

POLITICS

The Bourgeois Bloc - France, after the presidential and parliamentary elections

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“Just a few months ago, the French political situation seemed to be smiling on Emmanuel Macron. In a contest against Marine Le Pen, whom he had crushed five years earlier, his return to the Élysée seemed all but assured. In the end, though, only the first part of this scenario came to pass. The results of the National Assembly elections therefore came as a shock. Where the RN previously had eight deputies, it will now have 89.”

Just a few months ago, the French political situation seemed to be smiling on Emmanuel Macron. Since his election as president in 2017 there had been no shortage of crises: social (the gilets jaunes), health (the Covid pandemic), diplomatic (the war in Ukraine). Most French people also believed that his record was poor (56%); that the country had deteriorated over the last five years (69%); that his programme was dangerous (51%); and that he had predominantly served the interests of the privileged (72%). Yet, in a contest against Marine Le Pen, whom he had crushed five years earlier, Macron’s return to the Élysée seemed the most likely outcome – in fact, all but assured. It was widely predicted that, having vanquished a far right divided between Le Pen and Éric Zemmour, and a left split between the ‘radical’ La France insoumise (LFI) and the more ‘moderate’, more liberal, more Atlanticist Socialist Party (PS) and Greens (EELV), Macron would make short work of his opponents in the subsequent parliamentary elections.

In the end, though, only the first part of this scenario came to pass. President Macron was indeed re-elected and the left excluded – though only just – from the second round of voting. This is no small matter: neither Nicolas Sarkozy in 2012 nor François Hollande in 2017 managed to win a second term. But they were not lucky enough to find themselves in a run-off against the far right. Macron’s re-election nonetheless indicated a worrying trend. When the National Front first made it to the second round in 2002, after unexpectedly beating the Socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, Jean-Marie Le Pen captured only 18% of the electorate. In 2017, Marine Le Pen nearly doubled her father’s score. And this year she won 41% – 2.6 million more than in 2017 – while Macron’s vote fell by 2 million.

Few seemed troubled by this when the results were announced on 24 April. With the incumbent having secured a second term, most commentators assumed that the Rassemblement National (RN) – penalized by the two-round simple majority voting system and refusing any alliance with Zemmour – would win a derisory number of parliamentary seats. The only contest that seemed to matter was between Macron’s coalition, Ensemble, and the one that Jean-Luc Mélenchon had succeeded in forming around LFI, which brought the PS and EELV under its control. Mélenchon had even proclaimed that if his coalition, the Nouvelle unité populaire écologiste et sociale (NUPES), won, he would become Prime Minister, responsible for the country’s economic and social policy. Le Pen, meanwhile, seemed so resigned to defeat that she limited her ambitions to thirty seats out of the

total 577. Suffice to say that no one was interested in her campaign, which was largely concentrated on her own district in Pas-de-Calais.

The results of the National Assembly elections therefore came as a shock. Where the RN previously had eight deputies, it will now have 89, making it the third largest parliamentary grouping after Macron's 245-seat coalition and Mélenchon's 151-seat opposition. Without any support from French elites, without a serious programme or compelling electoral campaigns, and with little militant activity or grassroots organizing between election cycles, the far right nonetheless continues to advance. Since it appears unimaginable that Le Pen could become President or Prime Minister, backing her carries little risk, and allows voters to express their frustration when the price of petrol rises or violence erupts outside the Stade de France.

The RN already had strongholds in the north and east of the country, where the scars of industrial outsourcing remain raw. But the party is now spreading its web across the entire country, with the exception of Brittany, most big cities (Paris, Lyon, Grenoble, Bordeaux, Rennes) and suburbs with large immigrant populations, such as in Seine-Saint-Denis. In Aude, a former outpost of the left near the Spanish border, the RN now holds all three seats, including that once occupied by Léon Blum, head of the Popular Front government (1936-38). Le Pen has just been re-elected with a large mandate in the Pas-de-Calais, an old fiefdom of the French Communist Party (PCF), one of whose famous deputies was Maurice Thorez, a former miner who led the party for more than thirty years.

This consolidation of the far right reflects both the failure of Macron, now deprived of a parliamentary majority, as well as that of the left, which remains a minority in the country, particularly beyond the big cities and suburbs. Upon entering the Élysée in 2017, Macron claimed that his election would stem the far right's surge. The Economist ran a cover image of the youthful new President - 'Europe's saviour?' - walking on water. Under his leadership, it was assumed, France would become a happy isle in the tormented West. For a global bourgeoisie terrified by Brexit and Trump, his arrival on the international scene was the sweetest revenge, heralding the retreat of right-wing populism and the return of the liberal centre. And for once, the good news came from France!

But the illusion did not last long. Eighteen months later, the movement of the gilets jaunes exploded. On 15 December 2018, three of its activists read an address to President Macron from the Place de l'Opéra. 'This movement belongs to no one and everyone', they declared. 'It is the expression of a people who for forty years has seen itself dispossessed of anything that enables it to believe in its future and its greatness.' No political party or trade union had organized the uprisings, whose participants were mostly drawn from isolated areas, far from public services or media attention: a sort of Gallic fly-over known as la France périphérique.

Revolutionary and patriotic, the new sans-culottes had identified their Louis XVI and some dreamed of a similar end for him. In Macron, they saw an arrogant young banker in the pocket of the multinationals which had dismantled their factories and torn apart their communities. It was difficult to imagine a starker contrast between what the gilets jaunes represented, where they came from and what they thought, and the social and political coalition embodied by the President. The scale of repression meted out to the former was stunning (2,500 were wounded, 24 lost an eye, four an arm). Eventually the movement waned, but in rural areas where it had been powerful, Le Pen and the RN capitalized on its discontent more effectively than Mélenchon and NUPES.

Macron's 'bourgeois bloc' [\[1\]](#), as Bruno Amable and Stefano Palombarini have termed it, is not an invention of the President himself. It is a political configuration born out of the liberal turn of the left, or what passed for it after it broke with the popular sectors and trade unions. Macron represents a distinctively French iteration of the strategy pioneered by Gary Hart in his 1983

presidential campaign against Walter Mondale, and then pursued by Clinton, Blair, Schröder, d'Alema and Obama over the subsequent decades. In France, what facilitated this merger between a moderately reactionary neoliberal right and a 'modernizing' left infatuated with free markets and globalization was the question of European integration.

From 1983, the Socialists François Mitterrand and Jacques Delors were the architects of Europe's single market and capital liberalization laws. In 1992, in a dazzling prefiguration of what became the bourgeois bloc, Mitterrand and Chirac, who had clashed during the presidential election four years earlier, joined forces in the Maastricht Treaty referendum to advocate for a Yes vote. They rallied a novel coalition of right- and left-wing bourgeois behind them: managers, executives, professionals, as well as teachers, artists, intellectuals. On the other side, opposing the Treaty, was a disparate group of popular actors including the PCF, some Gaullists, the far right and Jacobin Socialists such as Jean-Pierre Chevènement. Despite a lopsided media campaign, the Yes campaign won by only a narrow margin, 51% to 49%.

Thirteen years later, roughly the same coalitions re-formed during another referendum on the proposed European Constitution. Hollande and Sarkozy appeared together on the front cover of Paris Match to endorse the Yes campaign. But this time, closer European integration was decisively rejected, 55% to 45%. In the interim, globalization had advanced, and a sizeable section of the insecure petite-bourgeoisie had come to loathe the neoliberal policies associated with the EU. For those who still needed it, Hollande and Sarkozy's photo shoot was proof that the traditional left-right cleavage concealed a basic convergence. So when Macron, then Economy Minister under Hollande, resigned from the government in 2016 to forge an alliance with the liberal right intended to override these outdated cleavages, most of the work had already been done for him.

Many in Macron's inner circle were once close to Dominique Strauss-Kahn, the Socialist grandee who was appointed Economy Minister under Jospin before becoming the Managing Director of the IMF. As early as 2002, Strauss-Kahn had laid out a plan for the Socialists to retain power without abandoning the neoliberal programme that cut them off from their popular constituency. His recommendation was simple: the party should not only resign itself to doing without working-class voters; it should learn to actively distrust those who previously formed its social base. The PS, he wrote in his book *The Flame and the Ashes*, must ignore the proletarian strata who 'do not vote for it, for the simple reason that, most often, they do not vote at all', and instead pitch itself to a 'prudent, informed and educated' layer. Rather than lamenting the embourgeoisement of the Socialists, Strauss-Kahn described this as a political and moral imperative: 'Regrettably, we cannot always expect serene participation in a parliamentary democracy from the most disadvantaged group. Not that it is uninterested in history, but its irruptions into it sometimes manifest themselves in violence.' Fifteen years later, the gilets jaunes would demonstrate as much to Macron, who welded the two fractions of the bourgeoisie into one hegemonic force, defined against the 'deplorables' protesting in the streets.

At this year's election, Macron managed to retain the support of Hollande's electorate in the first round of vote in spite of the regressive policies pursued by his administration: abolishing wealth taxes, reducing social protections for workers, dismantling the rights of the unemployed and laying the groundwork for railway privatization. Ever since the Fifth Republic introduced universal suffrage in presidential elections - that is, from 1965 onwards - every second round of the vote has included a candidate from the traditional right or the traditional left (and often one facing off against the other). This precedent has been shattered in the most spectacular fashion. Whereas in 2012 the Socialists and centre-right totted up almost 56% of the vote between them, by 2022 that figure had fallen to 6.5%. The incumbent has become the choice of the liberal right as well as the bourgeois post-left, which has become increasingly accustomed to (and satisfied with) neoliberal reforms.

Macron likes to present himself as the originator of this coalition, even though it long predates his presidency. As he explained two days before the vote, 'The radical centre project' rests on 're-grouping several political families, from social-democracy to ecology, the centre, and the right that is part-Bonapartist and part-Orleanist and pro-European'. Sociologically, the bourgeois bloc is defined by this strange synthesis. Ensemble is the 'party of order', of property owners and business people. It is a coalition of all those who were scared by the gilets jaunes and reassured by its ferocious repression. In affluent areas like Neuilly or Versailles, Macron's score has doubled in the last five years, allowing him to flatten the candidate of the official right, Valérie Pécresse, who could only distinguish herself by outbidding him on security and xenophobia (thereby helping to legitimize Le Pen, who looked almost moderate by comparison.) Once Pécresse was successfully 'triangulated', Macron then turned to the left's electorate to beat Le Pen. And when this was achieved, he equated Mélenchon with Le Pen - les extrêmes - in order to dissuade his voters from backing NUPES candidates (who might have formed an parliamentary majority) against RN (which had no chance of doing so). With such cynical manoeuvring, Macron has largely discredited the old idea of a 'Republican front' against the far right.

Behind Macron's centrist project, then, is assembled a conservative electorate of well-heeled pensioners and executives, in proportions that increase with age and income. An exceptional participation rate (88% of 60-69 year olds turned out to vote in the presidential election) amplifies its electoral impact, whereas supporters of Mélenchon and Le Pen are less inclined to use the ballot box (only 54% of 25-34 year olds participated in the first round, down from 72% in 2017). For Mélenchon, winning a parliamentary majority was contingent upon mobilizing large numbers of voters under the age of 35. This was not to be. Yet his campaign achieved several of its key objectives. Most impressively, it demolished the sections of the left that had embraced the right's economic orthodoxies. Given the declining popularity of Podemos in Spain, Die Linke in Germany and the Communists and Left Bloc in Portugal, not to mention the capitulation of Syriza in Greece, this was a significant outcome - a French exception of sorts.

Mélenchon won 21.95% of votes cast on 10 April, against a mere 4.63% for the EELV and 1.74% for the PS. That enabled him to form an electoral alliance on his terms: increasing the minimum wage, expanding the state sector, lowering of the retirement age, environmental planning, rent controls, higher taxes on high-earners and reinstatement of the wealth tax abolished by Macron. Moreover, Mélenchon's platform involved defying the European treaties insofar as they would impede his policies - a stance imposed by LFI on the reluctant Socialists and Greens. NUPES may not have won a majority, but it allowed the Socialists and Communists to maintain their seat share, the EELV to form a parliamentary group, and LFI to soar from seventeen to 75 deputies.

LFI triumphed in overseas territories and advanced in larger towns - increasing its popularity among the young, educated middle classes, some of whom voted for Macron in 2017. The party also made a breakthrough in the banlieues. Its new parliamentary intake includes militants such as Rachel Keke, an Ivoirian-born former housekeeper who became famous for leading a successful strike of precarious workers at the Ibis hotel in Batignolles, Paris. But despite these encouraging signs, the left made little progress in terms of votes in the country as a whole. It fared badly in rural areas and in the former mining, automobile and steel communities of the deindustrialized north and east, where the far right expanded its presence.

Of course, this rightward drift is not unique to France. Lorraine and Pas-de-Calais have their equivalents in Germany's Saxony, America's Midwestern rustbelt and England's Red Wall. Across the West, the left is struggling to unify three heteroclitic groups that are indispensable to its electoral victory: the educated bourgeoisie, the proletarians of the inner cities, and the popular classes in peripheral areas and the countryside. Often, in the absence of powerful organizations that can forge ties between these groups, distinct political identities are formed, and firmed up, around

issues as diverse as immigration, religion, car use or hunting. A 'wall of values' has been erected between different sections of this potential progressive coalition which has enabled the rise of the extreme right. A left-wing electoral campaign every five years is not enough to heal such divisions, which are relentlessly exacerbated by the media and online networks. The bourgeois bloc, by contrast, has a clearer sense of its shared interests, and can more effectively contain internal conflicts.

However, even in the absence of a unified opposition, the new composition of the National Assembly may prevent Macron from implementing his reforms - in particular, the one most important to him and to the European Commission: raising the retirement age from 62 to 65. LFI and the RN oppose the measure, as does a majority of the population. And the gilets jaunes have demonstrated that even an authoritarian president can sometimes be forced to retreat in the face of popular anger. Now, with his majority gone and discontent simmering, Macron will struggle to impose his will.

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P.S.

- Sidecar. NLR 30 JUNE 2022:
<https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/the-bourgeois-bloc?pc=1453>
 - Translated by Gregory Elliott.
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Footnotes

- [1] <https://www.versobooks.com/books/3187-the-last-neoliberal>