

Looking to the horizon

A few days ago, the “Decoded Constitution” (Derosier’s blog) underlined this: the first round of the municipal elections symbolized the start of a crisis and its second round could symbolize the exit from it.

At least, in order to better enter a new crisis, the following should have been added:

Yesterday's unprecedented abstention (58.4%), recorded in an election that is generally appreciated by the French, confirms their growing distrust of institutions and politics.

Even more so when it does not seem to be explained solely by fear of the virus: although it is an important cause, it is not unanimously accepted. There are other worries that are strongly defended too (this choice will not change anything in daily life, no list is satisfactory, other concerns, general discontent, etc.).

Let us hope that at least this unfortunate record will be temporary and that the 2026 elections possibly change it. It should be added that, although this is the highest abstention rate in a national election, it is by no means the highest of all: the 2009 European elections (59.39%) and, above all, the 2000 referendum (69.81%), which had a low turnout.

What this election teaches us is the resurgence of the traditional political cleavage between the left and the right.

The municipal elections of 2020 are unique, and we hope that this will always be the case, because the vote was distorted by many factors, all of them related to the health crisis we are going through. Above all, it is not one election but two, because the interruption between the two rounds has transformed a two-round election into two one-round elections: in fact, the political situation and challenges were no longer the same between 15 March and 28 June.

On 17th June, the Constitutional Council ruled that this interruption was justified by "an imperative reason of general interest", which seemed quite reasonable at the time, since it was necessary to support the end of the crisis and not to hinder economic recovery.

Beyond this observation of disaffection mixed with fear (in turn fueled by the government), it is difficult to draw conclusions from an election that had such a low turnout.

The "green wave" is undoubtedly a reality that confirms a movement perceived since the 2019 European elections. For the majority in power, defeat is painful, and the right is holding on as best it can (although more badly than well). The left and the Socialist Party are doing well, but shadowed by the victory of the Greens, while in many municipalities, it is a union of the social and ecological left that has won. This is the case in Paris, Lyon, Marseille, Bordeaux, in particular.

This is where we can see one of the main lessons of this election, in terms of its impact on the national elections of 2022: the resurgence of the traditional cleavage between the left and the right, which is healthy for the institutional and democratic functioning of our regime.

Indeed, Emmanuel Macron's victory in 2017 as a "candidate of the center" was quite exceptional and even "accidental". He owes his victory mainly to the left (his voters in the first round), while the French expected mainly a right-wing policy, which he decided to carry out.

Having benefited from the collapse of the traditional governing parties, he now needs enough support from first-round voters to move on to the second round, while ensuring that his opponent is not in a position to win. This is the dangerous strategy that leads him to focus on the extreme right and continue with the policy of "at the same time" (expression used by Macron; part of his political brand; indicates of parallel actions within his political program).

Said municipal elections show the difficulty to gain the loyalty of voters.

The right continues to maintain its presence on the national political stage so that its voters continue to trust it, knowing that a presidential figure can exist because the candidates are known and numerous.

Although it is more difficult for the left, the result is usually good when it manages to remain united (avoid splitting into new parties). At present, there is no presidential figure who is more imposing, but some are beginning to emerge, such as Yannick Jadot, Anne Hidalgo or others.

Between the two, the distance is reduced for the President of the Republic, who does not have a party with enough local roots to keep a real flame burning and prepare a new breath of fresh air. As in 2017, everything depends on one person: the President.

Of course, we cannot judge today what will happen in 2022. But after these municipal elections, it is the future presidential elections that will design the horizon. In fact, the test to find the necessary voters will be difficult, not to mention the "Édouard Philippe equation" that regards their permanence or removal of support – while the President seems to be worried about the success of a Prime Minister who owes him a lot, he could also take a lot away from him.

The process of seduction has already begun with the declaration on the follow-up to the Citizens' Climate Convention... whose aim was nothing less than to make us forget, to a certain extent, the failure of an election that had already been concluded. The voters still have to be convinced of this, which cannot be predicted.