

French Regional Elections - 66% abstain amid reactionary offensive

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Dave Kellaway reports on the regional elections in France.

France held the first round of the regional elections this Sunday 20th June. According to the initial polling estimates the traditional right-wing party, The Republicans (LR) came out on top ahead of Le Pen's post-fascist Rassemblement Nationale (RN - Rally to the Nation). Macron's government party, La Republique en Marche (LRM - Republic on the march) took a battering. The Socialist Party (PS) held on to its regions and consolidated its limited recovery from the 2017 presidential disaster. Green parties competed with the LRM for fourth place. Left populist Melenchon's La France Insoumise (LFI - France Unbowed) won around half or less the votes that it got in 2017.

There were some joint slates between the PS and the French Communist Party (PCF) and the LFI and the Greens linked up in some regions. Prospects for a united left mobilisation to seize the initiative from the right and stop Macron's reactionary programme appear slim.

Nationally the % estimates an hour after the polls closed are:

LR : 27.2 to 29.3

PS led slates : 16.5 and 17.6

RN : 19.1 to 19.3

LRM : 10 to 11

However, the overall significance of these election results is difficult to assess due to the highest ever abstention rate for a normal election - around 66% did not bother to vote. Various factors explain this - the pandemic, the onset of annual holidays, the lack of any clearly defined political stakes for these elections, and alienation from or anger at the political system. Politicians for many people have failed people over the pandemic and the social policies in the recovery plan are not convincing people either. Even before the pandemic, the Gilets Jaunes (yellow jackets) expressed a mass dissatisfaction of French people particularly in smaller towns or rural areas.

Does it tell us anything about what might happen at the key election in France, the Presidential one next year? Abstention will be at least less than half what we saw this Sunday in next year's big vote. At the moment it does not look like Le Pen's party will win any regions. Her movement had gone down from 27% in the 2015 regionals to 19% today. She had great hopes in Provence and Cote D'Azur where her candidate, came over from the traditional right party, but although it is close he has not made a breakthrough in the first round. He is just ahead but is unlikely to pull together a second-round majority. Already the PS has called for a vote for the traditional right to block the RN. The RN did much worse than expected in the northern region, Hauts-de-France (=Calais, Lille) where its 2015 vote of 41% was reduced to 24%. This was their second big target. Winning a big

region would have been a real fillip for the RN. Xavier Bertrand, the LR winner in this region, was already looking to throw his hat in the ring for the presidential election. His result makes this more likely. It also indicates that instead of a Macron-Le Pen run-off in the second round next year, you could have an LR versus Le Pen (a rerun of the Chirac/Le Pen in 2002) or even Macron against the LR.

However, Macron's catch-all LREM, which was largely built on the demise of the Socialist Party as well as the crisis of the traditional right, also did badly. At around 10% this is not a good base for a second-term presidential bid. The unpopularity of his social and economic policies such as attacks on pensions or his transport policies and the fallout from the pandemic has weakened his electoral base. Macron is losing the votes that he took from the mainstream right-wing parties who appear to be reconsolidating and is also vulnerable to an improvement in the PS fortunes, particularly if it can forge an alliance with the EELV - the French Greens. The latter did well in local elections in 2020 winning cities like Lyon, Strasbourg, Bourdeaux, and retained Grenoble. Incumbents seem to have done well and the PS are in the lead in five regions usually in coalition with the French Communist Party (PCF) and/or the Left Radicals (PRG). Their overall score is an improvement on the pitiful scores of the divided slates at the 2017 Presidential election.

The Greens mainly stood apart from the PS or in alliance with the LFI of Melenchon. Their scores were close to those of the Macron party. The LFI when standing alone had scores between 5 and 10%. Melenchon has already provisionally announced his candidature for next year. This time the French CP are saying they will stand a candidate which makes it even more unlikely that the LFI will improve on its 2017 score of nearly 20%. The left is very divided, both the moderate and the more class struggle currents, which makes it difficult to even see a PS candidate get through to the second round next year.

Exasperation with Macron's government has grown over his mandate. This has helped Le Pen to hold on to her base of around 20% of the electorate. It always gives her a chance during the presidential election campaign to get into the second round, particularly if the right and left of centre parties are divided. In the last year or so Macron had adopted some of the hard-line language of the right and of the RN on crime, 'disorder', and the terrorist threat. Just as the British Tories construct the myth of the threat to British values of the 'woke' generation or the Black Lives Matter movement Macron had invented the narrative of an Islamic-leftism (Islamogauchisme) that is supposedly raging through the universities. A 'separatism' bill has gone through parliament which under the cover of defending secularism and republican values is actually a reactionary islamophobic attack on France's more than 6 million Muslims. Some of its measures include:

- ban homeschooling by Muslim families]
- creates a new hate speech crime
- religious places of worship can be closed down and foreign donations to them over 10k euros have to be declared
- monitor any associations for their adherence to republican values
regulates forced marriage and other aspects concerning the so-called dignity of women
- any state or local council-run institution has to prove its secular principles so for example single-sex swimming sessions will not be allowed.

This bill comes on top of existing rules about wearing a veil in schools and elsewhere. There has been a lot of media platforms for reactionary 'theories' about the 'great replacement' - that Muslims

are intent on destroying French identity. Unsurprisingly there have been violent attacks on mosques and Islamic community meeting places, along with the increase in everyday abuse and violence against Muslims. Openly fascist groups like the Identitaires have become more active, they recently attacked an LGBT demonstration. Retired army officers have also joined in the right-wing frenzy by publishing an open letter (two in fact) saying that military action may be required to defend France from the Islamic threat. It is not so far away in history that sectors of the French military were involved in the 1961 Algiers putsch.

Although Le Pen may not be making any electoral breakthroughs her movement has become 'normalised' in French political life. Her strategy is to work for accommodation with the traditional right parties. Some key candidates in today's elections were poached from the LR.

At the same time Macron has put up another law on general security which once again shows this creeping global police state. He is trying to be as hard as Le Pen on 'Islamism' and on law and order in order to recover his lost support. Of course, the security bill will target Muslim youth in the poorer suburbs just as much as the separatism one. What does the general security law involve?

- it will make criminals of anybody, including journalists, who fill police actions
- it indiscriminately widens the scope of general surveillance
- drones and CCTV will be greatly increased
- privatised security services will be given more rights and become more integrated with the state
- local police will have increased powers
- squatters will be more easily repressed

Already the government banned pro-Palestine protests in Paris and detained a leader of the campaign in the days before the protests. Representatives from the UN and Council of Europe have all voiced concerns about the law. A broad coalition uniting nearly all the progressive and left forces in France marched in over 100 cities on the 12th of June against these reactionary measures.

Working people cannot wait for the presidential elections next year for a political solution. The possibility of a progressive electoral outcome is slim. However, France has shown us in the past that there can be upsurges in the streets that can upset the political applecart. The radical left has no alternative but to patiently work towards that end.

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P.S.

- Anti*Capitalist Resistance. 21 Jun 2021:
<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/french-regional-elections-66-abstain-amid-reactionary-offensive/>
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