

Below is a brief interview with well-known, progressive French economist, Dominique Plihon about the recent French election. Plihon is an Emeritus Professor of Economics at the University of Paris 13, a frequent commentator on French TV, and a major activist with ATTAC, an international network of progressive activists <https://www.attac.org/en>. Gerald Epstein, co-director of the Political Economy Research Institute, UMass Amherst, conducted the interview.

"A Letter from France on the French Election"

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1. What does the recent election mean?

The election in France reflects the changes which took place in the country in recent years. First, France paid a fairly high price for the crisis since 2008, with a rate of unemployment remaining at a high level (10%). Second, a majority of the population lost confidence in the ability of traditional political parties to solve social and economic problems. This mistrust with respect to politicians has been reinforced by rising corruption, and by insecurity caused by terrorism. Third, most French people are very critical about the European Union, which is considered as partly responsible for the poor economic performances, due to restrictive policies which have been imposed, not only in France, but also in Southern European countries (Greece, Spain, Portugal, Italy). However, and this may seem paradoxical, most people in France and in Southern European countries still think that the European project should not be abandoned, including the Eurozone, and that radical reforms are required for more democracy and more inclusive social policies.

The defeat of the two traditional parties (*Parti Socialiste* and *Les Républicains*) and the votes in favor of Le Pen and Macron whose political organization *En Marche* was created only one year ago, but also the good electoral results of the radical left, *La France Insoumise* led by Mélenchon, were a direct consequence of the factors just mentioned. The political situation in France has been deeply transformed. Clearly French people want a renewal of French politics.

2. What can and should the left do now to fight both La Pen and Macron?

Macron has a good image, for the time being, because he is young and succeeded in convincing a large share of the voters that he will change politics, outside the traditional distinction between Left and Right. However, if we take into account the spoiled votes and the abstentions, votes in favor of Macron represent only 44% of the total electoral body. The majority of the votes for Macron in the second round of the election were votes against Le

Pen. The polls indicate that 61% of the voters do not want his political party to have the majority of the seats at the Parliament at the elections which will take place in June. So there is no strong confidence in Macron's ability to solve social and economic problems.

In fact, Macron will pursue the neoliberal policies implemented by Holland as he wants to go on liberalizing the labor market and the financial system. Besides, there is almost nothing new in his program regarding the reform of the European institutions, and the ecological transition plays a minor role in his program. As a result, there is a major risk that social issues will not be solved, poverty and the precariousness of French people will worsen during the five years ahead. This may pave the way for Le Pen's *Front National* in future elections.

The Left is divided now into three pieces: the Socialist Party, the Communist Party, and Mélenchon's France *Insoumise*. It needs to reunify and propose a real progressive program to have a chance to win future elections. This will not be easy! It will require massive pressure coming from left people.

3. Does the left have a chance of winning enough seats in Parliament to affect the choice of the new Prime Minister?

Macron's Party may not have a majority of seats in Parliament. He may have to conclude ad hoc alliances with traditional Parties, more likely with the right wing Party Les Républicains. So there is a risk of political instability. This will be quite different from the situation in other European countries, like Germany, where coalitions between Right and Left parties have negotiated government programs.

Mélenchon's Radical Left is likely to win a good number of seats in the elections in June, but not the majority of the seats. The Left is likely to remain split into different parties.

But we also have to take into account the mobilization of social movements (labor unions, NGOs, citizen movements like Attac) which will play an important role in fighting Macron's business friendly policies.

4. What do you think is going to happen with all this?

The future of the political situation in France is very uncertain. This is also the case of other European countries, such as Italy, Spain, Portugal, Greece, Belgium and Austria. The outcome will depend partly on the evolution of the European Union. If current policies are pursued, the Eurozone, which is the core of Europe, will blow up sooner or later. This will lead to a political and economic disaster, with the threat of nationalist governments coming into power. What we need to get out of this danger are democratic reforms of the European institutions, and ambitious common policies promoting the ecological and social transition. That was at the heart of the programs of the two left candidates, Hamon and Mélenchon. Had they been able to unify, the Left would have probably won this election.