

MACRON, A STORY OF LOST ILLUSIONS

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French regional elections ended in the highest abstentionism than in virtually any other poll since the founding of the Fifth Republic in 1959. There are three reasons why French voters are increasingly disinclined to vote outside presidential elections: disillusion with Emmanuel Macron's promises to reform the economy; the growing distance between the Elysee Palace and the Parisian oligarchy with the rest of the country; and the weak power of regions.

The results of French regional elections can be read in many ways. The traditional right-wing parties win a convincing victory; all parties see off the challenge of the far right Rassemblement National (RN) led by Marine Le Pen; incumbent presidents, of conservative or socialist hue, were re-elected. However, all observers agree is that only one voter in three bothered to cast his vote. President Emmanuel Macron concluded the abstention rate sounded a “democratic alarm bell”. The number of abstentionists was higher than in virtually any other poll since the founding of the Fifth Republic in 1959. Yet, melodramatic sound bites cannot hide the stinging defeat suffered by La République en Marche (LREM) a catch-all centrist party that helped propel Macron to power four years ago. There are three reasons why French voters are increasingly disinclined to vote outside presidential elections. Many voters were convinced Macron would bring a breath of fresh air to French politics and genuinely seek reforms: these hopes have been betrayed. The second is that regional presidents have no power as France remains as centralised as it ever was. A third reason is explained in forensic detail by Brigitte Grandville in *What Ails France*. Macron - who quickly earned the nickname Jupiter among Paris insiders after his victory in 2017, has proved to be a great centraliser.

Four years into his presidency, all key decisions are taken at the Elysee Palace, key ministries except Finance are marginalised, not least the Foreign Ministry whose present incumbent Jean-Yves Le Drian is openly dismissed as “incompetent and inconsequential” by one of France’s most distinguished retired diplomats. The micro-management of the Covid-19 crisis snacks of Versailles, the glorious palace outside Paris where the Bourbon kings ruled France for a century before the revolution of 1789. Macron has

often treated ordinary French people with contemptuous throw away remarks during his walkabouts (he once treated them as 'shirkers'). All too often, he gives the impression that he is a paid-up member of the metropolitan sophisticates: to such Parisians, their fellow countrymen fighting to make ends meet the *gillet jaunes* in 2018, are "peripheral", the French equivalent of Trump-voting "deplorables" in the United States. The icy glaze of an Olympian president has become unattractive to millions of French people.

A second explanation also helps to frame the high level of abstention. Contrary to what many observers appear to believe, the French regions do not control education and transport which remain both heavily centralised. The tax money has merely been transferred from Paris to the regional capitals to pay for those policies. People do not vote because regions are primarily bureaucracies that pay bills on behalf of the state, not regional authorities. The proclaimed aim of President Francois Mitterrand in the 1980s was to decentralise power but the attempt was botched, maybe deliberately sabotaged by an all-knowing elite. More than one million new civil service jobs were created over the decades. Regional presidents operate from luxurious new *Hotels de Region* but it is open to doubt whether this huge new burden of state expenditure has added a single point to GDP or job creation in forty years. French regions are not German Lander, or Spanish autonomous communities, quite the reverse. The vice like grip of what is perceived as an aloof Paris' elite remains as tight as ever. Rightly or wrongly, Macron is also perceived as the symbol of this privileged and arrogant elite.

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The president has spent the past two years doing his utmost to cast next year's presidential race as a two-horse race between him and Marine Le Pen. The staying power of the traditional right, of regional presidents like Xavier Bertrand in the northern Hauts de France, Valérie Pécresse around Paris and Laurent Wauquiez around Lyon suggest his plan may be derailed. The renewed breakdown in law and order in the poorer districts of cities such as Paris with concentrated populations of predominantly Muslim immigrants, have fuelled a discourse which reduces radical Islam or the very religion of Islam as the source of the ills that bedevil France. Macron does not quite conflate Islam with terrorism as the RN and many public intellectuals do but stealing Marine Le Pen's clothes only to present himself as the best rampart against her is a risky strategy. Macron's posture on the suburbs chimes with what the writer Christian Bobin calls the Parisian oligarchy's haughty view of the periphery as "a dark pool of looming grievance".

The oligarchy's attitude extends beyond the issue of immigrants and Islam. Brigitte Grandville, an economics professor at Queen Mary University of London, offers a coruscating economic and social analysis of how the very manner in which France has been governed for decades explains the

widespread disillusionment with the political class. Grandville reminds her readers of *Le Mal Français*, a book published in 1977 in which Alain Peyrefitte, a gaullist minister, bemoaned the country as a “blocked society” which had failed to shed its absolutist heritage of centralisation. The *gilets jaunes* were a bottom-up revolt, catalysed by a planned tax rise of diesel, of people who scraped a meagre living in the outer suburbs and small provincial towns and blamed the government for rising taxes and deteriorating public services. Their protests were met by great police brutality and an uncomprehending and often condescending media in Paris.

The author’s focus not so much on Macron but on what she describes as a technocratic system of which the president is “both exemplar and hostage”, a ruling class of mandarins that holds sway over business, the media and intellectual life. Her very elegant words are written in a liberal intellectual frame. She concludes that recent reforms were either unnecessary (labour market liberalisation), ineffective (business deregulation), or politically counter-productive (pensions, now shelved). She argues, convincingly, that these reforms are about preserving the status quo rather than addressing the real challenges that France faces. A super selective education system fails many pupils and University students while French business is saddled by too many senior executives with bureaucratic backgrounds. State intervention is all pervasive and ill equipped to adapt to technical innovation. In other words, uncompromising centralisation has destroyed public trust in democracy. The huge revolt of 2018-9 witnessed the mobilisation of the working poor on a scale not seen since the second world war which does not speak of a happy country.

Macron came to power as a champion of transparency, openness and optimism. His failure to reform is shared by all recent presidents, be they or the left or the right. Growing abstention is a response to this failure and its inevitable consequence. French voters are angry or disillusioned. Young people in particular, who are actively engaged in all manner of NGOs, choose to opt out of elections.