DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 10.06.2022 | Thomas Manz

Is the Left back to stay in France?

The legislative elections might see a united French left under Mélenchon as Macron's strongest rival. But many question the role of the radical left

There was great relief when Emmanuel Macron won the second round of the French presidential election in April by a clear margin against his right-wing populist challenger Marine Le Pen. In the fixation on a repeat of the duel between the two, in which polls predicted a neck-and-neck race, the fact that the representative of the radical left, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, with 22 per cent in the first round of voting, was only slightly behind Le Pen and missed out on the run-off, however, faded into the background. Obviously, the widespread longing for unity among the left had led large sections of the electorate to vote strategically, *vote utile*, in favour of the best-placed of the left candidates. Thus, Mélenchon received more than twice as many votes as the rest of the candidates of the left combined.

With a disruptive discourse and a programme that emphasises social and ecological issues equally, he succeeded in winning over especially young voters of the 'climate generation'. In the 18-34 age group, he received about a third of the votes. It is above all the young and educated elite among whom he scored particularly well. His reservoir of votes is concentrated in the Île-de-France metropolitan region and in all the cities where the Greens were leading in the 2020 municipal elections. But also, among organised labour and workers in precarious jobs, his share of the vote is above average. It is also striking that a large part of the Muslim population voted for Mélenchon.

While the erosion of the traditional parties continued and the French Socialists were relegated to a marginality of national politics, Mélenchon's *La France Insoumise* (LFI)succeeded in establishing itself as a third pole in the party landscape alongside Macron's 'progressive' centre and Le Pen's right-wing populists. For the first time, the radical left dominates the left camp.

Mélenchon's third round

Carried by his honourable third-place finish in the presidential election and the newly won hegemony among the left parties, Mélenchon seized the political initiative and declared the upcoming parliamentary elections in June a 'third round'. His goal was to win a majority in the National Assembly with his *union populaire* and then to force President Macron, in accordance with republican tradition, to appoint him as the representative of the majority as prime minister. In the resulting *cohabitation*, he then wants to implement his government programme legitimised by the majority in the National Assembly. According to Mélenchon, this would be a step towards the re-parliamentarisation of the Fifth Republic, which has degenerated into a 'presidential monarchy'.

With the Nouvelle union populaire écologique et sociale (NUPES), the unity of the left eagerly awaited by many left-wing voters became a reality.

Nevertheless, to achieve such a majority, Mélenchon needs coalition partners. Therefore, unlike in 2017, he took a step towards the 'residual left' and, from his position of strength, called on the other parties of the left camp, the Greens EELV, the Communists and, after initial reservations, also the Socialist Party, to form an electoral alliance. With *the Nouvelle union populaire écologique et sociale* (NUPES), the unity of the left eagerly awaited by many left-wing voters became a reality. According to its claim, NUPES is not only an electoral alliance, but should also guarantee coordinated action by the left forces in the National Assembly after the election - right up to the election of Jean-Luc Mélenchon as prime minister and the implementation of a joint government programme.

In forging this alliance, the newly won partners of Mélenchon's *Insoumise*, PS, EELV and PCF, had to accept that they could only nominate their own candidates in a small part of the constituencies. For the PS, this means that it is running its own candidates in only 70 of the total 577 constituencies, which calls into question its status as a national political force. In addition, the 'small' alliance partners also had to come very close to the programme of *La France Insoumise*. In particular, the LFI position of 'disobedience' to EU rules caused tensions. The text of the agreement states that the implementation of the common programme will necessarily lead to tensions and conflicts with EU policy, which is why one must be prepared not to respect certain rules - whereby for some (*La France Insoumise*) this means 'disobedience', for others

(*Parti Socialiste*) a 'temporary suspension' of EU rules.

A controversial alliance and programme

The concessions on constituencies as well as the programmatic rapprochement with the radical left led to much criticism and contradiction within the Socialist Party, but also among the Greens, to the point of openly declared dissidence. In some constituencies there will be PS candidates in competition with those of the NUPES. Internal critics, including ex-president François Hollande, brand the PS alliance as a capitulation to the radical left and an abandonment of fundamental Socialist Party values.

The radical nature of the joint programme is defended as corresponding to the social and ecological challenges of our time, in view of which the supposedly typical social democratic policy of small steps and compromises is no longer sufficient.

While they deplore the departure from the social democratic legacy of the Hollande era as 'the end of the PS as it existed', the movement around party leader Olivier Faure celebrates the alliance with the radical left as a historic directional decision that consciously marks a break with the Hollande era. After having become so social-democratised during this period that, according to party spokesperson Pierre Jouvet, it had become 'boring as hell', the PS had now found its way back to where it belonged, namely in the 'big left family' alongside *Insoumise*, the ecological left and the communists. In this way, the PS was not only responding to the wishes of the left electorate, the *peuple de gauche*, whose overwhelming majority wanted the unity of the left, but also to the fact that this new PS, according to Olivier Faure, had no insurmountable programmatic differences with Mélenchon's *Insoumise*.

The decision of the PS, like that of the Greens, to enter into an electoral alliance with the radical left was obviously not only based on the strategic calculation of preserving a minimum number of seats in the National Assembly, but also on a programmatic reorientation. The radical nature of the joint programme is defended as corresponding to the social and ecological challenges of our time, in view of which the supposedly typical social democratic policy of small steps and compromises is no longer sufficient. How solid the common programmatic platform is will ultimately only be proven in political practice after the elections. Possible points of rupture are certainly named in the NUPES programme as programmatic nuances between the parties involved.

An alternative to Macron's *Ensemble Citoyens*

In any case, the 'cultural revolution' of the often so divided French left coming together in an alliance triggered euphoric reactions in considerable parts of its electorate. This feeds the hope of a new political dynamic that could pave the way for a triumphant return to the political stage for the long marginalised 'true' left. For the time being, the alliance has at least achieved a return of the left to a relevant force in the struggle for political power in France. While the presidential elections were marked by the duel between Macron and Le Pen, a duel between Macron's electoral alliance *Ensemble Citoyens* and NUPES is now emerging in the parliamentary elections.

Between 275 and 310 seats are expected for Ensemble Citoyens, and between 170 and 205 for NUPES.

According to the polls, the two camps are almost evenly matched, with around 25 to 26 per cent of the vote. Le Pen's *Rassemblement National*, on the other hand, is clearly behind with just over 20 per cent. Since the French electoral system provides for majority voting in the constituencies, the absolute vote shares of the parties do not translate into a corresponding distribution of seats in the National Assembly. Rather, the electoral system favours the political centre.

In the projections of the distribution of seats, a clear majority for Macron's *Ensemble* then also emerges once again. However, projections based on the latest polls leave open whether it will again be enough for an absolute majority (of at least 289 seats). Between 275 and 310 seats are expected for *Ensemble Citoyens*, and between 170 and 205 for NUPES. An electoral victory for the left that could force a cohabitation is thus rather unlikely, but this result would already be a success for the left, which was last represented in the National Assembly with only about 60 out of a 577 deputy. It would be the strongest opposition force.

The need to court the moderate left

However, the polls also show that even if many voters would prefer a *cohabitation*, expectations of a government led by Prime Minister Mélenchon are very subdued. While well over half of the electorate believes that he wants to change things, only a third expect a Mélenchon government to improve the situation in the country, while a good half expect the situation to worsen. And only one-third trust that Mélenchon

can reunite the country; whereas almost two-thirds find him too authoritarian.

Only two-fifths of those who consider themselves moderate leftists (about 30 per cent of the left electorate) say they want to vote for candidates of the NUPES electoral alliance.

With the electoral alliance NUPES, the left is undoubtedly back on the political stage; whether it is a stage on the way back to power, however, remains to be seen. For apart from the overall positive, but ultimately sobering polling data regarding an election victory, these reveal a serious structural weakness of the new left alliance - it has difficulties in binding the entire moderate left movement to itself. Without this, however, the left is not capable of winning a majority.

According to an Ipsos poll, only 60 per cent of PS sympathisers approve of the electoral alliance with the LFI. This reservation is also reflected in the voting intentions: only 58 per cent of those who declare themselves close to the PS (still 7.5 per cent of the electorate) and only two-fifths of those who consider themselves moderate leftists (about 30 per cent of the left electorate) say they want to vote for candidates of the NUPES electoral alliance. Nevertheless, as Gilles Finchelstein of the Fondation Jean Jaurès points out, it is in courting this moderate left electorate, which is not reflected in the existing political offerings today, that it will be decided whether the left in France will find its way back into government.



Thomas Manz
Paris

Thomas Manz heads the office of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Paris.
He previously worked for the foundation in Brazil.