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'The race is open'

The victory of Germany's social democrats is raising hopes in France. Gilles Finchelstein on the Parti Socialiste's chances in next year's elections

France's presidential elections will be held next April. The opinion polls currently put Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen ahead, each on around a quarter of the votes. The possible *Parti Socialiste* (PS) candidate, by contrast, is only on around 7 per cent. What role can the PS play in these elections?

First, it should be pointed out that the elections are still a long way off. At a similar stage in the German election things looked quite different from how they stood on election night. Voter volatility is especially pronounced in France. That means that some caution is called for when it comes to predictions. On top of that, although there has been an eager debate on the presidential election in politics and the media, the general public still aren't paying it much attention. As things stand, their interest is even more tepid than usual. But the fact that far fewer people intend to go to the polls, opens up a certain room to manoeuvre. Anything can happen in the run-up to April. Particularly interesting is what is going on to the right of the political spectrum. In the course of a month, Marine Le Pen, who was often ahead in the polls, has fallen back as another right-wing extremist – journalist Éric Zemmour – has emerged to steal votes from her, at least for now.

As for the PS, they were stronger than ever in 2012, which is not that long ago. The Socialists had never had as many representatives at national, regional, and municipal level than in that year. After reaching such heights, however, they fell to earth so hard in 2017 that they risked vanishing without a trace. And all in the space of five years. The PS is in a much better position today. It managed to consolidate its position in the very important municipal elections in 2020 and, in places, even to improve it. In the regional elections in June the PS managed to hang on to all the regions where it was already in power. The question is whether they can repeat this success at the national level.

But we're still in the early stages. The PS has not yet nominated Anne Hidalgo officially. That will only happen on 14 October. Being mayor of Paris gives her a kind of incumbent advantage. Apart from that, she stands for a confluence of environmentalism and social justice, which is of the utmost importance today. On top of these substantive strengths she has formidable personal qualities. Another advantage for her is that Emmanuel Macron has shifted to the right over the past five years. At least, that's how the French see it, and I think they're right. Macron does not occupy the social democratic space these days, as he perhaps still did in 2017.

In sum, it will undoubtedly be a tough campaign for the PS, as it's starting so far behind. But the race is open. So much can happen over the coming months.

Is there any reason for Anne Hidalgo to be apprehensive about her nomination?

No. There is a broad consensus in the party. In fact, no candidate has enjoyed such support for the past 30 years.

Do you think it's possible that the left-wing parties could agree on a joint candidate – such as Anne Hidalgo – for the presidency?

The French people don't want another duel between Macron and Le Pen. At the moment, Macron is undoubtedly the favourite in this election. But it is always difficult for an incumbent president to become a candidate once again. They have to explain what they plan for their second term of office, and what they didn't manage to accomplish in their first term. That isn't an easy undertaking.

One of the decisive political issues will be how many percentage points will be needed to make it to the run-off. In some circumstances it can be very low, perhaps even below 20 per cent, like in 2002. If that happens, the PS is in with a chance.

I consider a joint left-wing candidate to be out of the question. First and foremost because of the fundamental differences between the PS and the radical left around Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who plans to stand himself. The situation is also complicated between the PS and the Greens. Naturally, both parties would like to nominate their own candidate or have already done so.

It also remains to be seen whether the voters could go for a joint candidate. Would Green voters say to themselves 'Anne Hidalgo is green so I'll vote for her so that the left will be represented in the run-off'? At the moment, the PS and the Greens are on around 7 or 8 per cent, but experience tells us that one party will go up and the other

will go down. Will the defeated candidate then back the candidate that beat them? That is difficult to imagine.

At the recent regional elections voter turnout was around 35 per cent. Are people sick of politics?

Since the election of Emmanuel Macron and the subsequent parliamentary elections turnout in France has fallen to an all time low. Since then, not even half the electorate has voted in a single election. We have never seen that in France before. There is a danger that this phenomenon will also affect the presidential election, which usually sees a turnout of around 80 per cent.

According to a recent poll, more than 60 per cent of French people believe that nothing will change for them after the presidential election. It doesn't make any difference to them what the outcome is. France, like many other countries, is suffering a crisis of democracy. This is reflected in, among other things, the low turnout.

There are two possible scenarios in these circumstances. One is pessimistic: a low turnout in the presidential election, followed by a government that the majority feel does not represent them. But there is also an optimistic one: the French people go to the polls when they believe that something is at stake, and if they understand what the outcome will change for them and for their country. If it becomes clear in the course of the campaign that it means something, the voters, hopefully, will be motivated to cast their votes.

How does France, where there will be a presidential election next year, view the German Bundestag election?

In France this election was followed with great interest. Angela Merkel was all over the frontpages. 'Mutti the Superstar', with her 16 years as chancellor, has also left her mark on France.

A number of similarities occurred to me between developments in Germany and in other Western democracies. First of all, voter volatility: even in such a stable country as Germany it played a central role. Between June and September there were fluctuations of 10 to 15 percentage points. That is unprecedented. Secondly, in the meantime there has been a fragmentation of the party landscape, whereas previously two parties had dominated the political scene. These days there are a number of important parties. Thirdly, personalisation. Even in a country with such a strong parliamentary system, in which parties continue to exert a major influence, debates and the election campaign were more personalised than ever before.

These three factors – voter volatility, fragmentation of the party

landscape and personalisation – were for me, as an external observer, the main takeaways from these elections.

How will passing the baton to Olaf Scholz – assuming he becomes chancellor – affect Franco-German partnership?

Scholz is hardly a newcomer either on the European stage or in France, being familiar with both from his earlier incarnations. He will quickly find his feet in both cases. The challenge will be gradually to take Angela Merkel's place on the European stage. There are a series of issues in Europe that urgently need to be taken in hand and on which we need a German partner, ranging from defence through budgetary rules to environmental change.

A global perspective, finally: what is your view of the current state of social democracy in the world?

For a long time it was believed that we were moving in the direction of more democracy. Over the past 20 years this has not happened. Instead, authoritarian governments came power in a number of global powers with democratic systems. The situation is more balanced now, after this shift to the right. Joe Biden sent a powerful signal after winning on a Democratic platform further to the left than usual. In Latin America the situation is more complex. But in Europe we can see a positive trend. Social democrats are in charge once again in Portugal, Spain and all the Scandinavian countries. We can say that the prospect of social democracy's inevitable demise, which was perfectly valid ten years ago, no longer applies. Developments over recent months and years have given us reason to hope.



Gilles Finchelstein

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