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The French left is stuck

Ahead of the French elections, the far right is on the rise. In contrast, the left is in a dire state and may face another 5-year dry spell

The first round of the French presidential election will be taking place on 10 April 2022. According to various polls, it is still unclear whether nearly one third of the electorate will bother to vote, while one third of those who are sure to go to the polls have still not decided on their candidate. As the health crisis was quickly followed by an international one – the outbreak of the war in Ukraine –, the candidates' debates haven't taken place as usual, which has dampened French voters' interest.

This shows the degree of volatility within the electorate and the unprecedented level of uncertainty. Both loom heavily over the final result. On the eve of the most important election in French political life, which will largely determine the legislative elections that will follow, there is a need to caution against possible surprises.

However, some significant trends are emerging. The left as a whole is in a very weak position: in all likelihood, it will not manage to win even 30 per cent of the vote and will be eliminated in the first round. In contrast, the forecasted results for the far right – adding the votes for Marine Le Pen and Eric Zemmour – may exceed 30 per cent. After five years in the opposition, how can the left's anaemia be explained?

Macronism and Islamism

A first cause lies in the nature of Macronism. Emmanuel Macron began his career on the left, as a minister under François Hollande. Since 2017, his strategy has been to fracture the traditional left and right by attracting the more centrist elements of both camps. While he clearly leans in favour of economic liberalism, the health crisis has forced him to make extensive use of state intervention to cushion the shock of a series of lockdowns and curfews, in particular through compensation for partial unemployment.

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In other respects, he has also been able to satisfy part of the left. For instance, he recognised the responsibility of the French state for certain crimes committed during the war in Algeria and the genocide of the Tutsis in Rwanda in 1994. His government has also shown its commitment to republican values and secularism, which are very important to some left-wing voters. Finally, Macronism appears to be the best bulwark against a possible victory for the far right. All this explains why part of the traditional electorate of social democrats or the Greens will probably vote for Emmanuel Macron in the first round.

A second cause relates to the international political situation. The last five years have been marked by the arrival of nearly a million immigrants on French soil, half of whom are of non-European origin. In addition to this relatively large influx, there are the unresolved problems of Islamism and Islamist terrorism. In this situation, opposition to the Macron government is taking shape largely around identity and security issues. The far right, which makes these issues its priority and promises radical albeit demagogic solutions, may appear attractive to some disaffected voters. Moreover, Marine Le Pen, the best placed among the far-right candidates, is focussing part of her programme on the social question to win over some of the votes of the working-class people who had once supported the left.

The dire state of the left

Finally, we have to reckon with the ideological and strategic incoherence of the left itself. With 19 per cent of the vote, the 2017 election made Jean-Luc Mélenchon the leader of his political camp. Five years later, it is clear that his leadership has not produced a credible alternative to Macronism. The municipal elections were catastrophic for his movement, France Insoumise, which each time found itself polling below 10 per cent of the votes at the national level. The discrepancy between the presidential election and the municipal elections reflects the fact that the movement has no real foothold in the country. Its relative strength is essentially based on the person and charisma of Mélenchon himself.

However, Mélenchon has repeatedly given reason to doubt his ability to lead the country. During searches carried out at his home and at the headquarters of his movement, he became violently angry with judicial officers. In addition, on several occasions he has made remarks with anti-

Semitic and conspiracy-like overtones.

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Overall, his political line has quite clearly shifted since 2017. While up until then he proclaimed his commitment to republican values, secularism, and universalism, he subsequently ventured into areas usually reserved for the far left: relativising the problem of Islamism, opposing any new legal arsenal to combat this phenomenon, an unqualified denunciation of police violence, and so on. With this political line, France Insoumise seeks, rightly or wrongly, to secure votes in the working-class neighbourhoods where its fifteen deputies are elected. However, in doing so it prevents any possibility of expanding its electorate beyond around 15 per cent, which seems to be the glass ceiling that Mélenchon now faces.

Rebuild the left

The current campaign has not allowed the other left-wing candidates to create any momentum to compete with Mélenchon. The Socialist Party seems to have run out of steam after some of its leaders joined Macron's party, and the Greens are not managing to broaden their base any more than they did in previous elections. The Communist Party, for its part, is presenting a candidate for the first time since 2007, but despite courageous positions taken in favour of secularism, nuclear energy and job security (rather than a universal income), it lacks persuasiveness.

In this situation, the majority of left-wing voters are preparing for a 'tactical vote' in favour of Mélenchon – which will probably still not be enough for him to reach the second round. In all likelihood, the French left is on the eve of another 5-year dry spell. The crucial question is whether it will be able to take advantage of this period to finally rebuild itself.



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