

The Winner in France's June 20 Regional Elections Was Abstention

Tuesday 22 June 2021, by [MONDON Aurelien](#) (Date first published: 21 June 2021).

We often hear about discontented French voters turning to Marine Le Pen's far right, but not about the tens of millions who've given up on voting at all. They were the key in yesterday's regional elections — and they're the ones the Left has to win.

This week's French regional elections take place just ten months before the April 2022 presidential contest — and many hoped that they would tell us what to expect in next year's vote. Yet seemingly the only takeaway from Sunday's first-round regional contests was the [rock-bottom turnout](#), making what was already a highly uncertain electoral landscape even murkier.

More than two-thirds of the electorate abstained, a record in the Fifth Republic's six-decade history. And for once, what should be seen as a damning indictment in any democracy worth the name appears to have shaken both politicians and the media. However, in the discussions taking place in France, we can already see a lack of reflection on the real meaning of abstention — and perhaps more importantly, on the way we talk about voting, politics, and democracy in our societies.

Let's start with an important caveat. To demand that abstention is taken seriously into account does not mean imputing any particular political project or value. For obvious reasons, it is hard to know what the people who abstain actually believe, or whom they would turn to if they were forced to make a choice. Yet abstention is not spread equally across sociodemographic categories and, in general, the younger you are or the lower on the socioeconomic ladder, the more likely you are to abstain.

All too often, we are told that the (white) working class has turned decisively to the far right. While there is no denying that *some* have rallied behind Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National (RN), the [vast majority hasn't](#): they've either stayed with the Left or, in even more cases, turned off the electoral process. If this situation were acknowledged properly, the truly "left behind" might receive more attention — rather being painted with a broad brush based on those who do vote and the minority who back racist alternatives.

In Sunday's vote, the high level of abstention benefitted the traditional right (the *Républicains*) and their older, wealthier electorate. But for once, the low turnout seems to have been noted and taken seriously by the political and media elite. The vice president of Emmanuel Macron's *La République En Marche* party declared that this should be read as "[a political act](#)," and most commentators and politicians argued that this was the only real lesson to be drawn.

This contrasts with the many warning signs French citizens have sent over the years, pointing to a growing loss of trust, faith, and interest in mainstream politics. Yet the attention paid to a deeply disturbing trend already appears short lived, as its analysis remains partial at best. Indeed, while many articles have been written about rising abstention levels and many politicians have voiced concerns over it, election results have been reported without much care for the reality on everyone's

mind today.

A cursory look at election reports shows the same old articles about winners and losers, and comparisons between results this year and in the previous elections. For example, in the northern Hauts-de-France region, reports usually went something like this: “the far-right Rassemblement National fell to 24.3 percent compared to 40.6 percent in 2015, losing 15 percent support” or “the Républicains received 41 percent, far ahead of their opponents on 24.3 percent and the Greens on 19 percent, bringing a great victory for the right.”

If there was ever a time to reflect on the way election results are reported, this would surely be it — and yet this hasn’t been the case. These percentage figures take on a rather different coloration when we consider that abstention in the Hauts-de-France was 66.7 percent compared to 54.8 percent in 2015. So, while it is undeniably true that the Républicains’ candidate got over 41 percent of the votes cast (compared to 25 percent in 2015), the number of actual votes he received was close to static (at around 550,000).

Crucially, his electorate turned up — as the demographic that tends to favor the traditional right generally does. On the contrary, his opponents’ vote collapsed, with Le Pen’s RN losing almost two-thirds of its actual votes (from over 900,000 to around 320,000), while the Left lost half its supporters (from 520,000 to 252,000).

This matters because in 2015, the Républicains won the second round with over 1.3 million votes, while Le Pen received just over a million. Therefore, even if the RN does not do as well in the second round this coming Sunday, it is likely that the Républicains will still need to gather more votes in order to win. Hyping up their first-round victory through lazy reporting of percentages could even put off many of the 750,000 people who voted for the Républicains to stop the far right in 2015 — potentially helping Le Pen to an upset win in the second round if her voters turn out.

The turnout was at a record low this weekend and appears to have shaken the political and media elite. But overlooking or downplaying the role and scale of abstention in the reporting of election results has already had a very serious impact on our public discourse over the years. Indeed, many in France would pinpoint the moment when the far right Front National became a serious political contender to the 2002 presidential election, when Jean-Marie Le Pen reached the second round.

The media hyperbolically covered this as an “earthquake” or “bomb” and portrayed it as a real threat to democracy and the Republic. Yet the real story in 2002 was not the rise of the far right, but the splintering of the vote and the rise of abstention and distrust in the mainstream parties which had governed France for decades. Indeed, not only was Le Pen not achieving a major breakthrough in terms of number of votes, he was flatlining — as demonstrated by the table below.

	Number of votes	% of voters cast	% of registered vote	Position
1998	6,576,742	54.38	11.47	Fourth
1995	6,571,136	55	11.42	Fourth
2002	6,466,713	36.86	11.66	second

Obviously, the aim here is not to play down the threat posed by the far right. The problem is precisely that the commonplace misreading of the situation ended up strengthening the far right and its ideas rather than rallying people around democratic ideals.

What should have made the news in 2002 was that at least two of the traditional governing parties in France failed to gather more than 12 percent of the registered vote and, put together, they received as many votes as those who had decided to abstain for the most important election in France. Instead, the [far right was hyped up](#) as the expression of popular discontent — and politicians across

the spectrum decided to focus wholly on its supporters (just over 11 percent of the electorate) while ignoring the rest.

This is not just a French problem. Think of Brexit, for example, and how different the public discussion in the United Kingdom would have been if instead of the 52/48 narrative constructing it as a majoritarian movement, we saw the result as 37 percent for Brexit, 36 percent for Remain and 27 percent nonvoters. Or think of the election of Donald Trump in 2016; if it had been driven home that he was elected by just over a quarter of the vote, and in an electorate already skewed in favor of the Republicans because of voter suppression. Imagine, furthermore, that our coverage of abstention took sociodemographic characteristics into account to spare us inaccurate and damaging propaganda about the so-called left-behind “white working class” [turning to the far right](#).

My aim here is not to argue that abstention should change the end results of the elections mentioned above. For good or bad, the rules are what they are — and these dictate that we must accept Brexit, Trump, and other similar outcomes. Yet we should at least be able to highlight that these reactionary movements do not enjoy actual majority support and are not the “popular alternatives” they are often peddled as.

This would go a long way toward shifting public discourse and focus away from them. Instead of providing disproportionate coverage to the small, albeit concerning, minority who support these politics, we could instead try to listen to those far more numerous citizens who don’t vote for the far right and have switched off politics all together (who can blame them?).

The 2022 presidential election is [often painted](#) as an inevitable contest between Macron and Le Pen, with the former playing increasingly on the latter’s turf with regard to [Islam and immigration](#). Looking to both voters’ and nonvoters’ discontent with this paltry offer may yet help us escape our slow descent toward reaction.

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P.S.

- Jacobin. 06.21.2021:
<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2021/06/france-regional-election-2021-abstention-nonvoters-political-media>
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