decline in votes. You get 1.42 euros per vote every year if you score more than 1% in 50 constituencies. There is talk of bankruptcy.

Marine le Pen's Front National got around the same score as FI/PCF combined but is projected to have less seats because it fails to get the voters of other parties to vote for it. Marine le Pen is in a good position to win in the Pas de Calais since she got 45% in the first round. Having a small group of MPs will further legitimise this far right group and provide a platform for racist, islamophobic and anti-migrant campaigns. Overall the FN vote is roughly the same as in 2012, many more of its electors abstained than the national average.

Mélenchon nearly doubled his Presidential score this year compared to 2012 and was not far off getting into the second round run off. However this was not translated into an equivalent breakthrough in the general election. His result was double the previous general election score but around 6 points less than his presidential showing. Furthermore France Insoumise failed to mobilise all its electors from the presidential election, one survey shows 59% abstaining on Sunday compared to the average of 50%. His party is projected to win between 10 and 18 seats.

The key number is 15 which gives you a parliamentary group with allocated time and additional finance. In this respect you can say there is progress. In the last legislature there were more PCF (Communist) MPs than ones from Melenchon's group. This has been reversed and having more voices in parliament could help the struggle outside parliament against the neo-liberal assault on some of the French working class's historic social gains. Unfortunately Mélenchon refused to reach an agreement with the PCF to share out the seats so in a number of places the forces to the left of the PS were competing with each other. He also made some ludicrous claims that he could become the leader of the largest party in the house and therefore be involved in a cohabitation as the prime minister with President Macron.

His project of comprehensively defeating the PS and replacing it as the hegemonic force on the left is only partially achieved. There is a lot of bad blood between the PCF and Mélenchon which might be unhelpful in terms of generating united campaigns and struggles against the Macron government.

The Marxist or revolutionary left comprised of Lutte Ouvriere (LO) who stood in 533 constituencies and the NPA (New Anti-capitalist Party) who stood in around 30 got 0.77% of the votes. In its communique following the election, the NPA headlines the illegitimacy of the Macron majority given the 50% turnout and calls for mobilisations. (The actual percentage of registered voters who supported Macron was only about 16%). It states that the anti-working class policies of the Hollande government explain the disillusionment of the PS electorate. The lower than hoped for Mélenchon vote is noted as being a function of his divisive attitude on the left.

Lutte Ouvriere's communique makes the point that the Macron phenomenon has allowed the bosses to renew its political management with fresh faces less contaminated either with the traditional parties of right or left or with those who are corrupt. Nevertheless the Stalinist type majority in parliament means that there is little possibility of opposition there which could provide a 'safe' outlet for workers' dissatisfaction so that could be a problem for stability. Like the NPA it calls for mobilisation to defend workers gains.

Another radical left current, Ensemble, which works within and alongside Melenchon's France Insoumise, in its communique also highlights the democratic deficit expressed by the highest ever abstention rate which is also part and parcel of the anti-democratic features of the Vth Republic political system. Presidentialism overrides everything. Ensemble also calls on voters to block the FN

and to support the FI and other left candidates who are in the second round.

France is somewhere where there is a possibility of a disjunction between the electoral numbers and the relationship of forces in the class struggle. Big struggles can develop without a corresponding reflection in the parliamentary arithmetic. Macron intends to move swiftly to attack pension and social security rights, to change workplace regulations in favour of the bosses and to sack tens of thousands of public sector workers. Whether he will be able to achieve a landslide against sustained resistance on the ground is not so sure.

Dave Kellaway, 12th June 2017

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