

Elections (France) - Macron: the unhappy tightrope walker of the Elysée

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The first step to understanding the results of the French legislative elections of June 12 and 19 is simple: Macron has lost the absolute majority in the National Assembly and will find himself in a state of institutional instability whose outcome no one can predict. It is therefore a barely concealed political crisis that is opening up in the country, for which there is no short-term solution. This does not prevent him from wanting to maintain his objectives of social attacks in the months to come, while the working classes are suffering a general increase in the cost of living after a period of pandemic which has often cut wages and raised the level of precariousness.

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This electoral slap in the face is an extension of the presidential election last April. Macron, despite opposition to his policies by a large majority of the population, won 58 per cent of the vote in the second round, but half of that came from an electorate hostile to the outgoing president and only voting for him to block Marine Le Pen.

Macron's candidates (under the name Ensemble, bringing together his own formation, LREM, the centrists of MODEM and Horizon, a small formation of Gaullists around the former Prime Minister Edouard Philippe) recorded a massive decline in the first and second rounds compared to 2017 (a loss of 1.5 million votes in the first round, 1.2 million in the second), falling from just over 33 per cent of the votes cast in 2017 to less than 26 per cent. Five years ago, his formation (LREM) alone had 308 MPs (out of the 577 in the Assembly); with his allies he had a majority of 385 MPs. Today, all these components (the Ensemble list) represent only 245 MPs, less than an absolute majority (289). The loss comes exclusively from Macron's formation, LREM, which has halved its number of seats, with only 155.

It is a personal political slap in the face for Macron (even though the failure is cushioned by the single-member electoral system) reflecting above all the disavowal of the working classes who, when they have not simply lost interest in the legislative elections, have expressed the rejection of Macron and his candidates. Among those who were well and truly beaten, we can note in particular Castaner, the president of the LREM group of MPs, Ferrand, the president of the Assembly and several ministers, such as Blanquer, who did not hide his proximity to the ideas of the far right. If this rejection clearly benefited, in particular in the big cities and in the Parisian region, the candidates of the NUPES (New popular ecological and social union), the left alliance around La France Insoumise, in several other regions it also brought a massive entry of the far right into the

Assembly.

By overtaking the presidential coalition by some 60,000 votes in the first round, the NUPES, which won 131 seats (to which must be added miscellaneous left candidates, bringing the total to 146), succeeded in restoring a voice to the left, and did so on an anti-liberal basis, breaking with the social-liberal programmes of the past.

The left as a whole hardly made progress in terms of votes (200,000 more than in 2017, all parties combined) and only won a third of the votes cast. But this relative status quo hides two elevators going in opposite directions; the balance within the parliamentary left changes: La France Insoumise (LFI) gained 900,000 votes, Europe-Ecologie-Les-Verts (EELV. Greens) 300,000. The PS (Socialist) candidates lost one million votes, the PCF (Communist Party) 100,000 votes. It was therefore above all LFI and EELV which entered the Assembly in force, with a movement of polarization that clearly shifted from social democracy to the anti-liberal left: the PS and the PCF roughly maintained their previous number of elected members (with respectively 30 and 12 representatives in the new Assembly), on the other hand LFI multiplied its seats by more than four (from 17 to 75), EELV, reduced to one MP previously, now has a group of 23.

Unfortunately, on the other hand, we have witnessed another spectacular progression, that of the elected representatives of the extreme right. In the April presidential election, its three candidates (Le Pen, Zemmour and Dupont-Aignan) raised its score to more than 11 million votes, an increase of more than 1.6 million between 2017 and 2022. This was materialized in these legislative elections. The candidates of the RN have succeeded in breaking the anti-RN barrier which, with the single-member ballot system, prevented their election previously. They have a group of 89 MPs . The traditional right, the Republicans (LR), cushioned the shock suffered during the presidential election, but by winning 13.63 Per cent of the votes, against 21.57 per cent in 2017, they lost 2.3 million votes, falling from 112 to 61 seats. Like LREM, the Republicans have cut their number of seats in half (All the percentages given are based on votes cast: to get a figure for registered voters, they should be cut roughly in half).

An Assembly election with proportional representation, similar to those existing in many European countries, would have given roughly 148 MPs to the NUPES and the same to Ensemble, Macron's alliance. The RN for its part would have obtained 108 MPs , and the Republicans would have 78 seats. The single-member majority system therefore still greatly benefits Ensemble, which with its 245 seats , was able to cushion the disavowal suffered by its candidates.



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A defeat for Macron and his extreme presidentialism

It is nevertheless a real and profound political defeat for Macron. On the tarmac at Orly airport, leaving for Romania, the Tuesday before the second round, after refusing any debate with the other parties, he displayed a Trump-like posture, with a speech where he presented himself as the saviour of the Republic. Faced with "external and internal dangers", he urged the voters to give him an absolute majority directly, so that "no vote is missing from the Republic", that is to say from himself.

He hoped, moreover, to no longer be dependent on his centrist and Gaullist allies.

The slap in the face is all the more masterful. He hoped to renew the holdup carried out in 2017 on the Assembly and, after having brought about the collapse of the PS in 2017, benefit from the fall of the Gaullist party LR in 2022.

The problem is all the more serious for Macron since, for five years, he considered the National Assembly as a simple recording chamber for his personal decisions, without even thinking it necessary to structure a real party, the ministers of his government effectively serving as political spokespersons for his majority. Macron has aggravated the presidential drift of the regime of the Fifth Republic. This drift has been accentuated since 2002 by the reduction of the presidential term from seven to five years and the synchronization of presidential and legislative elections, the latter taking place automatically a few weeks after the presidential election. For 20 years, four times in a row, the elected president had brought a large majority of his supporters to the National Assembly. This 2002 reform aimed to stabilize the presidential regime by avoiding either a majority hostile to the president (resulting in "cohabitations" as in 1986, 1993 and 1997) or a coalition government as in 1988.

Macron is therefore confronted with a problem that is all the more serious in that his entire policy for the past five years has consisted in building his institutional power by crushing the two main traditional parties and keeping the far right and the anti-liberal left in the margins. The first objective has so far been achieved, the second is a fiasco and it is now the presidential party that is entering into a latent crisis. This is all the more so since Macron is clinging for the moment to his desire to govern alone, arguing for his presidential re-election. However, he only obtained 27.85% of the votes cast in the first round of this election last April.

The programme he has begun to outline in recent weeks: retirement at 65, a new plan to cut public spending, lower taxes on production and capital, is massively rejected, starting with the transition to retirement at 65.

The crisis opened by these results is therefore a slow-burning fuse. In many European countries accustomed to the absence of a majority for a party, minority or coalition governments are commonplace, but we are dealing with parliamentary regimes in which the monarchies or the presidency have no executive power. But Macron obviously wants to lead himself and apply "his programme". Wanting to minimize the consequences of his failure, he declares that the situation is not so serious and is comparable to that of Italy or Germany, whereas these are parliamentary regimes, very different from the French system.

Macron's choice for five years has been to play on the discredit of the old social-democratic and Gaullist institutional parties, worn out and discredited by their neoliberal policies. LREM has nevertheless poached and recycled dozens of ministers and deputies from these two currents. Although the question does not arise for the moment for the PS MPs of the NUPES, one of the scenarios for ending the crisis could have been a coalition with the Republicans, which could have represented a majority in the Assembly. But the Republicans have just escaped from a descent into Hell with this election and the party, already weakened by desertions to LREM and under very strong pressure from the far right, does not want to sign its death warrant by serving as a crutch for Macron. They rather hope to heal their wounds, count the blows taken by Macron and get back in the saddle for the next presidential election in which Macron will not be able to run again. Moreover, what Macron is looking for is not an alliance around a coalition programme. He still hopes to find MPs willing to support his programme (but he is 44 short). It is therefore, for the moment, a double rejection.

On the other hand, it is certain that the MEDEF, the French capitalists in general and the leaders of the EU will push for the establishment of a stable majority in the second economy of the European Union. For five years, Macron ensured the implementation of a supply policy in line with their interests, making possible substantial enrichment along the way, despite the failure of the pension reform and the mobilization of the Yellow Vests. The small depreciation pronounced after the legislative elections by the rating agencies, causing the spread of 10-year bond rates with Germany to widen slightly (the “spread”) is a small warning shot. It may indeed seem strange that two parties sharing broadly the same economic and social programme, the same allegiance to neoliberal policies, jeopardize in this way the continuation of a policy in conformity with capitalist interests, at a time when the situation will be increasingly perilous, with the ECB’s rate hike and the return to EU rules on budget deficits and public debt, all in a context of protracted war and rising inflation.

So, the capitalists and their agents in the media will surely raise their voices for a wake-up call. But, if the Republicans refuse to sacrifice their party, there is hardly any way out for Macron. The implementation of his policy with a minority government in such a hostile Assembly will only be possible by accepting concessions on each project, essentially on his right, therefore on the favorite themes of the right of the right and of the far right. The greatest risk is therefore a weak government under pressure from its right. Macron and his current prime minister seem ready for the moment to act in a piecemeal fashion, to muster the missing votes on bill after bill or at least obtain the abstention of certain MPs. We are therefore far from the declarations of certain MPs of En Marche welcoming a new role of debates and the construction of common projects. Macron’s policy will be “majority or minority I will get my projects through”. Power relations and power struggles will therefore be the key words.

The main enemy of the Macron camp was unambiguously the NUPES. Elisabeth Borne, the Prime Minister, renewed on Thursday, June 23 the declarations coming from the ranks of LREM: “LFI, like the RN, are not in the republican arc”, continuing in fact to trivialize the far right by putting it on the same plane as the anti-liberal left: “the extreme left is a danger as important as the extreme right”, there too, for the ex-minister Blanquer the heads to be beaten were on the side of the NUPES. On her part, the Minister for Ecological Transition, Amélie de Montchalin, called on MPs to vote against “far left anarchists”. Former Sports Minister Roxana Maracineanu called for “a Republican Front against the far left” when speaking of Rachel Kéké, NUPES candidate, former spokesperson for her fellow cleaning women at the Ibis Batignolles hotel, victorious after 22 months of strike against precariousness, overwork, sexism and racism. So many combats that are unbearable in Macron’s camp.

Abstention turned out to be the majority vote

If rates of abstention are rising steadily in France, they are following the European average for major elections. In France, unlike other European countries, the most important election is the presidential election. On the other hand, France is well in advance for the rate of abstention in the legislative elections. For the last two legislative elections (2017 and 2022) abstention was over 50 per cent, as part of a steady increase over 30 years. Abstention is highest in working-class neighborhoods and communes in urbanized areas and in many poor rural areas. As with every election, abstention is very marked at the generation level, going from 70 per cent among 18-24 year-olds to 35 per cent among the over 70s. Similarly, it is socially marked according to the level of diplomas and the level of income: 60 per cent abstention among manual workers, the same as in households with income of less than 1,250 euros a month.

This strong rise in abstention in this election has two chronic causes: a growing disavowal of

political institutions linked to the loss of confidence in the government parties. And a lack of interest in an election coming a few weeks after the presidential election which, usually, appears without issue because of the presidential nature of the regime. There, two phenomena neutralized each other: Macron's desire to "pass through" this election, as if everything had been settled in the presidential election, hence his frenzied refusal of any contradictory debate in the media, rightly fearing that a political debate would increase rejection of the president's candidates; Mélenchon's strategy of polarizing everything around the slogan "elect Mélenchon Prime Minister", (that is to say elect a majority of NUPES deputies allowing the establishment of a NUPES government) aimed at maintaining the popular mobilization of the presidential election. And the curves indeed show that the rejection of Macron and the NUPES campaign partially limited the increase in the number of abstentions, this election appearing to have a real stake for the first time in 20 years, with a clear polarization against Macron.

The RN succeeds in entering the political landscape

Macron played and lost vis-à-vis the RN. For five years, he voluntarily cultivated the favourite themes of the extreme right, security and putting the police on a pedestal, national identity, the rejection of migrants, Islamophobia, with in particular Darmanin, his Minister of Interior and Blanquer, his Minister of National Education, systematically encouraging all reactionary ideas. The RN and Zemmour therefore appeared, with benevolent support from the media, as pushing the political positions put forward by Macron on these themes to the end. Moreover, by cultivating the presence of the RN and making Le Pen his official opposition, Macron thought he would guarantee his re-election, presenting himself as the "democratic bulwark" against the RN. The discredit of the liberal left in the popular strata has also given free rein to the demagoguery of the RN seeking to appear as the defender of those left behind by globalization and the European Union. Even trying to appropriate the Yellow Vests movement and defend the purchasing power.... of French people.

These discourses systematically avoid any class discourse advancing the need to attack the capitalists and distribute the wealth for the benefit of the exploited . Consequently, over several elections, a reactionary class vote has converged, leaning as in many other countries towards authoritarian parties and a popular electorate, often coming from rural areas that have been largely impoverished in recent decades with the closure of businesses, the desertification of public services, the absence of any public policy. The RN has extended a dominant discourse since Chirac, Sarkozy and Valls who have cultivated a "white bloc" as Ugo Palheta puts it , advancing an inter-classist national interest in the face of the threat of "barbarians" from outside and inside, a bloc designating its enemy, the populations of the working-class suburbs, the Roma, immigrants and migrants as responsible for their situation. The bourgeoisie, having lost a stable social base among the popular classes through its neo-liberal policy, has sought to build a national consensus on the "values of the Republic" which badly conceal a racist and Islamophobic policy. This is both an ideological victory and a breeding ground for the extreme right. The National Front (now renamed RN) has benefited greatly from this context, especially over the last five years: in the presidential election, it went from 4.6 million votes in 2007 to 11.3 million in 2022.

Until now, it was the single-member voting system and the roadblock put in front of the candidates of the National Front by the traditional parties which prevented their presence in the National Assembly. The electoral fall of the Republicans and the PS, and the rejection of Macron's candidates, all this allowed the National Rally to obtain in the Assembly a representation in seats close to its electoral reality, and therefore to increase its means of pressure. and its political position. We can nevertheless note that the NUPES served as an electoral barrier to this progress by counterbalancing on the left the fall of social democracy. RN deputies focus on the North-East

quarter of France, the Mediterranean rim and a Gironde-Hérault axis in the South-West. The RN has so far stuck to a line of rejection of an alliance with the right and Ensemble, seeking to appear as a global alternative to the traditional right. It will weigh even more on the Gaullist party, the LR, whose presidential campaign borrowed largely from the theses of the RN.

What future for the NUPES?

Even without having achieved its official objective of winning the majority of the Assembly, La France Insoumise succeeded in progressing on two counts: it politically animated the campaign for the legislative elections, despite the refusal of debate by Macron and his ministers. It more than quadrupled its number of elected members (from 17 to 75) and succeeded in polarizing the PS and EELV on its programme in an agreement to present a single candidate in each constituency. In several urban regions and spectacularly in the Paris region, the NUPES carried out a real raid: all 12 seats in the popular department of Seine St Denis, all of eastern Paris (9 out of 18 constituencies). As such, with its 146 MPs, the NUPES, which came first in votes in the first round, appears to be the main pole of opposition, which is moreover on anti-liberal positions, breaking with all previous policies.

Moreover, in the presidential campaign, like that of the legislative elections, La France Insoumise has succeeded in bringing together a large number of activists from the social movement and “pushing to the left” the discourse of the PS and EELV (with the highlighting of Sandrine Rousseau, opponent of Yannick Jadot to be presidential candidate and sidelined during his campaign). Similarly, in the neocolonial overseas departments, in the wake of the very good results of Mélenchon, the polarization around the NUPES continued for these elections. Finally, even though most of its potential candidates were rejected by the leadership of LFI, the activists and groups in working-class neighbourhoods grouped together in “We are getting involved” supported the campaign of the anti-liberal rupture candidates of the NUPES, as the did the NPA.

Will the PS, PCF and EELV continue to play the NUPES card, now that they have each succeeded in forming a parliamentary group which allows them to act independently? Even though they owe their success to the space created by La France Insoumise, parliamentary logic and, the pressures coming from Macron’s ranks are likely to be stronger, in the name of realism, to counterbalance the manoeuvres of the Republicans and RN.

The main problem is that the NUPES is not a national militant alliance. Even around La France Insoumise, which remains a “gaseous” movement, there were hardly any cases where a unitary and open militant campaign was organized (this was the case in the 20th arrondissement of Paris around Danielle Simonnet, and in a few other places, notably in the Parisian region).

And so far, no signal is appearing to give priority to the militant organization of a political and social front extending nationally and locally the polarization created in recent weeks.

Yet this is the challenge for the weeks and months to come. We can rejoice that Macron is in an impasse and does not have a free hand, but he will want to implement his policy of social regression and that is what the capitalist groups will demand of him. Even without a stable majority, today there may be convergences within the real reactionary, capitalist majority which exists in the National Assembly and which will be able, even without giving him a free hand, to give Macron the means to implement at least part of the policies demanded by the MEDEF and the leaders of the European Union, and perhaps even to implement legislative proposals coming from the right and the extreme right. In any case, the balance of power to be created on the side of the exploited and the oppressed can be based on the hope and the political ground cleared by La France Insoumise and

the convergences built in recent months, but on condition of creating a new militant, popular, national and local dynamics to combat all the attacks and crises with which we are confronted . It is time to build a common front against all liberal and reactionary policies. The action of the LFI MPs can be a real point of support but cannot alone fulfill this task.

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P.S.

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