

Matthias Waechter - 6 May 2022

Three Takeaways from the French Presidential Elections

On Sunday 24th, a sigh of relief went through the European Union: The French electorate granted Emmanuel Macron, the ambitious European, a second term and rejected for a third time the bid of Marine Le Pen from the extreme nationalist and hard-core Europhobic “Rassemblement national”. If the far-right leader had won, numerous observers predicted a deep crisis, if not the end of the European integration project, considering the weight of France in the institutions and the pivotal role of the president in its political system. For Macron, however, the battle is not yet completely over: His party “La République en Marche” has still to win the parliamentary elections in June, if the president wants to have any decisive sway on domestic policies. His most vocal opponent from the Left, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, has already styled the elections for the National Assembly into the “third round” of the presidential ones, exhorting the French to give his movement “Unbowed France” a parliamentary majority and thus making him Prime Minister. A victory of “La République en Marche” at the June elections is far from being an easy run, the party lacking local anchorage and an attractive, well-known political personnel. In the meantime, three preliminary conclusions from the presidential elections can be drawn:

Good news for Europe, but the tough debates are yet to come

Evidently, the re-election of Macron is good news for Europe. Among the candidates, he was the one most closely in line with the current priorities of European integration. He never vacillated in its conviction that the EU is a solution for today’s political problems and not one of their reasons. And with this staunchly pro-European stance, he was a fairly isolated figure in the contest: Not only Marine Le Pen campaigned on a Europhobic platform, also the best-scoring leftist candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon is an unreconstructed French nationalist, for whom the European Union is a neo-liberal, job-destroying project driven by German interests. In the run-up to the campaign,

center-right contenders like Michel Barnier, Eric Ciotti and Valérie Pécresse outbid each other with bold proposals to make France take back control over immigration by leaving common European rules.

However, it is most certain that the toughest debates are still to come up for Macron, this time not with his domestic opponents, but with his European partners. In his first five-year mandate, his passionate plea for “European sovereignty”, for an autonomous role of the EU in security and defense remained largely unheard. The dramatic shifts in the international system since February 24th are not favorable for Macron’s visions. Under the Trump presidency, there had been obvious reasons for the Europeans to doubt about the future of the transatlantic alliance and US security guarantees. Now, with transatlantic solidarity seeming more solid than ever and several countries seriously mulling NATO accession, Macron’s diagnosis from 2019 of a “brain-dead” transatlantic alliance seems strangely outdated.¹ Difficult questions thus come up for the upcoming years: How will the French president rephrase his idea of European sovereignty? Will other member states adhere to it or will transatlanticism reign supreme over European security?

Another controversial policy field is enlargement. The war against Ukraine has again revealed the adamant importance of EU accession as a means to firmly anchor countries in the West, to support their democratic transition and to secure their geopolitical orientation. However, France remains highly skeptical about granting EU membership to Eastern European and Western Balkan states, whereas Germany has traditionally been a lot more supportive of their bid for joining the club. Further areas of divergences with Germany may concern EU budgetary and fiscal policies, as Macron is in favor of relaxing the current European fiscal rules and a defender of common debt. While there was a Franco-German consensus on combating the Covid19-related crisis with a new fund financed by common debt, it remains to be seen how the German “traffic-light” government stands

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on the continuation of such an expansive fiscal policy. A final area of possible conflictual debates is institutional reform: The new German coalition has introduced the goal of achieving a “federal European State” into its governmental program. Should the Scholz government undertake any initiative to attain this vision, it will probably not be enthusiastically welcomed in Paris. Historically, France has never endorsed the goal of a federal European state; and President Macron is all but a European federalist.

The French Left is not dead, but has forgotten Mitterrand’s lessons

The second conclusion from the presidential elections concerns the political culture and cleavages of the country. In the run-up to the elections, the French Left presented itself in a singularly disunited, depressed state and it seemed very likely that no leftist candidate would finish in the top three. The results have disproven these dismal predictions: The French Left is very well alive and scored, all candidates taken together, close to 32 % of the votes. And the leader of “France Unbowed”, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, was not so far from reaching the second round of the elections.

However, the French Left seems to have totally forgotten the lessons of its historic, 20th century leader François Mitterrand. When the direct election of the President of the Republic was introduced in 1962, Mitterrand immediately grasped the challenge for the Left: In a country which is sociologically center-right, which never had a large labor movement comparable with English or German socialism, the Left could only run a chance to win a presidential election, if it was unified behind one single candidate. Based on this conclusion, Mitterrand patiently crafted a coalition between all forces of the Left, from Communism over Socialism to middle-class Radicalism behind his own candidacy for the presidency in 1965. Thanks to this unity, he made the exploit of forcing General de Gaulle, the venerated Resistance leader, into the second round of the elections.

The ascension of the French Left to power in the late 20th century was based on the capacity to unify and to look beyond the deep cleavages between bourgeois Socialism and a Communist party loyal to the Soviet Union. Compared with the abysmal differences between the main forces of the 20th century Left, the divergences between today’s Socialists, Ecologists, and Far Leftists around Mélenchon

appear a lot easier to bridge. The recent years have shown that Mitterrand’s lessons remain as valid as they were in the 20th century: If the Left is disunited, it takes a strong risk to be eliminated from the second round of the presidential elections. It’s now for the third time in this century that no leftist candidate has made it into the runoff elections. The reasons for this are quickly found: They have to do with the self-centered character of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, with the pride of the Socialist Party unable to digest its recent decline and to work with a renegade like Mélenchon, with the divisiveness of the ecologist movement. If the French Left ever wants to matter again, it has to transcend these cleavages and get its acts together.

The progression of the Far Right: It’s not the economy, stupid!

With the Presidential elections of 2022, the French Far Right is at its all-time high since the end of World War 2. When we take together the scores of Marine Le Pen, of the extreme right journalist Eric Zemmour and the hard-core Eurosceptic Nicolas Dupont-Aignan, the Far right arrives at roughly one-third of the French electorate. Between 2017 and 2022, Marine Le Pen gained 455,337 votes in the first round, and 2,650,211 votes in the second round. How can we explain the rise of the Far right?

According to a widely held opinion, the fortunes of the French far right are intrinsically linked to the economic situation of the country. The rise of the “Front national” in the 1980s was concomitant with the end of the post-war boom (“les Trente glorieuses”), structural crises in the French economy and growing unemployment. The Far-right movement under its founder Jean-Marie Le Pen thrived on this by linking economic distress to immigration. One of the first campaign slogans of the “Front national” ran: “One million unemployed means one million immigrants too much”. Since the governments in place were unable to get down unemployment, “Front national” could contend that they were inconsiderate towards the needs of the French population or simply incompetent. The propaganda of Le Pen lumped all established parties together to one “system” incapable of bringing the French back to work and disregarding the obvious solution of sending immigrants back to their home countries. Thus it seemed that in order to explain the rise of the Extreme Right, one had to simply apply the famous slogan coined by Bill

Clinton's advisor James Carville: "It's the economy, stupid!"

The strong economic imbalances in today's France, between prosperous metropolitan regions and former industrial centers in decline, between the well-educated and a working class struggling to find jobs gives seemingly obvious evidence to this economic interpretation of the rise of the French extreme right. On election night, politicians and commentators alike interpreted the high score for the Far right as an expression of "anger", of "distress" and "misery", as an "outcry" of those neglected and left behind by Macron's economic policies. There are many reasons to question this interpretation: First, the economic record of the first mandate of Macron is not bad at all. Unemployment has been constantly declining recently and is with 7.4 % of the active population at the lowest point since 2008, before the outbreak of the financial crisis. Especially young people between 15 and 24 years find jobs easier than they used to do.² In his approach to the labor market, Macron was all but a neoliberal, as his detractors describe him. During the Covid19 pandemic, he committed to do "whatever it takes" to fight its economic consequences. A pervasive furlough scheme made it possible that workers were not laid off; shop and restaurant owners received generous help. France is among the EU countries best emerging from the Covid19 crisis.

Also, if we look closer at the election results, the economic interpretation of the score of the "Rassemblement national" doesn't hold. Of course, Marine Le Pen fares very well in some regions heavily hit by structural change and the downfall of industries like mining and steel production. This is especially visible in the Northeast of the country, where the Far-right leader scored over 50 % at the second round in more

than 10 départements. However, there is no clear causal link between economic decline and voting for Marine Le Pen, since municipalities equally stricken by deindustrialization especially around the Massif Central heavily voted for Macron. When we look at the strongholds of Marine Le Pen, they are by far not always places where the economic situation is dismal and people struggle to make ends meet. It is not necessarily their *objective* socio-economic condition, which drives citizens to vote for Marine Le Pen, but their *subjective* perception of their individual situation. This means that also middle-class, fully employed homeowners in suburbs feel at times inclined to vote for the far-right leader, because they are worried about high petrol prices, they see crime rates rising in other neighborhoods, and think that the political elite in Paris ignores these issues. Some voters of Marine Le Pen are in real economic distress, others *fear* that the trends of our times like globalization, outsourcing, increasing international competition will lead to a deterioration of their personal situation. The anger of Le Pen voters is sometimes clearly justified by economic misery, sometimes driven by elusive feelings. It is thus extremely difficult to tackle by concrete political measures the inclination of the French citizens towards the Far right. Probably only a structural change, which improves the representation and participation of the citizens and restores their feeling of ownership of the political process can make France again into a country where people widely prefer moderate parties. Such structural change should address issues such as the electoral system, the role of the parliament, the involvement of citizens, the distribution of competences between national, regional, and local levels. President Macron should better attack these fundamental problems during his second mandate, if he doesn't want to take the risk of a further rise of the Far right.

References

¹ In an interview with the "Economist" from November 7th, 2019, Macron said: "What we are currently experiencing is the brain death of NATO". <https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/11/07/emmanuel-macron-warns-europe-nato-is-becoming-brain-dead>

² Based on the numbers by the French statistical office INSEE, Informations rapides, No. 38, 18/02/2022. <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/6051733>