

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Europe, Great Britain > France > Political situation and debates (France) > **The electoral sequence in France: Resistance, but the oligarchy wins the (...)**

The electoral sequence in France: Resistance, but the oligarchy wins the first round

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The complete electoral sequence in France comprises a principal contest (the presidential election) and a more and more subordinate one (the legislative elections, which determine the composition of the National Assembly). Now that the sequence has been completed, we can draw an overall balance sheet, always provisional.

Contents

- [Oppose Macron in the street](#)
- [France Insoumise: a formidable](#)
- [The legislative elections](#)
- [Uncertainties, likely confront](#)

These elections take place within the framework of a semi-presidential system, borrowing from the characteristics of both a parliamentary system and a presidential system: the head of the executive, the President of the Republic, elected by universal suffrage, has strong powers but must obtain parliamentary support in order to govern. Emmanuel Macron and his movement “En marche” (now called “La République en marche”, REM) obtained an absolute majority in the Assembly. But they did so in a context of decomposition and recomposition on both the right and the left, whose dynamics and outcome are uncertain. The presidential election reflects the crisis of political identification and the splintering of the general landscape. The legislative elections confirmed this. This does not only affect political organizations. The social movement has been impacted and is faced with a crisis of strategy.

The good news, contrary to widespread fears, is that these elections were more polarized around social issues than around migration and security issues. It was a real moment of politicization, of popular education, but also of polemics among movements and supporters of the left.

Oppose Macron in the street, right away!

French political reality means that, in practice, the tone of the relationship of forces is given by the results of the presidential election, especially its first round.

Emmanuel Macron became president - without surprise, given the relentless media campaign to support him and given that his adversary was the National Front (FN). But he did it without assembling a massive vote based on conviction. He was elected thanks to a strong vote against Le Pen, to which was added a historically high number of blank and spoiled ballot papers and a very strong level of abstention. On the left and in the social and trade-union movement, the debate on what vote to call for was lively, reflecting the dilemma and the trap of the French presidential system, which saw a face-off between a supporter of untrammelled liberalism and the candidate of a

fascist party.

The National Front affirmed its national influence by winning the support of Gaullists of the traditionalist right who crossed the red line. It acquired a solid territorial implantation, particularly in Northern, Eastern and South-Eastern France. Fifteen years have passed since the 2002 presidential election, and Marine Le Pen doubled her father's score at that election around a programme that defends "national preference" and designates foreigners as being responsible for the crisis; but throughout the campaign her programme stressed social questions, with an anti-system profile. Marine Le Pen did not win, but the progression of her movement is constant and reaches voters with very diverse profiles. Having said that, the defeat of Marine Le Pen produced disappointment among her supporters, since her score did not surpass the 40 per cent mark that unofficially represented the threshold of success. Internally, criticism and tensions have erupted and there has been no hesitation in denouncing mistakes, notably those of Florian Philippot, one of those closest to the party president, who now evokes his departure if the National Front changes its line on the question of the exit from the euro. The founder of the National Front, Jean-Marie Le Pen, has questioned the strategy of the party, attributing its defeat to the influence of Philippot, which he considers to be too great. The knives will be out within the party. And within the Le Pen family. The divisions in the party are regrouped in two broad currents, two figures, and two regions. The trend embodied by Marine Le Pen and Florian Philippot is anchored in the North and East of France. Its line is clearly social, statist, anti-liberal and sovereigntist. It addresses the working class electorate of the FN.

The other current is represented by Marine le Pen's niece, Marion Maréchal-Le Pen, formerly an MP for the Vaucluse department. She has announced her temporary withdrawal from political life for personal reasons, but very few people would say that there is not a serious political conflict behind her decision. Her discourse highlights national and cultural identity, conservative and fundamentalist Catholicism. This current defends a liberal conception of the economy, where the state should concentrate on its core powers (army, police, borders). Its electorate is less working-class than in the North and more strongly represented in the world of business and trade: artisans, small employers and those, numerous in this region, who are nostalgic for French Algeria.

Emmanuel Macron is the product of the collapse of the vote in favour of the traditional right and left parties that have governed France for 45 years in an alternating or cohabiting way.

The results of the first round illustrate well the political and democratic crisis in France, which has led to a new stage in the crisis of the Fifth Republic, with the electoral defeat of the two parties, the Republicans and the Socialist Party (PS), who had organized until then the bipolarization of political life and the qualification of two presidential candidates for the second round... It is a real explosion of the political landscape that is under way.

The results of the primaries of the right and the PS were confirmed: the parties and the personnel who have dominated politics for decades were eliminated. The traditional clashes between the right and left government parties have been called into question: the same policies followed on both sides have tended to efface the divisions between the Republicans and the Socialists. The personalities of these parties were "kicked out" in the primaries of the right and then of the left. This was the case with Nicolas Sarkozy, President of the Republic from 2007 to 2012, of the Republicans, but also with Manuel Valls, Prime Minister of François Hollande from 2014 to 2016, in the Socialist Party. François Hollande did not even stand again, unlike all his predecessors who tried to win a second term, so great was his unpopularity.

Emmanuel Macron has thus become the receptacle of all the defenders of liberalism of recent decades. His "En Marche" movement is a sort of "recycling" movement that will accelerate the

decomposition of the Socialist Party and even the Republicans. Is this the final crisis of the Socialist Party that emerged from the congress of Épinay in 1971? The Socialist Party has entered a deep crisis. The candidacy of Benoît Hamon, who defeated Manuel Valls and symbolized the refusal of the policies of the five years of the Hollande presidency, was marginalized, with 6.4 per cent of the votes. Part of the PS tried to undermine his campaign by choosing to support Macron. By choosing not to rely on the dynamics of the primary, but to preserve the balance within the PS, Benoît Hamon found himself subjected to the double competition on his left and his right of the candidatures of Jean-Luc Mélenchon and Macron. Now (but belatedly) he has left the PS, launching a new movement that seeks to be intermediate between En Marche and France Insoumise. This follows the departure of Valls from the PS: the crisis in the PS is deepening, without it being certain that in the short term a new social-democracy can emerge in a credible fashion.

Emmanuel Macron, a former Rothschild banker coming from the financial world, has been built up and supported by all the major media groups and by business leaders such as Laurence Parisot, former president of the MEDEF (employers' organization). Benefiting from powerful financial support and from political figures coming, in an unprecedented way, from all sides, he succeeded in forcing the social-liberal current of the Socialist Party to openly accept an ultra-liberal programme and to make the left/right divide in the party explode. By his trajectory (as a former minister of Hollande) and by the voters he attracts, he comes from the governmental left. But by the ideological coherence he develops - liberalism openly affirmed, alliance with François Bayrou, leader of the Modem (centre right), and sectors of the right, he breaks any kind of ties with the social movement; he has succeeded in drawing sectors of the left towards what constitutes a new right. The Macron phenomenon is the result of a degradation of the relationship of forces, which has crystallized evolutions that had been embryonic for several years (construction of liberal Europe, adaptation to the logic of the market, individualism, left-right alliance...).

He gave the illusion of representing a break with the past (young, neither right-nor left, without a party), but he represents a continuity. He was part of the government of Hollande, he supported the labour law, enacted by the former PS government, which abolished many forms of legal protections in employer/employee relations and which provoked a long social confrontation. He even wants to reinforce it, with an offensive programmed at breaking down social rights by governing by ordinance (which makes it possible to eliminate almost any control by the Parliament). The calendar of counter-reforms has already been announced: in the autumn a new law to destroy the labour code and then in early 2018 a historic change in the pension system, moving to a "notional account", without excluding a further rise in the official age of retirement. Macron is a virulent advocate of free trade, such as the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) between the European Union and Canada... He is a liberal, anti-social European and his friend Junker, President of the European Commission, has just reminded him that "the French spend too much". Macron is already planning budget cuts in public spending and will rely on the "balance sheet" of the former government to free himself from some of his promises, and once again accentuate austerity choices.

The challenge is therefore to oppose him right away, in the streets, by a united front of all those who proclaim that they want to resist him.

France Insoumise: a formidable campaign dynamic!

For the third time since the introduction of universal suffrage for the election of the President of France, the "left" was absent from the second round. But the dynamics of the campaign of Jean-Luc Mélenchon represent undoubtedly a major event for the reconstruction of a real left. He pulled off a major exploit, with nearly 20 per cent of the votes cast, representing just over 7 million votes. By

arriving fourth in the first round, he made a remarkable breakthrough. This success was rooted in the strength of the rejection of the politics of Hollande and Valls, in the social mobilizations, the labour law, the Nuit Debout movement, the ecological and democratic movements that have developed in recent years. The candidacy of Jean-Luc Mélenchon polarized the majority of left-wing voters (as witnessed by the parallel weakening of voting intentions for Benoît Hamon of the Socialist Party) and of many abstentionists. In particular, he achieved significant success in working-class neighbourhoods, among workers and youth. For the first time, a left-wing candidate opposing the PS's governmental policy and its hegemony was seen as representing a credible prospect of gaining power and not as a means of pressure from the left on the PS. The campaign of Jean-Luc Mélenchon imposed him as the main candidate of the left against liberalism. This was possible through the programme, which, although not strictly anti-capitalist, is quite radical: refusal of austerity, democracy and a Sixth Republic, ecological transition, integral social security, equality of rights... A campaign resonating with the social struggles of recent years.

The major, decisive point after so many years of disappointment, after the mobilizations against the labour law, was first of all a snarling and definitive break with the Socialist Party, foreseeing that anything concerning the PS would be swept away in the very centralized confrontation that characterized this presidential election. This led to a political break with the Left Front, the alliance formed in 2009 between Jean-Luc Mélenchon's Left Party and the French Communist Party (PCF), and with the Communist Party's hesitations concerning the Socialist Party.

The choice that was made was to build a movement from below, outside of parties: France Insoumise, with a way of functioning that was horizontal and at the same time very vertical. The main decisions were in the hands of a small group around the candidate. But this was combined with the undeniable "free" vitality at local level, in a massive way, and with the support (obtained by commitments on the internet) of nearly 500,000 people. The parties (or factions of parties) that committed to France Insoumise had a specific "political space" where they could put forward their proposals, without it being possible at this stage to draw a concrete balance sheet of that experience. But it is true that the promise to break with the "traditional parties" convinced many people to support the process. On these two questions of democratic functioning and the place of various currents of ideas, heirs to specific political histories, the debate will open in the aftermath of the legislative elections, when it is a question of perpetuating the movement. Then the thorny question of the relationship with social movements will also have to be discussed. We cannot say that FI is cut off from these movements, since the general programme and the material dealing with specific sectors are, in the end, often copied and pasted from what each of the social movements produced. But these movements are not taken into account as such and, to date, the mobilization of FI members remains purely electoral (there are few FI activists as such involved in supporting migrants, irrespective of questions of "line", "or in feminist mobilizations). Is it just because of the elections or is there a more lasting problem to be resolved?

Mélenchon also understood the highly productive use of new means of propaganda, with a real generational break among the organizers of his campaign. He was able to put forward and defend a radical, ecologist, Keynesian programme, democratic on the institutional level. The successful demonstration in Paris for a Sixth Republic showed that the dynamics of the campaign were in tune with the crisis of the political regime and its system of representativeness. Mélenchon has also particularly developed the theme of ecological transition, with the abandonment of nuclear and fossil energies, a strong axis in the development of arguments to build alternatives to this society.

There were points that led to disagreements and polemics on the left: on the Syrian question, on geostrategic questions, and on the freedom of immigrants to settle here. The suppression of the singing of the Internationale, keeping only the Marseillaise at the end of meetings, and the abundant presence of red, white and blue flags at every initiative was questioned. Would this affirmed

patriotism drive people from the working-class neighborhoods away? Some people went so far as to believe that this was a way of attracting the voters of the National Front...

In the end, Mélenchon was very well received in working-class neighbourhoods. Because there the links with the PS had been cut. He sent signals that were perceived as deeply friendly, otherwise he would not have had 37 per cent of the Muslim vote. What we see as problematic "patriotic" or even imperial signs were not perceived as such. When he says to Le Pen "stop talking about religion" it is understood as "let us live in peace". This made possible an increased mobilization of the popular layers for Mélenchon and assured him pole position against Benoît Hamon. This was very marked in Marseilles, where Jean-Luc Mélenchon (with 24.82 per cent) came in ahead of the FN (23.66 per cent).

There were lively debates defending the idea of unity between Jean-Luc Mélenchon and Benoît Hamon before the first round. This rapprochement was initially associated with the hope of a single candidacy of the two candidates, sharing a left reformist optic and likely have a bigger impact. The many petitions in this sense expressed this hope in various forms. But the respective strategic projects of these two candidates, although close in many respects, were strictly contradictory with any renunciation of one of them in favour of the other. After the Socialist primaries, Hamon believed he could maintain at all costs the unity of a moribund PS. It made no sense for Jean-Luc Mélenchon to join with him. Reciprocally, joining France Insoumise meant for Hamon putting a cross on his strategy of the primary and the recomposition of the PS. Except that this strategy was condemned to finish in a dead-end, as shown by the current splintering of the PS, with Hamon leaving the party and launching a new movement, while historic figures such as Martine Aubry and Anne Hidalgo (mayor of Paris) are launching another one. Not to mention all those who have joined Macron...

Jean-Luc Mélenchon attracted an electorate that was young (29 per cent among 18-24-year olds), unemployed (32 per cent), working in white-collar (24 per cent) and blue-collar (25 per cent) jobs. Although he marginally bit into the electorates of the FN (4 per cent) and the right (3 per cent), the main result of his campaign was to remobilize the left electorate, which had abstained in intermediate elections (regional, municipal).

Jean-Luc Mélenchon and the campaign of France Insoumise made it possible for debates to focus on subjects other than Islam and immigration and succeeded in reducing the influence of the FN in certain neighbourhoods. By demonizing Mélenchon in the last week before the first round, the media consciously helped the FN. Their cynical calculation was probably that this would facilitate the election of Macron in the second round...

The legislative elections confirm the essential lessons

France's majority electoral system, with two rounds, has a powerful multiplier effect. With 33 per cent of votes in the first round, Macron's party secured an absolute majority, but less solid than the polls had announced. Especially, the level of abstention was massive, breaking records by a long way. So much so that this majority actually represents a small minority of the population. It will be endowed with exorbitant powers, and brutal anti-popular offensives will succeed one another. It is impossible to say whether it will be successful or if the weakness of its roots will make things difficult for it. The old right is clearly weakened, and furthermore it is profoundly divided as to its attitude towards the new majority. And this is nothing compared to the PS, which has been steamrollered and is also still divided between support to Macron, opposition and abstention. The general political crisis is thus largely confirmed. The FN has suffered a very serious setback compared to its presidential results. This is what usually happens to it, but this time it is much more

marked. It is being confirmed that the internal damage will be serious and delicate to repair. Since the far right has suffered many setbacks in Europe recently, there may be a new phenomenon of serious difficulties.

The forces that supported Mélenchon were divided, a combined effect of the Communist Party overestimating its own influence and a rather closed attitude on the part of FI. Moreover, abstention had particularly negative effects on FI, essentially rooted in the younger vote, the vote of workers and employees, of working-class neighbourhoods, which were precisely the most abstentionist strata. But the overall score remains high, more than 11 per cent for FI and 2.7 per cent for the PCF. As a percentage, that is 5 per cent less than the presidential election, but twice as much as the Left Front in 2012. The PCF emerges very much weakened politically, even though it managed to retain a parliamentary group. For the first time in its history, the radical left, with 17 elected representatives, will have a parliamentary group that should be a solid base to face up to the tough battles ahead.

Uncertainties, likely confrontations, potentialities

In the end, and for the moment, Macron seems to have pulled off a double operation. His own election, obviously. But also the serious weakening of the PS and now the possibility of fracturing the right. Many sectors of the PS and the right who have not yet joined him are willing to do so. With his hands apparently free to launch the liberal offensive dreamed of by the employers and the European Commission, which has been more or less contested and slowed down up to now. But these political successes do not cancel out the image of a deeply fractured country that was revealed in the first round of the presidential election. And although the incontestable social fatigue after so many defeats can favour Macron's policy, it is just as much possible that, by means of such and such a measure, this or that event, the country finds the road to a confrontation that may turn out to be brutal. This will take place under the threat of the far right, which is certainly affected by serious divisions, but which nevertheless obtained 34 per cent of the votes in the second round of the presidential election. Fortunately, an almost equivalent bloc appeared on the left, in the first round of the presidential election (with a very high level of electoral participation), which was lacking until then, and which will perhaps provide a basis for these possible confrontations to have a favourable outcome. Provided that the promises contained in this left-wing vote can really be concretized in the existence of a force that is new, democratic and linked to the social movement in its diversity. For the moment, only a convention of France Insoumise is planned for the autumn. What is needed is a "constituent process". The debate is open and we must get involved in it.

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P.S.

* <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article5083>

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