

The first round of the French regional elections: the far right turn

France held the first round of voting in regional elections on 6 December, with the Front National emerging as the party with the largest vote share. **Marta Lorimer** writes that the elections were a blow for both François Hollande's Socialist Party and the Republicans, led by Nicolas Sarkozy. She notes that with doubts being raised over whether the left and right will cooperate in the second round to keep the Front National out of power, the party looks set to win an unprecedented degree of control over sizeable regional budgets and secure a strong basis to operate from for the 2017 presidential elections.



Following a major reform of France's electoral boundaries, on 6 December, French voters were called upon to vote in the first round of regional elections. In a striking result, the **Front National** (FN) came first in six regions, with an estimated 27-30 per cent of the national vote. This was the party's highest vote share in 40 years of existence, with the result already sparking a lively debate in France.

The demise of the PS, disappointment for Sarkozy and joy for Le Pen

After the first round of voting, one element was immediately clear: the crisis of the left. If the aggregate score of left wing parties, sitting around 22-23 per cent, was not a complete disaster, the **Socialist Party** (PS) of President François Hollande and its '**Union de la Gauche**' have little to rejoice.

In metropolitan France, its lists came first in two regions (Bretagne and Aquitaine-Limousin-Poitou-Charentes), but were only third in most cases. The mainstream left is suffering from a profound loss of appeal among its traditional electorate and from being in government at a very hard time for France. While Hollande's approval ratings have increased following the Paris attacks, they have been abysmally low throughout most of his presidency, making him France's **least popular president**.

On the other hand, the **Republicans** (LR), led by Nicolas Sarkozy, and the corresponding alliance of centre-right parties came in first in four regions (Auvergne-Rhone-Alpes, Pays de la Loire, Normandie, Ile-de-France) and La Reunion, but trailed behind the Front National in several others. Moreover, the party polled worse than expected, with an estimated 26-27 per cent of the national vote, showing that overall, the mainstream right in France is not doing too well either.

The real winner of the first round was undoubtedly the Front National. Coming in first in six regions, its most striking results were in the PACA (Provences-Alpes Cote D'Azur) and NPDPCP (Nord-Pas-De-Calais–Picardie) regions. Led by the most prominent modern representatives of the Le Pen dynasty, Marine and Marion, the party polled around 40.6 per cent in both PACA and in NPDPCP – the latter being the region which has had the most direct experience of the migration crisis.

Making sense of the results

Viewed as a classic 'protest vote', the Front National's success has already been explained by several commentators as the result of exogenous factors, ranging from the Paris attacks to the inadequacy of the other parties. Indeed, the Paris attacks, taking place only three weeks prior to the elections, clearly allowed the party to emphasise its existing narrative on the threat posed by immigration and radical Islam. Nevertheless, it should be remembered that the Front National was leading in the polls even before the attacks occurred. The events in Paris may have amplified its success, but they do not explain the emergence of the party's solid electoral base.

A series of other factors also need to be considered in order to understand the results. Perhaps one of the most

striking elements of the Front National's progression has been its ability to 'fideliser' the electorate: that is, the tendency for an increasing number of voters who vote for the party in one election to continue voting for it in future elections. In addition, it has been extremely effective in attracting voters from new social categories and, according to a survey carried out by Ipsos, it has polled above average levels of support among young voters, with around 35 per cent of 18-24 year olds preferring it to the other parties.

The Front National also benefits from the fact that it has never been in power, and can therefore forego any responsibility for France's current situation. Laurent Fabius famously said in 1984 that the far right 'asks the right questions, but gives the wrong answers'. Especially in times of crisis, the first part of the quote is relevant: the far right can appeal to voters with arguments that the mainstream is reluctant to discuss, such as migration and security.

The final element to be considered is that the Front National, once a reject of French politics, has come to be seen increasingly as a regular party. According to a January Odoxa poll for CQFD et iTELE and an April BVA poll for iTele, the party is judged to be increasingly 'normal', with over 50 per cent of the electorate considering it to be a 'party like all others'.

To rally or not to rally: the second round

How successful the Front National proves to be will ultimately come down to the voting in the second round. Some of those who remember the second round of the 2002 presidential elections, which saw Jacques Chirac facing Jean-Marie Le Pen, may feel that there is little to worry about. While the French may vote impulsively in first rounds, they are expected to vote 'rationally' in the second round. Moreover, faced with the real threat of a far right victory, mainstream parties tend to stick together and rally in favour of one candidate.

However something is different this time: the 'republican rally' of the past has not emerged. While the PS officially withdrew its candidates in three regions, one of them (Jean-Pierre Masseret) refused to follow the party line. Similarly, several members of the Republicans, including former president Sarkozy, spoke against the idea of withdrawing their candidates because it would be the equivalent of 'playing with the people's votes'. He may be right: after all, when one is faced with an adversary whose standard argument about other parties is 'they're all the same', joining forces may not be the most credible strategy.

Even if the Front National is unlikely to win in all six regions, it is very well placed in at least three and almost sure to win in two. While this is not quite the sweeping of the board that many of those in the mainstream parties fear, it would still be a significant result because it would give the Front National an unprecedented degree of control over sizeable regional budgets. In addition, it would form a strong basis for the 2017 presidential election.

Whatever happens in the second round, the left and the right have less than two years to recompose themselves and find a credible strategy for the presidential elections – and possibly one that does not include looking increasingly like the Front National itself. After all, there may be some truth to Jean-Marie Le Pen's idea that 'the French will always prefer the original to the copy'.

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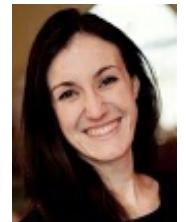
Marine Le Pen embraces her niece, Marion Maréchal Le Pen. From: francebleu.fr (CC BY-SA 3.0)

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