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Newly United, French Left Hopes to Counter President in Upcoming Vote

Left-wing parties have joined forces ahead of France's two-stage parliamentary elections, hoping to revive their fortunes and put a brake on President Emmanuel Macron's agenda.



Candidates meeting with farmers in the Drôme, a French region where leftist politicians believe they can win legislative seats in a push to stymie President Emmanuel Macron's agenda.

Credit... Andrea Mantovani for The New York Times



By [Constant Méheut](#)

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ALLEX, France — With its centuries-old stone villages nestled among lavender fields, cows and goats grazing in the mountains and miles of vineyards, the Drôme region resembles a France in miniature. Steeped in tradition and seemingly averse to change, the vast southeastern district, tucked between Lyon and Marseille, has for the past two decades been the political domain of France's center-right. But with the first round of France's two-step parliamentary elections approaching on Sunday, the long-

excluded left sees a rare opening to challenge President Emmanuel Macron, after his [convincing re-election victory in April over Marine Le Pen](#), his far-right challenger.

Largely nonexistent in the presidential campaign, [France's fractious leftist parties](#) have forged an alliance with the aim of making themselves relevant again, blocking Mr. Macron from getting a majority in Parliament and complicating his new five-year term.

At least that is the hope of politicians like Marie Pochon, the local left-wing candidate in the third constituency of the Drôme, where left-wing parties outscored Mr. Macron's in the presidential vote by more than 10 percentage points.



Marie Pochon, left, a candidate representing the leftist coalition NUPES, campaigning door to door in Alex, France, a town in the Drôme.

Credit... Andrea Mantovani for The New York Times

During a recent stop in Alex, a small village of cream-colored stone houses in the eastern part of the Drôme, Ms. Pochon was met with an enthusiasm that had long eluded the left in this part of France. "Keep going, we're all behind you!" Maud Dugrand, a resident of Alex, told Ms. Pochon as she rang doorbells on a narrow street and handed out leaflets, which one resident, reading a newspaper on his terrace, refused, saying he was already convinced by her.

"Our constituency is a laboratory," said Pascale Rochas, a local Socialist candidate in the 2017 legislative elections who has now rallied behind Ms. Pochon's candidacy. "If we can win here, we can win elsewhere."

The Drôme, indeed, is a snapshot of small-town France, giving the local election the veneer of a national contest. Until recently, the region was typical of the disarray of the left at the national level, with each party refusing to collaborate and instead clinging to its strongholds.

The Socialists and Communists have long dominated the southern Provençal villages, while the Greens and the hard left have battled for the more economically threatened farmlands in the north.



Residents discussing the upcoming legislative elections in a market in Saint-Paul-Trois-Châteaux, in the Drôme, on Tuesday.

Credit... Andrea Mantovani for The New York Times

But the new leftist alliance — forged under the leadership of the longtime leftist firebrand [Jean-Luc Mélenchon](#) — is now trying to bridge those gaps, uniting Mr. Mélenchon's own France Unbowed Party with the Socialists, Communists and Greens.

Mr. Mélenchon, who came third in April's presidential race, has portrayed the parliamentary election as a "third round" presidential vote. He has called on voters to metaphorically "elect" him prime minister (the position is appointed by the president) by giving the coalition a majority in the National Assembly, the lower and most powerful house of Parliament.

The alliance has allowed the left to avoid competing candidacies and instead field a single candidate in almost all of France's 577 constituencies, automatically raising its chances of winning seats in Parliament. Stewart Chau, a political analyst for the polling firm Viavoix, said the alliance was "the only dynamic in the current political landscape."

Since her loss in the presidential election, Ms. Le Pen's National Rally party has failed to drive the public debate around its favorite themes of economic insecurity, immigration and crime, and the two-round voting system, which generally [favors more moderate candidates](#), will most likely result in the far right securing only a few dozen seats in Parliament.



Posters featuring Ms. Pochon, in the commune of Saoû.

Credit... Andrea Mantovani for The New York Times

Mr. Chau said Mr. Mélenchon had created a new “center of gravity” for the French left and had “succeeded in pushing through the idea that the game was not up yet,” despite Mr. Macron’s re-election. [Opinion polls](#) currently give the leftist coalition — called Nouvelle Union populaire écologique et sociale, more commonly known by its acronym NUPES — a chance of winning 160 to 230 seats in the 577-seat National Assembly.

That could be enough to put a brake on Mr. Macron’s political agenda in Parliament and upset his second term as president, though it is far from certain.

Ms. Pochon, 32, an environmental activist, perhaps best embodies the outreach of the left-wing alliance even in areas that the center-right has long controlled.

Economic and social issues vary greatly along the roads that run through the Drôme’s third constituency. Each of its 238 municipalities, populated by only a few thousand people, faces specific challenges.



Voters mingling after Ms. Pochon’s rally on Tuesday before the first round of voting on Sunday. Credit... Andrea Mantovani for The New York Times

Economic insecurity, a shortage of doctors and a lack of public transportation are the main concerns in the district’s northern farmlands, whereas Provençal villages in the south are more worried about lavender production, a key feature of the local economy increasingly threatened by rising temperatures.

To address the variety of issues, Ms. Pochon has drawn on the alliance’s extensive platform, which includes raising the monthly minimum wage to 1,500 euros, or about \$1,600; kick-starting ecological transition with big investments in green energy; reintroducing small train lines; and putting an end to [medical deserts](#).

“We’re witnessing the emergence of a rural environmentalism, of a new kind of left in these territories,” Ms. Pochon said during an interview.

It has also helped that local left-wing forces have teamed up in the election, putting an end to divisions that Ms. Rochas said had been a “heartbreak.”



Celia de Lavergne, right, a candidate in Mr. Macron's center-right party, canvassing for votes at a market. Credit... Andrea Mantovani for The New York Times

In the Drôme, Macron supporters acknowledged the challenge they face. “NUPES worry us a bit because they’re very present on the ground,” said Maurice Mérabet, as he was handing out leaflets at an open-air market for Célia de Lavergne, the constituency’s current lawmaker and a member of Mr. Macron’s party, La République En Marche.

Ms. de Lavergne, who is running for re-election and was campaigning in Saint-Paul-Trois-Châteaux, a small town in southern Drôme, said it would “be a close race” between her and Ms. Pochon.

She attacked the leftist alliance for its economic platform, saying it was unrealistic, and slammed the coalition’s plans to phase out reliance on nuclear power.

Instead she highlighted how she had fought to try to get an additional reactor for the local nuclear plant, as part of [Mr. Macron's ambitious plans to construct 14 new-generation reactors](#).

“Being antinuclear is a total aberration,” said Jean-Paul Sagnard, 72, a retiree, as he wove his way through the market’s vegetable stalls. He added that Mr. Macron’s platform was “the one that makes the most sense, economically speaking.”



Nuclear power and climate change are key issues for voters in the Drôme. Credit... Andrea Mantovani for The New York Times

Criticism about Mr. Mélenchon’s fiery personality is also frequent, even among left-wing supporters. Maurice Feschet, a lavender producer, said that even though he would vote for the leftist alliance on Sunday, Mr. Mélenchon’s calls to elect him prime minister had left him indifferent.

"I don't think that he has what it takes to lead the country," said Mr. Feschet, standing in the middle of a lavender field.

In the narrow streets of the village of Alex, Ms. Dugrand, the supporter of Ms. Pochon, also told the candidate that Mr. Mélenchon "is not my cup of tea." But she could not hide her excitement at the prospect of the left becoming the main force of opposition to Mr. Macron, after five years during which it was virtually voiceless.

"We only have one wish, that something happens," she said.



*Campaign posters in Alex speak to the region's importance in the coming election.
Credit... Andrea Mantovani for The New York Times*