

# **First round of French presidential election: Macron President - a continuity candidate amid the rubble of a political earthquake**

Monday 24 April 2017, by [KELLAWAY Dave](#) (Date first published: 24 April 2017).

**So in the end the polls were accurate, writes Dave Kellaway. Official results with 97% votes counted put Macron on 23.86%, Le Pen on 21.43%, Fillon on 19.94%, Melenchon on 19.62%, Hamon on 6.35% and the two revolutionary left candidates, Philippe Poutou (for the NPA, New Anti-Capitalist party) on 1.10% and Nathalie Arthaud (Lutte Ouvriere, Workers' Struggle) on 0.65%. Abstention was only up by a point or so. The polls were right on the order and more or less on the figures.**

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Overall it confirms three things. Firstly, yet another example of the crisis of political representation of mainstream political parties – the PS (Socialist Party) and the LR (Republicans) received less than 30% of the vote and these two forces have normally been in the second round run-offs since the beginning of the Vth Republic in 1958. Secondly it confirms the overall political shift to the right that we have seen elsewhere with the election of Trump and Brexit. If you add the votes of the pro-austerity parties running from the far right to the more centrist Macron you have nearly 70%. Thirdly, there is a radical polarisation both on the right with the FN (National Front led by Marine le Pen) and on the left with France Insoumise (France Unbowed led by Melenchon). These points suggest a political earthquake has taken place but if you really examine Macron and his movement you can see there is a lot more continuity that you might imagine from the way the media has presented it.

## **Why did Macron win?**

The media both here and in France have tended to portray him as some sort of brilliant talent who has managed to create a movement from nothing in one year. However the actions of three other politicians – Fillon, Bayrou and Hamon – provide a much more rounded explanation. Fillon's corrupt use of parliamentary money to pay his wife and children for fictitious jobs meant the favourite fell at the first fence. Although he managed to come back a little to sneak third place in the end. Bayrou is a leader of a centre party in France and has got respectable scores in previous Presidential elections, as high as 18% in 2007. He threw his lot in with Macron for a promise of 40 places on the eventual Macron slate for the general elections in early June. Finally the victory of Hamon who is on the left of the PS over the favourite Valls, who was Hollande's prime minister, meant that Macron could soak up moderate PS voters. He was further helped by a number of big SP beasts such as

Colomb and Valls coming out in open support.

Furthermore Macron's pro-austerity neo-liberalism – shown by his role as Hollande's economics minister who tried to bring in a regressive labour law – meant that he was quickly picked up by the key capitalist sectors and the dominant media as their plan B after the Fillon fiasco. Consequently it was relatively easy for Macron to carry out a reasonably smart marketing exercise. At 39 he would be the youngest ever president and he combines neo-liberal economics with more socially liberal attitudes on migration, abortion, gay rights and so on. He was able to win younger generation voters particularly those who are clearly anti-FN. Although he was a banker and a Hollande minister the fact that he was never in the PS and he formed his own movement, En Marche, only a year ago, meant that he could present himself as an outsider who was renewing the political system. His victory speech focussed on this generational shift. He has adapted the neither left nor right mantra into the formula both right and left, claiming to take the best policies from each side.

Yesterday he suggested that his slate for the general election would be 50% candidates from civil society who have not been elected before and then 50% split between existing politicians from the right, centre and left. Of course the problem for a completely new movement is how to win parliamentary seats which require more of a local base and an apparatus. One of the post-election debates has been the possibility of what they call here, cohabitation, where the President does not have his or her own majority in parliament. No doubt he hopes to put together refugees from the right, the Valls wing of the PS and the Bayrou people to have that majority. Nevertheless this does imply some volatility and opens opportunities for a fighting left to resist pro-austerity policies.

### **Challenge for the left**

The strength of resistance to a neo-liberal Macron government depends to some extent on how the left can recover from the right wing victory and build on the radicalisation within the left vote with the nearly 20% achieved by Melenchon. You have to go back to Gaston Defferre's vote in 1969 to get a worst PS vote than Hamon's. The crisis in the PS opened up dramatically as soon as Hamon beat Valls for the nomination. As a party focussed on elections its main priority now is to save as many seats as it can in the general elections – if the Hamon score is repeated then they will have hardly any seats. Macron, despite his talk of renewal, will certainly welcome a certain number of PS sitting candidates onto his slate. What will the PS leadership decide? Will they try to come to a deal with Melenchon. The latter is very much the playmaker on the left at the moment.

Melenchon's score was eight percentage points better than in 2012. On the one hand this can be seen as progress of a radical anti-austerity left. The movement was very centralised and controlled by the Melenchon team but there were hundreds and hundreds of local committees drawing in experienced and newer, often younger activists. His vote is more than double that of the PS. Just this vote can give confidence to people identifying with the left. On the other hand how much of the progress in his score can be explained by the significant shift in the politics of his campaign from that of 2012? It could be defined this time very much as a left populism. Even though there were excellent progressive policies that are unacceptable to the ruling class nationalist tones dominated. This is part of his post-results speech:

*"My fine country, my beautiful homeland and you all the people can be proud of what we have undertaken and achieved. We are a conscious and enthusiastic force. I call on you to stay organised, to keep the movement going, to be a movement because the challenges remain (...) You, the people, well loved country, you are a bright new morning which is dawning. Let's keep our faith with the values of the Republic – Liberty, Equality and fraternity – long live the Republic and long live*

*France.*" (my translation)

Pierre Laurent, the PCF leader, whose party supported Melenchon despite not being allowed the same role in the campaign as in 2012, has said the result means the left can reinvent itself, that a new left can emerge. During the campaign Melenchon has been careful not to identify himself with a re-make of the Front de Gauche of 2012 and the progress in his vote may encourage him to stick to the France Insoumise framework which is a movement based on his personal candidature and not a coalition between parties. Currently the PCF and Melenchon have planned separate slates for the general election. If there is no deal then the presidential result might not lead to much of a parliamentary group since the general election is over two rounds (if a candidate does not reach 50%+1) but is not proportional. Alliances are crucial. The other question is whether the electoral vote will translate into a movement on the streets, communities and workplaces that will actually effectively resist Macron's austerity with a human face.

Macron will be president. The conservatives, the PCF and Hamon have already called for a vote for Macron or against Le Pen. Melenchon has not made a call, he says he is going to consult his base. The revolutionary left are calling for opposition to Le Pen but not making a clear call to vote Macron. Polls on Sunday gave him 62% in the second round. But it is likely that Marine le Pen will improve on her father's second round score which only increased by about one percent. She may approach 40% which would be another boost to the racist FN. Again given the electoral system it is not easy for the FN to win parliamentary seats so a progression of this sort does not mean she will have a parliamentary group. Of course if the left cannot provide a serious opposition to Macron you may see the FN adopted demagogic anti-austerity positions and be in a position for further progress in future elections.

What happened with the revolutionary left candidates? Poutou was roughly on the same score as last time as was Arthaud so there was a maintenance of a hard left minority within the overall left score. Given the pressure on the left to vote for Melenchon, to get him into the second round, this shows their resilience. They both used the opportunity to get a clear anti-capitalist and internationalist message out during the official campaign. Poutou in particular with his exploit on the TV debate and his creative broadcasts did make an impact. Some people in France and here have looked at the numbers and say that this left has some sort of responsibility for Melenchon not quite making it. First, the numbers don't quite add up even if you assume all the votes would have transferred. Second, it is not their fault if the electoral system is as it is - you have to stand if you want to be accepted as a serious force. Third, Melenchon himself made no effort at all to try to attract or include the radical left - it would contradict his overall attempt to position himself as nothing to do with the extreme left (he responded to a journalist's question rejecting any connection). Of course you can argue that the NPA and LO should have been working, like Ensemble (a previous split from the NPA) inside the Melenchon movement from the start but that is another debate.

The major question now for all the left is how to respond to the continuing de-demonisation and progress of the FN and to build resistance to the pro-austerity policies of a Macron government. People have compared France Insoumise to Podemos. Certainly some of the ideologues repeat the Laclau/Mouffe ideology about a credible Left Populism like the now minority Errejón current inside Podemos. However despite the continued exaggerated powers of its leader Podemos remains a coalition that functions between three broad currents including the radical left. It holds democratic conferences. France Insoumise is quite different. A movement-party in France like Podemos coming out of these elections would be something to strategically aim for.

**Dave Kellaway**, 24<sup>th</sup> April 2017

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<http://leftunity.org/macron-president-a-continuity-candidate-amid-the-rubble-of-a-political-earthquake/>