

Parliament: Setback for Macron in 'third round' of French elections

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Dave Kellaway reports on the first round of the French parliamentary elections.

Gérald Darmanin, the French interior minister, the same politician who blamed the Liverpool fans for the debacle of the Champions league final a few weeks ago, did his best to massage the election results. He tried to define some left candidates as not really being part of the left coalition so that the overall vote for the coalition was reduced. Respected news outlets like *Le Monde* did not stand for it and declared the New Popular Ecological and Social Union (NUPES) the winners by a small margin. No wonder Darmanin was trying to fiddle the figures; this is the first time in the history of the Fifth Republic that a recently elected president has failed to come first in the parliamentary elections that immediately follow the Presidential race.

The margin of victory for the coalition led by Jean-Luc Mélenchon was around half a percentage point. NUPES scored 26% followed by Macron's Ensemble on 25% and Le Pen's far right National Rally (RN) came in at just under 20%. French politics is still currently structured around these three political blocs. The traditional conservative party which came out of the Gaullist tradition, the Republicans (LR), got 11%.

Notable successes for the left included the election of Danièle Obono, a black woman leader of the LFI who had received much abuse from the right and the first place of Stéphane Ravacley, a left wing baker who did a successful 11 day hunger strike to stop his 18 year old Guinean apprentice being deported. He beat Macron's candidate.

Since it is a first past the post electoral system over two rounds, the popular vote will not translate into the same proportion of seats. At the moment NUPES is projected to get between 150 and 190 seats whereas Ensemble is predicted to get between 255 and 295. A working majority is 289 so at the moment it is likely, but not certain, that Macron will just about do that. Of course Macron could govern without 289 seats by doing deals with the other blocs, particularly the LR, but it would make it more difficult to get controversial legislation through like increasing the retirement age.

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Education, Blanquer, in the first round. His attacks on teachers have received their just desserts. Macron has still failed to create a solid political base. His success has always been based on skilful manoeuvring, taking advantage of the crisis and decline of the mainstream left and right of centre parties. At the same time the rise of the hard right and fascists allow him to present himself as the safe alternative to the extreme right. Today he is trying to extend the notion of bullwark against extremes by red baiting Mélenchon. His ministers keep talking about a French Chávez or a risk to the French role in the European Union.

Despite the good showing of the left, particularly compared to 2017 when there was no unity among the left and ecologists, the slogan put forward by the France Unbowed (La France Insoumise - LFI) of 'Mélenchon Prime Minister!' will not become reality. It will be the main opposition bloc in parliament and its political centre of gravity will be more radical than the previous social liberal Socialist Party. The LFI will have the biggest number of MPs within the left/ecologist alliance. On paper the LFI has an even more radical left social democratic programme than Corbyn's.

Only 47% of the French electorate bothered to vote, a new low for these elections. This expresses a real disgust at and alienation from the political system. It also shows both the difficulty and opportunity for the left coalition. Even before the first round, the left recognised that one way of completely blocking Macron was to convince the abstainers to vote for progressive reform. Current projections of seats could change significantly if there were to be a big mobilisation and a cut in the rate of abstention. Mélenchon made his post election speech centre on the nation of 'deferlement' - general mobilisation for the second round.

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Although the NUPES are through to the second round in over 300 seats, there is a much smaller stock of potential votes from those parties which did not make it through. NUPES already regrouped the whole of the left except for candidates of Lutte Ouvrière (Workers Struggle), which always rejected the coalition, and the few supported by the NPA (New Anti-Capitalist Party), which generally voted for NUPES except where social liberal PS candidates were standing. These currents only got about 1.4% of the vote and so will not weigh heavily.

On the other hand, Macron can expect to pick up a good part of the LR vote whether its candidates are standing against NUPES or the hard right RN. Where NUPES are running off against the RN the LR vote is more likely to go to the hard right. Leaders of Macron's coalition have been much more ambivalent about supporting NUPES candidates against the RN as a 'republican duty'. Some have come out clearly for a NUPES vote while others say that it has to be on a case by case basis since some NUPES candidates do not share 'republican values'. Of course, Macron was happy to bleat on about solidarity with republican values when he relied on left voters voting for him in the second round of the presidential elections in order to defeat Le Pen.

The near 20% for Le Pen is much better than in 2017 and is a success for her reactionary current. It will help to further embed her hard right politics in the political institutions. This time she is more

confident about getting the 15 seats needed to have an official parliamentary group which confers definite advantages. It will further change the relationship of forces between her current and the mainstream rightwing. Her absolute refusal to make any agreement with the pro-Vichy, fascist Éric Zemmour has paid off politically. He even failed to make the second round in a constituency where he had done well in the presidential elections. It looks like he is very much a busted flush – a balloon pumped up by the media in the preliminary phase of the presidential elections. Le Pen's continued threat to the left is her popularity among some working class communities.

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Any weakening of the dominant class enemy is always helpful to working people's struggle to defend their gains and build a fairer society. Macron has to get his reforms through parliament and therefore a working majority is important. It is a practical motivation for people to vote left in the second round. Even if, as likely, NUPES fails to block Macron in parliament, the fact of having around 100 MPs on a radical left position could well help any mobilisations. The social liberal PS will not be the leadership of the left.

The anti-capitalist and revolutionary left will be doing their best to mobilise for the second round but will also be calling on NUPES to develop the struggles outside parliament. If you cannot stop reactionary bills going through parliament, you have to do it by mobilising forces on the streets. In recent decades, France has seen various neo-liberal reforms, including by Macron, stopped by mass demonstrations and strikes. Progress in the unity of the left and greens can give confidence to such movements.

Dave Kellaway

P.S.

- Anti*Capitalist Resistance. 14 Jun 2022:
<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/setback-for-macron-in-third-round-of-french-elections/>
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