

# Voters set to punish Macron's party in French municipal elections

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Country-wide municipal elections in France are to be held in two weeks' time against the backdrop of widespread opposition to President Emmanuel Macron's austerity policies and pension reform, which he is determined to push through.

Three years after an election in which large numbers of people stayed home, Macron and his The Republic on the March party (LREM) remain highly unpopular. The LREM crisis is expressed in the internal opposition displayed in dozens of cities, friction with its coalition partner, the MoDem [Democratic Movement] party, and Macron's arbitration between two ministers who are fighting each other in Biarritz.

The presidential party hopes to go from 2,000 to 10,000 local elected officials without winning a number of new municipalities. A deputy of the party, Pierre Person, explains worriedly that "if we don't win any big city, it will be embarrassing. You don't become a local actor if you are not established."

Although only local politicians are elected, the municipal election has national implications for all established parties, who are looking for the best conditions to prepare for the presidential election. The absence of a strong local base for the LREM increases fears that voters will sanction the party with a vote against them. Furthermore, this could then undermine Macron's campaign for a second term.

The elections are taking place during a continuing rout, in France and throughout Europe, of the social-democratic or Christian-democratic parties that have dominated bourgeois politics since the May 1968 era. Those parties hope to reduce the damage after their collapse in the presidential and European elections of 2017 and 2019, despite their crumbling local forces. The Republicans (LR, a right-wing party), which holds 15 of the 40 cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants,

hopes to take advantage of the defeat of the presidential party to keep the cities it currently controls, despite successive electoral defeats.

The Socialist Party (PS), which under the hated former president François Hollande imposed a state of emergency, anticipates keeping its 12 cities of more than 100,000 people thanks to "our mayors who are very well established locally," according to Pierre Jouvét, spokesman for the party. For this, the PS is counting on its satellite parties—the French Communist Party (PCF), the Greens (EELV) and the pseudo-left Unsubmissive France party (LFI) of Jean-Luc Mélenchon—with whom the PS has allied itself to try to maintain its local elected representatives.

The neo-fascists are attempting to gain from the unpopularity of Macron, who legitimizes Le Pen's National Rally (RN) by saluting the Nazi collaborator Marshal Philippe Pétain and denouncing Muslims. Mélenchon also legitimizes Le Pen's party, by hailing its leader's alleged "progress towards humanism" during the strikes against Macron's pension reform.

Le Pen wants to use the municipal elections to increase her stature as a presidential candidate, hoping to win small and medium-sized towns so as to run as Macron's main opponent.

Thus, in mid-January, Le Pen took the opportunity of the municipal campaign to announce her candidacy for the 2022 presidential election. "We have entered a presidential phase," she said. "Emmanuel Macron and I are symbols of the globalist-nationalist divide set up by the French in the presidential election, which is intended to replace the right and the left."

For the time being, it is likely the RN will keep its small towns such as Fréjus in the south, Beaucaire and Hénin-Beaumont in the north. Béziers should be kept by Robert Ménard, who is supported by the RN and

Perpignan in the south could see Louis Alliot, number 2 in the RN win the municipality.

The campaign in the big cities is marked by very diverse developments. What dominates above all is the trend towards the disintegration of the former electoral bases of the mayors, while no established party has stable support and Macron's party is very divided.

In Paris, in an unprecedented development, three candidates are within five percentage points of each other. According to an Ifop-Fiducial poll on Sunday 23 February, outgoing PS mayor Anne Hidalgo would come first in the first round with 24 percent, followed by Rachida Dati with 22 percent for the LR and Agnès Buzyn of the presidential party with 19 percent. Buzyn replaced the former government spokesperson, Benjamin Griveaux, who withdrew from the campaign after sexual videos of him were posted on social networks.

David Belliard of the Greens is at 13 per cent and a "dissident" member of Macron's party, Cédric Villani, is at 9 per cent. A PS-Green alliance is possible for the second round, which could see a three-way fight.

In Lyon, the current mayor and Macron's interior minister for a time, Gérard Collomb, who went from the PS to LREM, comes in first with 23 percent, followed by Bruno Bernard for the Greens with 20 percent. The current president of the region around and including Lyon, David Kimelfed, who is another LREM "dissident," is at 18 percent, in front of the LR candidate, François Noël Buffet.

In Marseilles, the election is wide open after the non-participation of LR mayor Jean-Claude Gaudin, in power since 1995, but criticized after the collapse of buildings in Rue Aubagne. According to an unofficial poll carried out by the FranceInfo Radio, Stéphane Ravier, the RN Senator, would come first with 25 percent of voting intentions, followed by Martine Vassal (LR) and ecologist Sébastien Barle, both with 15 percent. The PS mayor of the 15th arrondissement, Samia Ghali, who asked for the army to be sent to the district, received 9 percent of the votes.

The deputy from Marseille, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who had for a while considered running for mayor in view of the 2022 presidential elections, gave up after LFI's poor scores in the European elections and the decline in support for him and his party among the young people and workers who voted for him in 2017.

LFI supports Michèle Rubirola in a bloc with the Socialist Party, the Communist Party and independent candidates.

The tactic of LFI is not to present its own lists but rather "citizens" lists in order to keep its local elected officials on whom it depends financially after the widespread discrediting of the party: "The municipal elections are a stage in the citizen revolution. The local question is not an end in itself. We continue to think that the decisive moment is the presidential election, because that's where the conquest of power is played out," says Paul Vannier.

In Bordeaux, according to an Orange-Europe1 poll, outgoing mayor Nicolas Florian is at 40 percent followed by ecologist Pierre Hurmic, supported by the PS, PCF, Radical Party and Génération.s at 30 percent. New Anticapitalist (NPA) presidential candidate Philippe Poutou is at 12 per cent, overtaking LREM candidate, Tomas Cazenave, at 12 per cent.

In Lille, Martine Aubry of the PS leads with 35 percent of voting intentions according to an Ifop-Fiducial poll published in mid-February. Stéphane Blay of the Greens came in second with 21 per cent of the votes, followed by LREM candidate Violette Spillebout at 14 per cent.



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