

French legislative elections: final round 19 June



by Nidra Poller

Il n'y a pas le feu au lac. This is one of my favorite French expressions. “The lake’s not on fire.” Meaning, don’t panic, things could be worse. Today, in the bleary aftermath of the legislative elections, it seems like the lake is on fire.

OFFICIAL RESULTS for the top four groups or parties:

LABEL	Number of seats
Ensemble (Renaissance ex-LREM, Modem, Parti Radical, Horizons)	245

Nupes (La France Insoumise, EELV, Communistes, Socialistes) Divers gauche	131 22
Rassemblement National (Marine LePen)	89
Les Républicains + UDI Divers droite	64 10

[See below what the polls predicted on June 17th.]

Emmanuel Macron will have to govern with an even slimmer majority than predicted. He'll be boxed in by the *NUPES* on the Left and *Rassemblement National* on the Right. *RN* has achieved results far beyond what was predicted. *Les Républicains* (+ the right-centrist *UDI* & misc. Right) with a total of 74 seats will be the newly-elected president's only source of votes to pass the reforms he promised and, more generally, to resist the left-wing populist pull.

Will the two populist opposition parties cancel each other out and reduce their power? Will they join together to promote the leftist economic policies they've been promoting for years? Or will the *NUPES* tear the government to shreds with their sharp teeth, steely eyes, and lust for revenge against the "president of the rich"?

And the *Rassemblement National*? Will it prove that Marine Le Pen's *dédiabolisation* strategy has worked ... not only to fulfill her wildest dreams—to be The Opposition and replace *Les Républicains* as the governing right-wing party—but also to demonstrate by the words and deeds of her deputies that she is not the devil, not linked to the fascist origins of her party, not undemocratic or anti-*républicaine*?

The harsh reality is staring us in the face. French voters freely chose to abstain (only 54% of registered voters went to the polls) and probably complain, or to give legislative power to populists whose political philosophies are totally discredited everywhere they have been applied.

Moreover, they have given their favors to two parties, NUPES and RN, whose leaders are, to put it starkly, pro-Putin and anti-Ukraine. A few days after President Macron traveled to Kyiv and declared unambiguous support for a Ukrainian victory, with restoration of its territorial integrity, including Crimea, voters demonstrated their profound indifference to a war for the defense of our collective freedom.

The super-humanitarian *NUPES* doesn't give a fig for famine in Africa. Or else they blame it on Macron and pretend it will go away if only they can decapitate him and rule tyrannically in his stead. The *RN*, champions of national identity, sovereignty and security, apparently think the best guarantee of those values will be to throw Ukraine to the Russian bear.

And the young brilliant Emmanuel Macron, who came to power by blurring the Right-Left cleavage, finds himself undermined by the extreme populist versions of Left and Right.

They accuse him of humiliating them, treating them with contempt, governing like Jupiter, refusing debate and compromise, causing economic ruin, and failing to save the planet from ecological disaster. Judging by media appearance across the board today, the victims of humiliation, contempt and autocratic rule are determined to humiliate the humiliators and rule with an iron fist.

[See below my report on the 1st round] I did not explain last week, because I didn't understand it myself, the meaning of the "party labels" used for the legislative elections. *RN* and *LR* candidates ran under their own labels. Macron's party (originally "*LREM*" now renamed a bitterly ironic *Renaissance*)

ran together (*Ensemble*) with *Modem* and *Horizons*. Mélenchon's *France Insoumise* ran as *NUPES*, a coalition of left-wing parties. If, as it seems, the deputies will maintain their original party affiliations, the total number of seats won by *NUPES* will be broken up into 4 parts, with 72 for *la France Insoumise*. This leaves *RN* as the major opposition party.

I naïvely believed that Mélenchon fervently believed he would be thrust into the post of prime minister by an irresistible surge. That's why I dared to suggest he had lost his bid and ended his career in a fizzle. Now, his loyal followers are explaining that reaching for the heights was just a way of galvanizing voters. Of course they didn't soar, but they are ready to grapple.

Jerry Gordon and I will explore this and more in our next conversation, to appear in the July issue of *New English Review*.

French legislative elections: first round 12 June

OFFICIAL RESULTS for the top four parties:

Party label	Percentage of total votes cast	Predicted number of seats According to last polls before the 2 nd round
Ensemble (Emmanuel Macron)	25.75%	270-300
Nupes (Jean-Luc Mélenchon)	25.66%	160-190
Rassemblement National (Marine LePen)	18.68%	25-45
Les Républicains	10.4%	50-70

Only 5 candidates out of the 577 districts that will choose

their deputies won on the first round

PREDICTIONS: Ensemble will obtain a relative majority, but not the absolute majority that the re-elected president Emmanuel Macron would have hoped for. Nupes will not obtain a majority, Jean-Luc Mélenchon will not be “elected” prime minister. These percentages do not automatically translate into a comparable number of deputies. Each contest is local, countless factors are at play.

Q: Is it true that NUPES had more votes than Ensemble?

A: It’s debatable. NUPES accuses the Interior Minister of manipulating the figures to hide the NUPES victory. The ministry replies that some candidates claimed by NUPES were not really affiliated or had discarded the label.

If, as expected, the balance of power in the parliament remains roughly the same after the second round, this squabble over percentages will count for little in the coming years.

More important, is the low percentage of participation: 47.51% of registered voters went to the polls. While Ukrainians risk their lives to defend their democracy, citizens of democratic countries don’t even bother to vote.

Q: Could you sum up the overall political climate after this round?

A: Triumphant losses, low key victories, and disappointment all down the line. The temptation of the extremes is disturbingly strong.

ENSEMBLE [together] The party of the re-elected president did not win an absolute majority in the first round and doesn’t have much chance of achieving it in the second and final round. This means the president will have to count on votes from one or several parties to pass legislation. Which is not bad for the general welfare but is cast as a disappointment

because the newly elected president is expected to obtain a parliamentary majority in a “logical” vote of confidence. According to opinion polls, the voters’ intention was precisely to deprive the president of that rubber stamp.

NUPES, the left-wing populist party cobbled together by Jean-Luc Mélenchon, building on his surprisingly high score (21.95%) in the presidential election and the disastrous results of other leftist parties, is profoundly disappointed. Consequently, the ringleader of that unlikely political circus immediately declared Emmanuel Macron “beaten and defeated.” The campaign slogan of NUPES (that no one knows how to pronounce in French, but anyone can see it’s one step away from DUPES) is “Jean-Luc Mélenchon for Prime Minister. Too important to run for a lowly MP position, Mélenchon decided his party would win a comfortable majority of seats in the Parliament, thereby forcing Macron to appoint him Prime Minister. It didn’t happen. But his true believers are more optimistic than ever. Mélenchon promised a “déferlement” for the second round, a surge, an irresistible wave that will truly knock Macron down and out. The chances are nil.

And it would seem that Mélenchon knows it. His “victory” speech was more like a dirge. His usual bluster was gone. He seemed weary, listless, lusterless. His predictions of a dazzling future were sad, depressing. On the upside, his bouncy supporters made ridiculous claims of immediate revolutionary transformation: Vote for us next Sunday and on Monday the minimum wage will soar, the cost of living will drop, all your wishes will be fulfilled. “We’re ready to govern.” The next day they explained Mélenchon’s obvious sadness as solemnity. Friday, on the last day of campaigning before the second round, Mélenchon boasted that he wouldn’t be criticizing the president heretofore because on Monday he’ll be Macron’s Prime Minister and they will show a united front in the international arena.

Two political careers fizzled out this week: Zemmour’s flash

in the pan and Mélenchon's lifelong role as Chief Opposition Orator.

RASSEMBLEMENT NATIONAL, in the image of its leader, Marine Le Pen, is neither here nor there. With a significant increase in the potential number of deputies, the party can claim success. Monotonous Marine is again going through the motions, strolling through indulgent outdoor markets, smiling, grinning, and posing for some o some o selfies, declaring victory over fellow populists: Mélenchon is not going to be prime minister, I told you so, Zemmour is over and out, as he deserves, and here I am, Marine never to be president, Marine true to form, Marine over and over again. Her lieutenant Jordan Bardella proudly proclaims RN is France's leading party and main opposition. How does RN get to be the leading party as it consistently comes in second? Simple, says Bardella: it's the only solid party with no coalitions, no adulterations. 100% Pure. And RN will probably be true to its no-show no-vote reputation, earned at both the European and the national parliament.

LES RÉPUBLICAINS may lose one third or more of the deputies serving in the current legislature. They had hoped against hope to take advantage of a solid presence on the local level to bounce back after the drastic defeat of their presidential candidate, Valérie Pécresse, Apparently the wind is not in LR's sails. The parliamentary Right is left with a small piece of the pie. However, Macron will need those votes to pass important legislation that is fiercely rejected by both Left and the Right-wing populists. This will give LR some bargaining power to move the government in the direction of law & order, *laïcité*, immigration control, free market economics, defense of national identity ...

RECONQUÊTE: Eric Zemmour. the only candidate of his short-lived party with any chance of becoming an MP, was eliminated

in the first round. Terminus for his political career. He'll go back to being a kibitzer. If the public and the media will have him. He had chosen a district where he had a good score in the presidential election but it wasn't enough to carry him further. Consequently, Zemmour came to the logical conclusion that his party was the only one that could save the nation, and the entire Right wing should line up behind him. A fistful of commentators with solid conservative reputations agreed: the Right should follow the example of the Left. A smattering of no-future parties—Communist, Greens, Socialists, etc. threw their principles overboard and lined up behind Mélenchon's extreme France Insoumise agenda. The cocktail was so exciting that the ousted antisemitic labor leader Jeremy Corbin came to Paris to campaign for a NUPES candidates in Paris. She is leading with 47 % of the votes in her district. The likely winner in my district is a NUPES Green candidate that sailed in the infamous Gaza flotilla.

Temptation of the extremes

I witnessed a stunning example of the temptation of the extremes last week in the aftermath of the lukewarm results for Ensemble. Journalists on one of the all-news channels, LCI, went into a hysterical flurry against the president's party. They didn't campaign, the candidates are tasteless and colorless, Macron is AWOL and now he's going off on a jaunt to Macedonia when he should be here campaigning. Quelle idée, quel timing, c'est scandaleux. His Prime Minister (Elisabeth Borne née Bornestein, daughter of a Jewish résistant of Russian origin) is a dull technocrat. Look at Mélenchon's Nupes, there's a party that knows how to campaign, what energy, what pizzazz, these guys and gals are FUN, look at Obono with her ethnic headdress and big earrings, what a cast, how colorful... Hey there, Ensemble, you better get your act together.

Macron in Kyiv

Leaving his party to fend for itself, President Macron traveled to Romania, Moldavia, Ukraine and Poland, joined by the German Chancellor Scholz, the Italian Consigliere Draghi, and the Romanian President Klaus Iohannis. The European leaders made long old-fashioned train journeys, bearing the message of unambiguous support for Ukraine and welcoming its bid for EU membership. Emmanuel Macron, as rotating president of the European Commission until the end of the month and newly re-elected French president, announced that his country will add 6 Caesar canons in addition to the 12 already supplied. In stronger terms than he had previously expressed, the French president declared wishes for a Ukrainian victory, with the restoration of its territorial integrity, including Crimea. Then, in his typically French manner, the president added that if and when Ukraine should decide, on its own terms, that it would be ready to negotiate, France would be there to guarantee its security, which is inseparable from the security of the continent.

Commentators granted a certain dignity to the exercise, though reminding all concerned that the primary concern of French citizens is the cost of living.

We will see on Sunday whether the president's fulfillment of his international responsibilities has any influence on French voters.