EUROPE 20.06.2017 | Stefan Dehnert

Game, set and match

Stefan Dehnert on the success of Macron's party in the final round of France's legislative elections

When Emmanuel Macron was elected president many people questioned how fit he was to govern, considering he wasn't represented by a single MP at the time. What's changed since this weekend's legislative elections?

La République en marche (LREM) is on course to win between 350 and 360 seats in the Assemblée nationale following the second round of France's legislative elections on 18 June – a comfortable majority. So how has a political movement founded only last year become so successful? Historically, voters in France have tended to give the president's party a stable majority. A president without a majority, unable to negotiate with the parliament, threatens to bring back the instability of the previous Fourth Republic. The legislative elections came straight after the presidential elections, as they have done since 2002. This is supposed to prevent so-called "cohabitations", where the President is forced to rule alongside a prime minister from the opposition. Previously, the legislative elections were held every five years, while the French had to wait seven years to vote for a new president. This situation led to several of these "cohabitations" between 1986 and 2002. The new arrangement means, on the whole, that the legislative elections confirm the outcome of the presidential elections. The usual navel-gazing and party infighting that follows the defeat of a presidential candidate tends to lead to a falling off of support. You can see this in the fact fewer people turn out to vote in the second round (48.7 percent in the first round this year, compared with just 42 percent in the second round of the legislative elections).

There are a number of other factors though. The conservative Republicans (LR) and the Socialists (PS), the two parties that have dominated French politics for decades, started their campaigns on a bad footing, and LREM managed to win over lots of their voters. During the presidential primaries, LR and PS both plumped for candidates at the extremes of their respective parties whom many moderates couldn't stomach voting for. The scandal surrounding

Republican candidate Francois Fillon set off a civil war within his party which went on right up to polling day. Benoît Hamon, representing the socialists, proved hugely unpopular, and the party was further weakened by competition from the far-left candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon.

And of course the "Macron effect" has given the candidates of his LREM movement a huge boost. Macron has managed to build significant trust among voters since his election as president, even among conservatives. If he was once seen as young and inexperienced, his choice of a conservative prime minister, and several conservative ministers, has changed that. He's also won admiration for his appearances on the international stage.

The socialists were, until this weekend, the largest party in the Assemblée nationale. What's the cause of their historic downfall?

It was pretty clear the PS were going to do badly in the legislative elections, after their candidate Benoît Hamon polled only 6.3 percent in the presidential election. Late opinion polls also predicted a catastrophe, and the PS leader Jean-Christophe Cambadelis said it was touch and go whether his party would reach the 15 seat threshold to form a parliamentary group. It hasn't come to that. Together with the Parti Radical de Gauche and other left-wingers, the socialists will be able to claim some 44 seats. Mind you, five years ago the PS had 280 seats in the National Assembly. This time several of their star players from the Hollande era have lost their seats – presidential candidate Benoît Hamon, party leader Jean-Christophe Cambadelis, interior minister Mathias Fekl and former minister Aurelie Philipetti to name but a few. The ministers in Hollande's government that retained their seats were those that publicly supported Macron, and so didn't have to compete with another pro-Macron candidate in their own constituency.

There are several reasons for this historic defeat. For a start, Hollande was a very unpopular president. He came to office after Dominique Strauss-Kahn was forced to withdraw his candidacy for president. Centrists voted for him because they were fed up with Nicolas Sarkozy. Promises made to voters on the left were broken, and centrists didn't think much of his tentative reforms. There wasn't an obvious improvement in economic growth or the unemployment rate. The party was split ideologically, with Benoît Hamon's left-wing "frondeurs" presenting a new challenge. Most on the left ended up voting for Jean-Luc Mélenchon, while "social liberals" voted for Macron's LREM movement.

A total of 2966 candidates from various other left-wing parties stood

for election, splitting the left-wing vote.

I should mention that the conservative LR also suffered a historic defeat, winning a slightly less shameful 137 seats (predicted).

The Front National also had a disappointing weekend, gaining far fewer seats than they had previously hoped for. Why did so many voters believe Marine Le Pen would make a good president, but then didn't vote for her party in the legislative election?

As I say, it's pretty common for those who voted for the losing parties in the presidential elections to withdraw their support in the legislative elections. The elected president is simply a very dominant figure.

After she lost out on the presidency, Marine Le Pen wasn't effective in rallying her party around her for a second, parliamentary election. The party was too much occupied with analysing their defeat in the presidential elections, and many saw Le Pen herself as the reason they lost. After the elections in May, Le Pen started questioning one of the main promises of her election campaign: bringing France out of the Euro. It's clear from opinion polls that most French people didn't support this policy, especially because the potential consequences of an exit from the Euro were so unclear.

The FN's internal debate on Euro membership has exposed deep divisions within the party's leadership over an absolutely fundamental issue. Deputy leader Florian Philippot actually threatened to leave the party if it gave up its policy on exiting the common currency. Meanwhile Marine Le Pen's niece, Marion Maréchal-Le Pen, announced just before the legislative elections that she'd be taking a break from politics indefinitely. She's highly popular among the party's conservative Catholic wing and many see her departure as further evidence of a rift with her aunt. Before the presidential elections Marine Le Pen said she wouldn't offer he niece a ministerial position if she got elected. This obvious lack of unity left many of the FN's supporters baffled.

Interviewer: Hannes Alpen



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