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French Revolution Mark II

Riding high on international success, Macron eyes more election victory at home

Just a month ago, analysts and pollsters were unanimous in warning that the new president of France had no chance of seeing his fledgling centrist party win a majority in parliament.

Now, on the eve of legislative elections June 11 and 18, Emmanuel Macron is proving them wrong. Very wrong.

Early voting by French citizens resident abroad saw his La République en Marche (LREM) movement take 10 out of 11 constituencies. The latest opinion polls predict that could be reflected at home, giving LREM between 385 and 415 seats in the 577-seat National Assembly, and wiping out any need for a coalition government.

That would be a stunning victory for a brand new political party that is fielding fewer candidates than seats – 525 names on the final list – and offering just 24 outgoing parliamentarians. Most of the LREM candidates are unknown, and more than half have never held elected office. In a country with 36,820 mayors, that is saying something.

28 days later

Many heads of state are judged on their first 100 days. Macron was given just 28, from inauguration to round 1, to convince French voters he could provide a stable, effective government. So, assuming the polls are even partly right, how has he done it?

Some of Macron's biggest triumphs since his inauguration on 14 May have been on the international scene: that white-knuckle handshake with US President Donald Trump; publicly criticising Russia's President Vladimir Putin while standing right beside him; and that video in English after the US announced it would pull out of the Paris Climate Accord have all cemented his image as determined, intelligent, fearless, and forward-looking.

That has had an effect at home. At a time when many in the US and Britain are shaking their heads at the result of recent votes there, and apologising to their neighbours for pulling out of international agreements, the French have been buoyed up by the reaction abroad to Macron's election.

Praised across the world for seeing off the threat of a far-right leader and electing a fresh-faced 39-year-old, the French, previously downcast and despairing after Francois Hollande's presidency failed to make a jot of difference to the ailing French economy, are feeling good about themselves again.

Many of those who voted for Macron in the presidential run-off did so with a heavy heart, voting not so much for him as against far-right leader Marine Le Pen. At the time, many of them, and of the one in four who abstained, promised to give the new president a rough ride at the parliamentary elections. However, it is clear that a large percentage of them have decided to give him a chance.

On the other hand, perhaps it's just that there's not a whole lot of choice anymore. The traditional parties are still in disarray since the presidential election saw them out of the race after the first round.

Even the far right is having trouble finding itself. Instead of riding on the wave of popularity that secured Marine Le Pen a record one in three votes in the second round, the National Front party is still, rather bizarrely, beating itself up for not having won the Elysée Palace. Yes, Le Pen was in with a chance for a while, but only by default, on a calculation that dispirited left-wingers might rather abstain than vote for pro-business Macron. She could never have attracted an actual majority of voters to her anti-Europe, anti-immigrant programme. So the fact the party has chosen to indulge in a bout of self-pity and infighting, instead of going for more seats in parliament, says a lot more about the real state of the National Front than Le Pen's moment of glory.

As well as his own party candidates, Macron has the open support of many Socialist Party (PS) candidates – and LREM has thanked them by not fielding a candidate against them.

That's a win-win strategy for both sides: LREM garners the support of experienced parliamentarians – including many of calibre, such as former prime minister Manuel Valls – and PS candidates get to run on an "I'm with Macron" ticket, which is possibly the only way many of them can be elected, but which has further weakened the party.

Socialist regrets

The PS is still in a state of crisis after the presidential election. Latest polls predict the party that held the presidency and government for the past five years will likely win just 35 seats, and suggest the PS will be lucky to scrape together 8.5 percent of the first round. That's well behind the 12.5 percent predicted for the far-left La France Insoumise movement of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who caused a stir during the presidential elections but hasn't managed to hold on to those numbers.

Macron's only real opposition comes from the conservative Les Républicains (LR). Recent polls suggest they could win 105-135 seats. However, despite a re-organisation at the helm, LR was hit hard by the decision of party member Edouard Philippe to accept the post of prime minister in Macron's inter-election government.

While that decision irked many on the left, who have always had the sneaking suspicion that Macron is more centre-right than centrist, it was his only choice if he wanted to reduce the threat from the LR.

Despite his youth and relative inexperience in power, Macron is proving an able and pragmatic strategist who learns fast. His government-for-a-month also includes the leader of the centrist MoDEM party, Francois Bayrou, as Justice Minister, and former defence minister Yves le Drian (PS) who moved up to Foreign Affairs, thus ensuring his main target parties each had a top job.

Once again, high abstention rates could hurt Macron's chances, although early indications are that the no-shows are likely to come from across the political spectrum. Just 60 per cent of voters say they will go to the polls. However, that is not unusual for parliamentary polls in France, especially since the relatively recent date change to just after the presidential election. That campaign involved so many ups and downs, saw so many changes in the traditional political landscape, and revealed so many divisions in French society that the French are simply tired of talking about politics.



Elaine Cobbe

Elaine Cobbe is a seasoned news journalist with more than 20 years of experience of covering international events. A correspondent for CBS News, she is based in Paris and has reported from around the world, including Iraq, Kosovo and Rwanda. She is also a regular commentator of French news on radio in Ireland, South Africa and New Zealand.