

First round of French regional elections marked by record abstention

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The first round of regional elections in France took place on Sunday. They were marked by a historic abstention rate, while the far-right National Rally (Rassemblement National-RN) of Marine Le Pen secured the most votes in the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur (PACA) region.

The elections took place amidst the coronavirus pandemic, which has killed more than 110,000 people in the country, due to Macron's actions since the beginning of the crisis to permit the virus to spread. For the political establishment, the elections are used as an indicator in advance of the presidential elections next year.

Early estimates put the national turnout at just 32.8 percent, with abstention at 67.2 percent, a record high for a two-round election under the Fifth Republic. In 2015, abstention in the regional elections was 49.9 percent; the highest abstention ever was in 2010, at 53 percent. In contrast, the abstention rate in the 1986 regional elections was 22.7 percent.

This points to the widespread disillusionment with and hostility to the established political parties, as well as a distrust of Macron's handling of the pandemic, which has been tacitly backed by parties such as Jean-Luc Mélenchon's La France insoumise (LFI).

The regional elections appoint 1,767 regional councillors for six years in France's 12 metropolitan regions. In the first round, if a list obtains an absolute majority of the votes cast, it gets a quarter of the seats to be filled. The remaining seats are distributed by proportional representation among all the lists that obtained at least 5 percent of the votes cast.

The Republicans (LR) won in Hauts-de-France (43.1 percent), Grand Est (31.5 percent), Normandy (35.1 percent), Pays de la Loire (34.1 percent) and Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes (43.8 percent), and in Ile-de-France (34.2

percent of the vote). The PS came out on top in five regions: Centre-Val de Loire (25.6 percent), Nouvelle-Aquitaine (28.6 percent), Occitanie (39.6 percent), Bourgogne-Franche-Comté (26.2 percent) and Bretagne (20.8 percent).

Le Pen's far-right National Rally leads with 34.8 percent in the PACA region.

In Corsica, the autonomist Inseme per a Corsica is leading with 28 percent of the vote.

With no party obtaining an absolute majority of the votes cast, a second round of elections will be necessary in all regions next Sunday. Parties that obtained at least 10 percent of the votes cast can stand in the second round, and possibly merge with lists with at least 5 percent of the votes.

At a national level, according to an Ipsos/Sopra Steria estimate, the results of the first round by political party are: LR and its allies, 27.2 percent; the RN, 19.3 percent; the PS and its allies, 17.6 percent; Europe Ecology-the Greens and allies, 12.5 percent; Macron's Republic on the Move (LREM) and its allies, 11.2 percent; Mélenchon's LFI and allies, 4.2 percent.

Several commentators have highlighted the widespread discrediting of the political class that the election reveals. In its weekend edition, *Le Monde* wrote, "this desertion of voters is a sign of a sick democracy, of a political disillusionment, where the feeling that 'voting is useless' is taking root."

Frédéric Dabi, the director of Ifop Opinion, said on LCI this Friday that this abstention rate will be "the major lesson of this election night" and an "earthquake that will have consequences, because an electoral balance of power is primarily the result of participation and a differential of mobilization between camps that vote and camps that do not vote. But when we reach such a level, for whom does the bell toll? It rings for all

political parties, all segments of the population.”

Macron’s LREM is discredited and failed to win in Hauts-de-France, Auvergne Rhône Alpes and Occitanie.

The first round was a disappointment for Le Pen’s RN. Previously, polls and media outlets predicted that it would come first in six or seven regions, and win the Grand Est, the Centre-Val de Loire and PACA in the second round. In reality, the RN vote has declined compared to the 2015 regional elections, in which it won almost 28 percent of the vote in the first and second rounds, or 6.8 million votes. In 2015, the RN did not win any regions in the second round, but it did win 358 regional councillors, three times more than previously.

However, despite the drop in its vote in the first round, the RN remains a major established political force in France, largely thanks to the legitimisation of its policies by Macron and by the former Socialist Party government of President François Hollande before him.

For LFI and Mélenchon, who received just under 20 percent of the vote in the 2017 presidential elections, the vote of 4.2 percent was a clear blow. In the midst of the greatest health catastrophe in over a century, LFI did not present any real alternative to the disastrous and politically criminal management by the government in the interests of the financial aristocracy.

In the second round, LFI is aligning itself with the other bourgeois parties, allegedly in order to block the Rassemblement National. Mélenchon called for no region to be left to the RN, stating: “We call for not adding one more blow to the misfortunes of our democracy. We will do what it takes to convince everyone that no region should be given to the National Rally.”

Macron and the entire political establishment have largely contributed to the rise of RN by legitimising the politics of the far right in recent years. While he has led attacks on workers in collaboration with the unions, Macron has continued to promote the far right.

After his victory in 2017, Macron made the “Republican salute” to Marine Le Pen and her supporters. Forces within his Ministry of Culture attempted to have the works of Charles Maurras, the 20th-century anti-Semitic leader of Action Française, a pillar of the Vichy collaborationist regime who was convicted as a traitor after the Liberation, published. In

2018, as he sent riot police against the “yellow vests,” he hailed the collaborationist dictator Philippe Pétain as a “great soldier.”

Since the start of the pandemic, the Macron government has provided billions of euros to banks and big business while pursuing a policy of “herd immunity” that has cost more than 110,000 lives in France and more than a million in Europe. During this period, the richest have increased their fortunes enormously, while the majority of the population have seen their standard of living fall.

In the wake of the pandemic, Macron has adopted much of the RN’s agenda in an attempt to permanently undermine democratic rights. This includes the anti-Muslim anti-separatism law, which scuttles the 1905 law on secularism and the separation of church and state, and opens the way for the arbitrary dissolution of cultural and political organisations. He has also passed the “global security” law, which expands police powers against protesters and the population.

This underlines that the French political system is unresponsive to the rising social anger among workers, and in the hands of the financial aristocracy. Whatever the final outcome of the elections, they will not solve any of the fundamental problems facing workers. The decisive issue remains the mobilisation of the working class in France and internationally on the basis of socialist and internationalist opposition to capitalism and the reactionary policies of the ruling class.



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