

The rise of the Front National is pushing France toward a genuine three-party system

blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2015/04/13/the-rise-of-the-front-national-is-pushing-france-toward-a-genuine-three-party-system/

13/04/2015

Nicolas Sarkozy's UMP received the largest share of support in the French departmental elections on 22 and 29 March. However the success of Marine Le Pen's Front National, which polled over 20 per cent in both rounds of voting, was once again one of the key stories to emerge from the vote.

Helen Drake writes on the lessons to be learned for France's political system ahead of regional elections in December and the next presidential election in 2017. She notes that an emerging tripartite party system is now appearing in France, where the Front National more or less equals the power of the traditionally dominant mainstream centre-left and centre-right parties.



On 22 and 29 March 2015, French voters were invited to elect representatives (*conseillers départementaux*) to sit on the executive body (*le conseil départemental*) of 98 of France's 101 *départements* for the next six years (Paris, Guyana and Martinique did not vote on this occasion, Paris because its representatives are elected at the level of the *commune* in *élections municipales*; and Guyana and Martinique pending reorganisation to take effect in January 2016).

The role of the department in French local governance is the subject of ongoing reform (in the form of the draft bill on the *nouvelle organisation territoriale de la République*), and plans to scrap it entirely have only recently been shelved. It is currently and primarily responsible for (expensive) social support to vulnerable populations, the building and upkeep of middle schools (*le collège*), and rural planning.

These *élections départementales* (previously *élections cantonales*) were fought under a new set of electoral rules. First, the electoral map had been redrawn in line with population changes to replace the existing 4,053 *cantons* (the electoral constituency for these elections) with 2,054 new *cantons*. Second, the elections in each of these *cantons* would return two *conseillers* each (giving a national total of 4108 councillors), the novelty being that these representatives were to be elected as a female-male pair – *un binôme* – in the name of gender parity. Some 18,194 candidates stood in total, making 9,097 pairs.



Third, the bar for any *binôme* to progress from the first to the second round of the election was raised (in the case of no outright victory by absolute majority in round 1), such that only *binômes* winning over 12.5 per cent of registered voters, or coming in first or second place, survived the cut. This third rule in practice worked best for those parties which were prepared to field *binômes* based on electoral alliances. Such was the preferred strategy of the centre-right, which accordingly emerged as the winner in terms of votes, seats, and influence in the *départements*.

Presidents, Prime Ministers and the departmental elections

Much was made in the period leading up to the elections of the fact that this was a local election of national dimensions: an opportunity for the electorate to comment on the performance of the incumbent president and government. In 2014, three similar occasions had gone badly for President Hollande and the *parti socialiste* (PS) in government.

The municipal elections of March that year were a serious defeat with high abstention rates, a loss of 150 towns and cities for the PS, and a strong showing by the both the opposition *UMP* (*Union pour une majorité populaire*) and the *FN* (*Front national*) prompting President Hollande to change prime minister. The June 2014 European elections saw the FN come first in terms of votes for the first time in any election (winning 24.9 per cent of the national vote in comparison to 20.8 per cent for the UMP, and 14 per cent for the PS, a result which for the FN equated in 4.7 million votes and 24 seats in Strasbourg); and the September 2014 elections to the Senate, the upper house of the French parliament, returned two FN members for the first time ever, and restored a right-wing majority overall.

Looking back, then, the 2015 departmental elections would provide a measure of the distance travelled for the Hollande-Valls executive in difficult times. Indeed, Prime Minister Valls pitched this contest as a test of his personal leadership, an opportunity to reverse the ‘fear’ of the FN, and a chance to maintain the feeling of national unity that French leaders had appropriated for political purposes following the Charlie Hebdo and Hyper-Cacher massacres of early January 2015. Looking ahead, the elections would give pointers to the state of the parties and the mood of the electorate in advance of the final elections of the Hollande mandate – the December 2015 regional elections which will be fought under proportional representation – and ahead of the 2017 presidential elections, which typically are already a focus for France’s political class.

As predicted, the results were bad for the French left. In terms of seats won and departments controlled it came second to the mainstream right, although the picture was hardly encouraging: of the 61 departments it previously held, it kept 33, won one, and lost 27, and the PS itself was worst affected. On the heels of the losses of so many towns and *communes* in the 2014 *municipales*, the local foundations, finances and allegiances of the PS are now increasingly enfeebled, if not endangered.

Just as problematic in these elections was the state of the left as a unified bloc: nothing could be further from the truth. To the left of the PS, the *Front de Gauche* had refused electoral alliances on the grounds of its fundamental disagreement with the government’s ongoing austerity policies; the *Greens* (Europe-Ecologie-les Verts) lack electoral weight; and the PS itself struggles to achieve internal, ideological coherence. By way of illustration, the PS was the single candidate from the Left in only 12 per cent of *cantons* in the first round, compared to a figure of 54 per cent for the UMP (meaning that the UMP had successfully struck agreements with its allies in those cantons over which party would carry the Right); unsurprisingly, the candidates of the left were eliminated after the first round in over 500 constituencies.

A victory for the right

If the left so clearly lost, who won these elections? The right, in the form of the opposition party the UMP, headed by former French president Nicolas Sarkozy, and the UMP’s allies, foremost of which the *UDI* (*Union démocrates et Indépendantes*). These political forces previously ran 41 of the 101 departments, and their conservative hope was to emerge from these elections in charge of at least 60. This expectation was exceeded, with the right henceforth governing 67 *départements* by virtue of 1,138 councillors elected under the UMP’s label alone. Notably, the parties of the right played the new electoral rules with success, forging electoral alliances to maximum effect, particularly in the form of mixed party *binômes*.

But this is a partial view of the outcome for the right. All sensationalism aside, the *Front national* were also winners in this contest. Having raised expectations in the form of the target of becoming the ‘first party of France’, the FN were forced to accept second place to the mainstream right in terms of votes, and no department was conquered in their own right.

But on other measures, their victory was sizeable: it polled over 4 million votes in the first round, and 5 million in the second (25 per cent and 22 per cent of the national vote respectively). They won 62 council seats (in comparison with only one after the previous, 2011 elections at this level); they got more votes as a single party than any of the others; they fielded more candidates in round 1 than any other party (their candidates were present in 93 per cent of cantons in that round). In sum they are building themselves, in accordance with their leader Marine le Pen's explicit strategy, a party from the grass roots up.

What lessons can we draw from the outcome of these elections? That the FN has a normalised presence in the French political landscape that sets France apart from certain sister countries, including the UK, and which brings rewards of airtime, finances, respectability and, accordingly, legitimacy to the party. That the UMP under its leader Nicolas Sarkozy continues to fish for votes in FN waters, while, on this occasion at least, categorically ruling out the alliances with the FN that would unlock the gate for the far right to translate votes into power at elections such as these.

We can also reflect on the fact that in 2015, politics in France is still heavily male-dominated (only 10 of the 101 newly-elected departments are chaired by women); still characterised by huge disaffection (the abstention rate in both rounds of these elections was just on 50 per cent); still blighted by inflated expectations of its presidency; and now increasingly drained by what looks like an emerging tripartite party system where the FN, virtually hegemonic on the far right and in terms of likely votes, more or less equals the power of the old forces of *alternance*, the mainstream left and right.

Already, France's political class is gearing itself up for the 2017 presidential contest: the fight for the presidency continues to take centre stage in French politics at a time when French presidents have arguably never been so constrained, and each political camp has its own challenges.

Nicolas Sarkozy may yet be brought down from within his party and rejected for the presidential nomination; Marine le Pen must still face down her father, the former party founder and leader Jean-Marie le Pen, in order to avoid any future split in the far right vote; and the French left confronts many agendas which provide opportunities for it to take progressive and united stances as it faces the future, but it lacks unity and strength. The 2015 French departmental elections have placed the right in a position of competitive advantage, but the political landscape is not auspicious for a stable, political peace.

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