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France

Abstract

The French government's response to Coronavirus outbreak – health and safety measures, restrictions on movement, social distancing, shut down of non-essential businesses and education establishments – has been operating only since the commencement of lockdown on 17 March 2020. At first, the government only followed the advice of its Scientific Council. Following a split between the scientists on the importance and means of fighting the global pandemic, the government focused on the Health and Economy portfolios, which has contributed to it keeping control on the evolution of the pandemic in France.

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FRANCE

RED AND GREEN ZONES CUT FRANCE IN TWO

ESTIMATED POPULATION (2020): 67 MILLION¹

COVID-19 statistics at 1 June 2020

TOTAL CASES	185,851
TOTAL RECOVERED	68,473
DEATHS	28,805

Introduction: The French government's response to Coronavirus outbreak—health and safety measures, restrictions on movement, social distancing, shut down of non-essential businesses and education establishments—has been operating only since the commencement of lockdown on 17 March 2020. At first, the government only followed the advice of its Scientific Council. Following a split between the scientists on the importance and means of fighting the global pandemic, the government focused on the Health and Economy portfolios, which has contributed to it keeping control on the evolution of the pandemic in France.

COVID-19 in France. The first cases of coronavirus in France² may go back to December 2019, but at that time patients were treated for pneumonia. It was only by going back to patients' files and having tests carried out that it was discovered that the patients suffered from coronavirus.³ Agnès Buzyn, the former Health Minister who left her post to be a candidate in the municipal elections in Paris, said that she had warned President Macron and Prime Minister Edouard Philippe about the seriousness of the crisis in January.⁴

The first large cluster was an evangelical gathering between 17 and 21 February in Mulhouse attended by 2,500 people.⁵ According to an investigative report by Radio France, at least half of the attendees had contracted the virus. It was only on 2 March that health authorities recognized that there was an outbreak all over the country linked to the religious meeting, by which time secondary infections had spread out of control. By 1 June, the COVID-19 pandemic had claimed the lives of just over 28,800 people in France, according to the data communicated by the *Santé publique France*.

Government measures: The first round of municipal elections in France took place on 15 March against the backdrop of government measures to prevent the spread of the virus. Stringent restrictions on public life involving the closure of bars, restaurants and other businesses considered non-essential were set to begin the following day.

The decision to press ahead with the election was justified as being critical to democratic life in the country, despite concerns about how a second round would be held as the toll of infections and deaths continued to rise. In the end, the turnout of registered voters was 45%, down almost 20% from the last election in 2014.⁶ The second round of very 'out of the ordinary' municipal elections will now be held on 28 June.⁷ This is almost three and a half months after the first round when usually the first and second rounds take place within a week.

On 16 March (one day after the first round of the municipal elections), President Emmanuel Macron announced the beginning of a lockdown period from 17 March at noon. Initially planned for 15 days, then for 30 days, the lockdown period was extended until 11 May. Prime Minister Edouard Philippe announced on 7 May that the country was "cut in two" concerning rates of infection; the government has created red and green zones to demarcate infection levels. There is a clear concentration of cases in Paris and the northeast of France (the red zones) where restrictions will both remain.⁸ The announcement came as France moved to relax lockdown from Monday 11 May.

Government intervention and stimulus: On 16 March President Emmanuel Macron announced measures intended to assist both businesses and employees to help stave off the prospect of an economic crisis in France. These included a furloughing scheme known as *chômage partiel* under which the state would pay 84% of an employee's wage.⁹ Since its introduction the cost of the scheme has risen to €20 billion.¹⁰ Businesses were also informed that via a simple email request they could defer payment of taxes and social security contributions in the month of May¹¹ with those able to demonstrate that the effects of the virus were a direct threat to their survival able to apply for tax exemption.¹² The government has also announced a €110 billion package, which includes: a solidarity fund of €6 billion in direct payments for the self-employed and very small businesses; the postponement of rent and utility bills for small and medium-sized enterprises; and funds for bailout loans to businesses.¹³

1 Population changes <https://www.insee.fr/en/statistiques/2382601?sommaire=2382613>

2 For more information, see Etat de l'épidémie en France https://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2020/05/05/coronavirus-age-mortalite-departements-pays-suivez-l-evolution-de-l-epidemie-en-cartes-et-graphiques_6038751_4355770.html

3 Coronavirus: France's first known case was in December <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-52526554>

4 Coronavirus: Buzyn affirme avoir prévenu Philippe et Macron des janvier de l'ampleur de la crise <https://www.lefigaro.fr/politique/pour-agnes-buzyn-les-municipales-ont-ete-une-mascarade-au-regard-du-coronavirus-20200317>

5 How five days of evangelical worship set off the coronavirus outbreak in France <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/europe/how-five-days-of-evangelical-worship-set-off-the-coronavirus-outbreak-in-france-1.4217239>

6 Green surge and low turnout as virus fears weigh on French local elections <https://www.france24.com/en/20200315-live-france-holds-local-elections-despite-coronavirus-clampdown>

7 Elections municipales: un second tour si particulier

8 https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2020/05/28/municipales-un-second-tour-si-particulier_6041028_823448.html Coronavirus : Paris restrictions to stay as France reopens, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-52579482>

9 The Economist, 'France and covid-19: The new war', 4 April 2020, p. 19

10 Officiel des Terrains de Camping, 'Aide aux campings: les mesures acquises et celles que l'HPA attend', 14 April 2020,

<http://www.ot-campings.com/L-Actualite/Aide-aux-campings-les-mesures-acquises-et-celles-que-l-HPA-attend>

11 Marc Vignaud, 'Coronavirus - Macron: "Nous ne laisserons pas une crise économique se propager"', *Le Point*, 12 March 2020, https://www.lepoint.fr/economie/macron-quoi-qu-il-en-coute-pour-protger-l-economie-12-03-2020-2366950_28.php

12 Julien Manceaux, 'France: Economic relief to be frontloaded', *ING*, 17 March 2020, <https://think.ing.com/articles/france-economic-relief-to-be-frontloaded/>

13 Gabe Alpert, 'COVID-19 Government Stimulus and Financial Relief Guide', *Investopedia*, 4 June 2020, <https://www.investopedia.com/government-stimulus-efforts-to-fight-the-covid-19-crisis-4799723#france>; 'Aide aux campings: les mesures acquises et celles que l'HPA attend', 14 April 2020; and France24, 'France boosts Covid-19 economic rescue package to €110 billion', 15 April 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/20200415-france-boosts-covid-19-economic-rescue-package-to-%E2%82%AC110-billion>

France's biggest COVID-19 relief measure has been a package of €300 billion in loan guarantees to help businesses survive the crisis.¹⁴ While there has been a progressive *déconfinement* (easing of lockdown restrictions) since 11 May, the economic prospects for France look bleak. Each month of lockdown has cost the French economy approximately 3% of annual GDP¹⁵ and France now faces a deep recession, which will result in the economy (specifically the annual GDP forecast) shrinking by 11%.¹⁶ The government hopes that the damaging financial and medical impacts of the virus can be mitigated through the widespread use of its contact-tracing app (StopCovid) for mobile phones, which was released on 2 June.¹⁷ The app seeks to determine whether its users have been in close contact with any person infected by Covid-19 and to alert them to the fact if they have.

Effects on higher education: The closure of universities was announced by president Emmanuel Macron on 12 March¹⁸ and affected 2.5 million students.¹⁹ All universities subsequently made provision for distance education, with most offering their courses and assessments online. Students of medicine had the opportunity of becoming part of the reserve volunteers who could be called upon to assist in hospitals.²⁰ The tertiary sector in France is mostly government-funded and therefore not dependent on tuition fees from domestic or international students in the same way, or to the same level as universities in Australia, the US or the UK. Following the outbreak of COVID-19, the government announced an investment of €50 million for research into the virus, a further €30 million into issues affecting global health, and an additional €1 billion a year for the sector as a whole (infrastructure, facilities and laboratories, staff pay, research projects, etc).²¹ The Minister of Higher Education has asked for universities to prepare a hybrid learning approach to the delivery of courses for when the new academic year starts in September.²²

Assessment: France has suffered one of the highest COVID-19 death rates in Europe. At the time of writing, approximately 28,000 people have died from the disease in hospitals and care homes, but the number of new cases has also fallen. Since 11 May, lockdown measures are gradually being relaxed and journeys of 100 km are allowed without an *attestation* (permission form).²³ These measures vary depending on the health situation of the department in which people live. Stricter rules apply in departments where the virus is highly active (red zones) than in departments where the virus is less active (green zones).²⁴ The government is keeping a close watch on infection rates to avoid a second wave.

Last but not least, in spite of a global health, social and economic crisis, the French Academy has been debating whether we should say 'LE coronavirus' (as virus is masculine in French) or whether it should be 'LA Covid-19' because it is an acronym for disease, or '*maladie*', which in French is feminine!²⁵

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<https://www.lci.fr/social/universites-la-rentree-de-septembre-2020-ne-sera-pas-decalee-assure-frederique-vidal-confinement-coronavirus-2153235.html>

23 Coronavirus France eases lockdown after eight weeks <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-52615733>

24 Coronavirus COVID-19 <https://www.gouvernement.fr/en/coronavirus-covid-19>

25 'La Covid': coronavirus acronym is feminine, Académie française says' <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/13/le-la-covid-coronavirus-acronym-feminine-academie-francaise-france>

Figure 1: Prime minister Edouard Philippe described France 'cut in two' by the coronavirus <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-52615733>
Red and Green zones in France, (includes parts of overseas France).

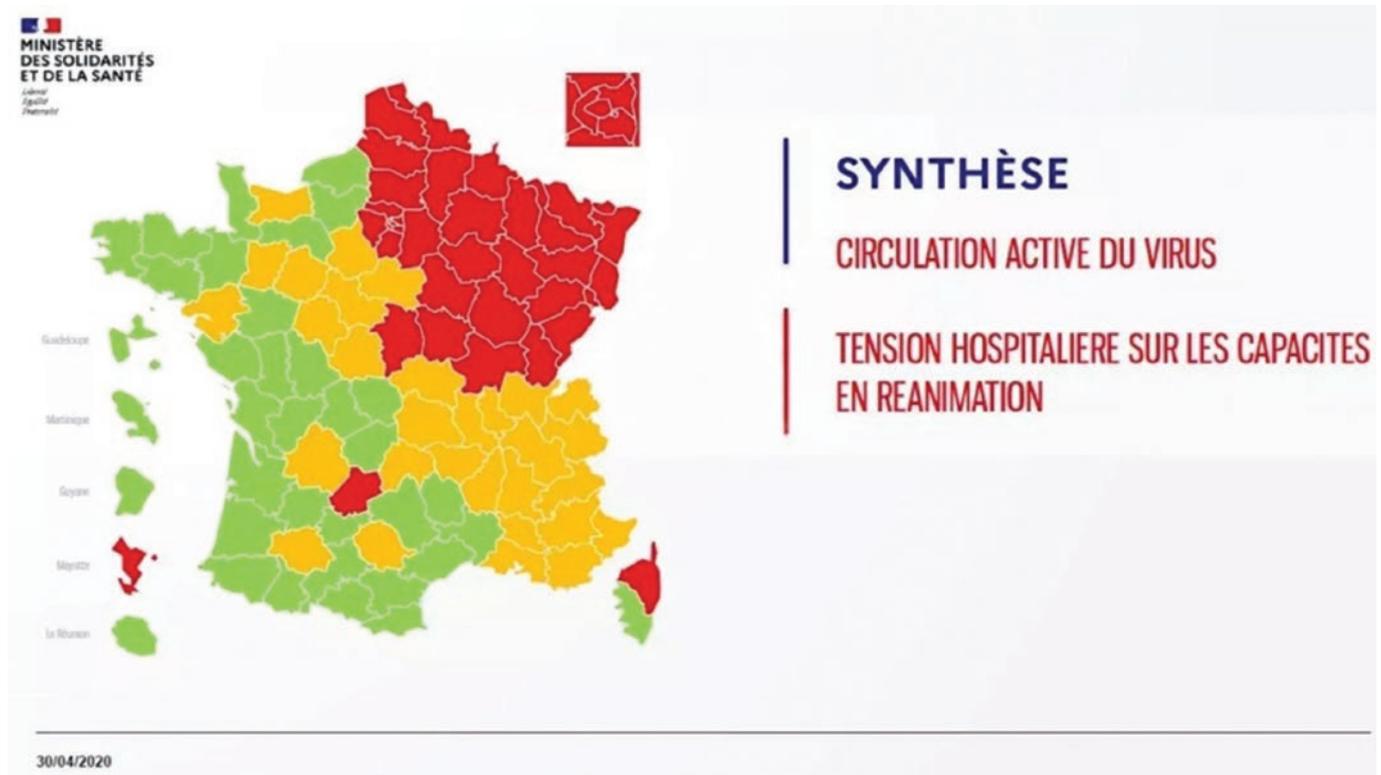


Figure 2: Food distribution notice, Paris. Photo by Michelle Ziling Ou on Unsplash.

