

French regional elections: Ruling party defeated amid mass abstention

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The March 14 first round of France's regional elections produced a massive abstention and a resounding disavowal of the austerity policies of President Nicolas Sarkozy.

The circumstances of the vote underlined the bankruptcy of France's political establishment. Given the political vacuum that exists on the French left, the electorate registered its views largely through a vote for the opposition *Parti Socialiste* (PS). Paradoxically, this is a pro-business party whose policies are widely viewed as not substantially different from those of Sarkozy.

The abstention rate hit a record 53.64 percent of France's 44 million registered voters. The 26.2 percent vote for the ruling conservative UMP (Union for a Popular Movement) was the lowest vote for the Gaullist right since the founding of the Fifth Republic by President Charles de Gaulle in 1958. The PS received 29.14 percent of the vote—though, due to abstention, less than 15 percent of the electorate in fact voted for them, only 10 percent for its allies, and only 13 percent for the UMP.

The Europe-Ecology Party, a traditional ally of the PS, received 12.8 percent of the vote. Yesterday, the PS's Claude Bartolone announced the PS had reached a national agreement for an alliance with Europe-Ecology in all the regional elections on the second round. However, Europe-Ecology's Jean-Vincent Placé denied that a deal had been made, saying that deals remained to be reached in several regions, including Ile-de-France (the Paris metropolitan area).

The vote for other “left” parties oriented to the PS was weak. The Left Front, an alliance of the *Parti Communiste Français* (PCF) and the Left Party (PG) of former PS minister Jean-Luc Mélenchon, scored only 5.84 percent of the vote. In the European elections last year, it received 6.47 percent of the vote. The *Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste* (NPA) of Olivier Besancenot had received 6.1

percent of the vote in the 2009 European elections, but only 2.4 percent last Sunday.

The neo-fascist *Front National* scored 11.42 percent nationally—reversing eight years of decline due to defections, inter-party dissension, and Sarkozy's racist appeals to the FN electorate. It advanced to the second round in 10 regions, receiving over 20 percent in the southeastern PACA region (Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur) where Jean-Marie Le Pen was standing, 18.3 percent in Nord-Pas-de-Calais where his daughter Marine was standing, and 15 percent in Picardie.

The second and final round will take place next Sunday, March 21. It is possible that the PS and its coalition partners will sweep all 22 regions, leaving no regional council in the hands of the UMP.

The PS victory is a distorted echo, under conditions where the masses see no other political alternative, of mounting opposition to the austerity politics pursued by President Sarkozy of the UMP. Last month, Sarkozy announced negotiations with the CGT trade union for further pension cuts—amid a wave of social cuts across Europe, in the wake of the Greek debt crisis.

A March 11 poll revealed that 72 percent of the population wanted Sarkozy to modify “national policies” in light of the results of the regional elections. Moreover, 73 percent wanted him to change his plans for pension cuts in light of the results, and 70 percent expressed growing pessimism about the economy.

The night of the election, PS spokesman Benoît Hamon tried to appeal to this sentiment, calling for a large PS vote on March 21 on the absurd grounds that PS-controlled regional councils would constitute “social shields” against “unprecedented austerity packages” being prepared after the elections.

Remarkably, Hamon then presented arguments that Greece's social cuts should be imposed on France as well, under a cynical pose of fairness: “France has

demanded this policy from Greece. When the European Commission then turns to France, how can France refuse to apply to itself the policy it demanded of Greece?”

A class gulf separates workers’ anger at Sarkozy’s cuts from the PS, which seeks to exploit that anger to return to power and carry out social cuts similar to those of Sarkozy.

Hamon’s comments omitted the important fact that the largest social cuts in Europe are being carried out by social democrats like himself: the PASOK government of Prime Minister Giorgios Papandreou in Greece, the PSOE government of Prime Minister José Luis Zapatero in Spain, and the PS government of José Sócrates in Portugal. All of these governments are proposing massive cuts in pensions, public sector wages and social spending. In France, PS First Secretary Martine Aubry proposed a two-year increase in the retirement age during the regional election campaign.

Several bourgeois press outlets warned the PS not to mistake the election results for broad support for its policies. Business daily *Les Echos* wrote that the election “expresses a profound mistrust towards the political powers-that-be, whatever their color, whether they be national or local.”

Médiapart warned: “With a total of about 50.5 percent of the vote, the whole of the left could start dreaming again. They would be mistaken. For abstention is not just the privilege of the right ... this abstention also indicates how much malaise there is on the left ... Once again, the under-25s, the working class, the people of the inner-city estates have desisted from voting.”

The higher votes for both the PS and the FN must be placed in the context of the toxic racist atmosphere fomented by France’s political establishment, and particularly the UMP, after the outbreak of the economic crisis in 2008. Last June, Sarkozy and PCF politician André Gerin launched a parliamentary commission to ban the burqa, in which the PS also participated. Last autumn, Sarkozy initiated a right-wing debate on France’s “national identity.”

Last December, as public opinion turned decidedly against the “national identity” campaign, the press began criticizing it.

PS deputies then left the anti-burqa commission as the party cynically sought to repackage itself as an anti-racist force. A critical element of this campaign was Aubry’s organization of a competing PS candidacy to that of Georges Frêche, an ex-PS politician in the Languedoc-Roussillon region known for his racist comments. This

opposition was altogether hypocritical, and Aubry has now called for a second-round vote for Frêche’s list in Languedoc.

Going into the election, it was clear that Sarkozy was on the defensive. On March 12 Sarkozy gave an interview in *Figaro Magazine*, suggesting that he would slow down his social cuts next year. Asked whether he might decide not to run for re-election, letting Prime Minister François Fillon run for the presidency in 2012 instead, Sarkozy refused to answer.

Nonetheless, the UMP maintained its focus on racial issues. UMP Senator Gérard Longuet created a media firestorm by suggesting that PS politician Malek Boutih should not preside over an anti-discrimination body, the HALDE (High Authority Against Discrimination and for Equality), because he was not a member of the “traditional French community.” Boutih is a French citizen of Algerian origin.

UMP candidates in Ile-de-France repeatedly slandered Ali Soumaré, a PS candidate of African origin in Seine-Saint-Denis—the poorer northern suburbs of Paris—as a “multi-recidivist criminal.” On March 10, the police confirmed that Soumaré had no criminal record. Soumaré received 47.8 percent of the vote in his town of Villiers-le-Bel, which saw large-scale riots after the death of two youths in an accident with police in 2007, beating both the UMP (13.5 percent) and the FN (13.6 percent).

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