European Elections monitor

French President Emmanuel Macron on the quest for a parliamentary majority

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Analysis

The French are being called to ballot on 11th and 18th June to renew the 577 members of the National Assembly, the lower house in parliament. After being elected as President of the Republic on 7th May last Emmanuel Macron (La République en Marche, LREM) now has to assert himself in the general election so that he has the necessary majority to implement his programme. In France the head of State plays an important role in terms of foreign policy, but he shares his powers with the Prime Minister and his government regarding everything related to domestic policy.

On 15th May Emmanuel Macron appointed Edouard Philippe (The Republicans, LR) as Prime Minister. The latter formed his government on 17th May. The new team that is now leading France is, as Emmanuel Macron had promised, strictly equal in terms of gender, comprising people from all walks of life. From the left: four ministers from the Socialist Party (PS) and two from the far left (PRG) and the right: three come from the Republicans and three from the Democratic Movement (MoDem). Nicolas Hulot, who until now had refused to take part in government, is representing the ecologist trend. Finally, 11 of the 22 members of government come from civil society.

The government is responsible for implementing the new president's programme and of course for the campaign in the general elections. The choice of Edouard Philippe as Prime Minister can be explained by Emmanuel Macron's wish to divide and weaken the right just before the election, since the collapse of the left took place during the presidential election on 23rd April and 7th May. Hence, the new head of State gave the Ministry of the Economy to Bruno Le Maire and the Ministry for Action and Public Accounts to Gérald Darmanin, two Republican party members, to show that in no way could he be deemed to be the successor to François Hollande (PS).

La République en marche (LREM), the new name of the movement created by Emmanuel Macron (he gave the leadership of this to Catherine Barbaroux until the next party congress that will take place during the summer), is presenting candidates in 522 constituencies. Indeed, several politicians, both men and women, have said they want to work with the new team, such as for example former Prime Minister Manuel Valls (2014-2016); Stéphane Le Foll, former Agriculture, Foodstuffs and Forestry Minister (2012-2017); Marisol Touraine, former Social Affairs and Healthcare Minister (2012-2017), and Myriam el Khomri, former Labour, Employment, Vocational Training and Social Dialogue Minister (2015-2017) on the left, but also outgoing MPs Thierry Solère (LR) and Franck Riester (LR) on the right. More than half (52%) of the 522 LREM candidates have never had an elective mandate.

The members of government who are standing for election will have to resign from their positions if they are beaten in June. Six of them are concerned by this. Moreover the Ministers and Secretaries of State must also resign from the local executives that they lead in the month to come.

Just three weeks before the general election the question is: after having elected Emmanuel Macron as head of State by a wide majority, will the French do the same now or will membership of a political party take the upper hand and prove crucial in the voters' choice?

The most recent poll by Opinion Way, undertaken between 16th and 18th May last, credits LREM with 27% of the vote, ahead of the Republicans (LR) allied with the Democrats and Independents (UDI), a centrist party led by Jean-Christophe Lagarde, which is due to win 20% of the vote just like the Front National led by Marine Le Pen. On the left the Socialist Party (PS) allied to Europe Ecology-The Greens (EELV), led by David Cormand, is due to win 11% of the vote and come out ahead

of France insoumise (FI) led by Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who is due to win 14% of the vote.

The Republicans want to believe in victory on 18th June next
On the right the Republicans are battling for victory. Led by François Baroin, LR is refusing to believe that France's political future can be reduced to a standoff between Emmanuel Macron, accused of being the representatives of a new Socialist Party and the Front National. The Republicans, who know that the French would like to see political leaders on the left and right work together, and that they hope for national unity, maintain that they take a constructive stance in the face of the new Head of State. "The country would not understand that we were engaging in a systematic type of opposition," declared former Prime Minister (1995-1997) and present Mayor of Bordeaux, Alain Juppé (LR).

François Baroin wants to respond to the French population's feeling of fracture and abandonment and is defending a moderate line of action. Amongst the Republicans, some members, like Laurent Wauquiez, have chosen a harder stance. Many voters on the right feel that they were robbed during the presidential election, not only of victory but also of the basic debate they were expecting, due to the scandals, which made the campaign of their candidate, François Fillon inaudible, but this was also due to the latter's programme, deemed too hard and of having frightened off the electorate from the popular and also the middle classes. The programme defended by LR in the general elections has therefore been amended and modified.

LR is still planning to do away with 500,000 civil servants' posts, but now over 7 year period, i.e. 300,000 posts over the next five years, without affecting hospital and security staff (10 000 additional police and gendarme posts would be created). The party wants to bring public spending down by half of the GDP (this represents 57% at present) saving 100 billion €, reduce income tax and achieve budgetary balance in five years. LR wants to raise the lowest retirement pensions by 300€ and increase modest survivors' pensions by 10%.

What is the opposition saying?
In the Front National, defeat on 7th May was painful and the consequences were to be felt, notably the challenge made to the anti-euro stance defended by Florian Philippot, the party's Vice-President. Moreover, to everyone's general surprise Marion Maréchal Le Pen, Marine Le Pen's niece, and one of the two FN MPs and also the youngest member of the outgoing Assemblée Nationale decided not to stand in the election. She is leaving politics for the time being. After several days of hesitation Marine Le Pen decided to run in the election.

The latter brought the FN to its highest level ever on 7th May last (after having dominated the by-elections between the two presidential elections) but she seemed weakened after her defeat. Something sufficiently rare to be noted in this party in which self-criticism is uncommon, Marine Le Pen admitted that she had "failed" in the TV debate as she faced Emmanuel Macron between the two rounds: "too fiery, too passionate" she said.

The FN Chair came out ahead in the first round of the presidential election in 216 constituencies. On 7th May she won 45 constituencies and won more than 45% of the vote in 66 others. The party, 86% of whose candidates are new in these general elections, is counting cashing in on these results.

The FN claims to be the leading opposition group to the project of the new President Emmanuel Macron and hopes to win at least 15 seats in the Assemblée nationale so that it can form a parliamentary group. However, the general elections are a test for the FN, since staying in the second round this time will be more difficult than in the presidential election. Indeed a candidate has to win the vote of at least 12.5% of those registered in the first round to be able to stay in the second, which, with an average abstention rate of 35%, is equivalent to around 20% of the votes cast.

On the left the Socialist Party (PS) is caught between the radicals of France insoumise led by Jean-Luc Mélenchon and the Social Liberals of La République en Marche (LREM). Division on the left is damaging, since only agreements between the parties and withdrawals enabled some, and notably the members of the "smallest" parties in this political trend, to be elected. "Just a few days ago, in the field, citizens were telling us to give the new President Emmanuel Macron a chance, but since the appointment of Edouard Philippe as Prime Minister, many find that the president of the Republic is overly influenced by the right" suggests the socialist leader Jean-Christophe Cambadélis.
The PS candidates seem to be disenchanted. They are

campaigning without any real programme or strategy, each in his own corner, under his own name and are claiming their identity as socialists as little as possible.

The socialist candidate in the recent presidential election, Benoît Hamon, announced that he would be launching a movement "to rebuild a creative left, which would rise above all political labels" as of July 1st. Likewise the Mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo (PS), declared that she would be launching "Dès Demain" with former Employment and Solidarity Minister (1997-2000), Martine Aubry (PS), and former Justice Minister (2012-2016), Christiane Taubira, Dès demain, "an innovative movement open to all humanists who still believe in action."

Finally, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the other unfortunate candidate in the presidential election on 23rd April and 7th May last decided to do without the support of the Communist Party (PC) and is standing under the France insoumise banner alone. "After a vote of rejection and fear, the time has come to make a positive choice, that of a joint future," he declared. He will be standing in the country's second biggest city, Marseille, against outgoing MP Patrick Menucci (PS) and Corinne Versini (LREM) in the constituency in which Marine Le Pen achieved her weakest result in the region of Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur in the presidential election. "Jean-Luc Mélenchon will try to eliminate everyone on his left and right from the PS to the PC, as well as the EELV, so that he appears as the only force on the left," indicates Frédéric Dabi, Deputy Director of the pollster IFOP.

The French political system

The bicameral parliament is made up of the Assemblée nationale, the lower house, which comprises 577 MPs elected by direct universal suffrage for five years, and the Senate, the upper house, whose 348 members are elected for 6 years by indirect universal suffrage.

MPs are elected according to a single majority list in two rounds within 577 constituencies (556 in the departments of mainland France, 1 in the overseas departments and the territorial communities and 11 by the French who do not live in France itself). To be elected in the first round of the election a candidate has to win an absolute majority of the votes cast and this figure has to be the equivalent to at least one quarter of the voters registered. If no candidate is elected in the first round a second round is organised a week later. All of the candidates who win at least 12.5% of the vote in the constituency in the first round are allowed to stay for the second. If only one of the candidates fulfils this criteria, the one having won the second highest number of votes in the first round is then allowed to remain.

In France, political parties received a subsidy from the State which is attributed proportionally to the number of votes won by each of them in the general elections in terms of any candidate who has won at least 1% of the vote in at least 5 constituencies (or in all of those in which the party's candidates were standing in the case of the overseas departments). On average each vote cast earns 1.42€. The parties also receive a subsidy that is proportional to the number of of parliamentarians (MPs and Senators). An elected representative is equivalent to 37,280€. The electoral law obliges political parties to put forward at least 50% women candidates (give or take 2%). The parties which do not respect this principle have their subsidies reduced by a percentage that is equal to half of the difference between the number of candidates of each sex in comparison with the total number of candidates.
Finally, the bill of 16th February 2104 prohibits the accumulation of a parliamentary mandate with that of a local executive post. Many outgoing MPs are not standing because of this.

10 political parties won seats in the Assemblée nationale in the last general elections on 10th and 17th June 2012:

– the Socialist Party (PS), led by Jean-Christophe Cambadélis, has 302 seats;
– the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP), now the Republicans (LR) led by Bernard Accoyer, with 203 seats;
– Europe Ecology-The Greens (EE-LV), led by David Cormand, 18 seats ;
– the New Centre (NC) 13 seats;
– the Radical Left Party (PRG) has 13 seats;
– the Left Front (FG), alliance of the Left Party led by Jean-Luc Mélenchon and the Communist Party (PC) led by Pierre Laurent, with 10 seats;
– the Radical Valois Party (PRV) 6 seats;
– the Centre for France has 2 seats;
– the Front national (FN), led by Marine Le Pen, with 2 seats;
– the Centrist Alliance has one seat.

The 15th legislature of the V Republic will start on 27th June next.

Reminder of the general election results of 10th June and 17th June 2012 in France

Turnout: 57.22% in the first round and 55.4% in the second round

Political Parties	Number of votes won (first round)	% of votes won (first round)	Number of votes won (second round)	% of votes won (second round)	Number of seats
Far Left	253 386	0,98			0
Left Front (FG)	1 793 192	6,91	249 498	1,08	10
Socialist Party (PS)	7 618 326	29,35	9 420 889	40,91	280
Europe Ecology-The Greens (EE-LV)	1 418 264	5,46	829 036	3,60	17
Various Left	881 555	3,40	709 395	3,08	22
Radical Left Party (PRG)	428 898	1,65	538 331	2,34	12
The Centre for France	458 098	1,77	113 196	0,49	2
Union for a Popular Movement (UMP)	7 037 268	27,12	8 740 628	37,95	194
Various Right	910 034	3,51	417 940	1,82	15
New Centre	569 897	2,20	568 319	2,47	12
Radical Valois Party (PRV)	321 124	1,24	311 199	1,35	6
Centrist Alliance	156 026	0,60	123 132	0,53	2
Front National (FN)	3 528 663	13,60	842 695	3,66	2
Far Right	49 499	0,19	29 738	0,13	1
Ecologists	249 068	0,96			0
Regionalists	145 809	0,56	135 312	0,59	2
Others	133 752	0,52			0

Source: Home Affairs Ministry http://www.interieur.gouv.fr/Elections/Les-resultats/Legislatives/elecresult__LG2012/(path)/LG2012/FE.html

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