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Hope for a Divided France

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Under the microscope of the pandemic, the flaws underlying France's centralised political system are coming to the fore, undermining public trust and spurring a crisis of legitimacy. The electoral success of Greens in late June has paved the way for a shift in French politics.

With nearly 600 000 cases of Covid-19 confirmed by early October, France was not prepared for a crisis of this extent, to say the least. It was not just the public health system that was overwhelmed by the unexpected virus; French political culture itself has also proven to be quite weak.

The crisis started during the municipal election campaign in February and March. It became apparent that Emmanuel Macron's governing party, La République En Marche, was set to lose. One month before the election, Macron's health minister left the government to run for mayor of Paris. Weeks later, she confessed that at the time she was already aware of the looming public health disaster. Her speech catastrophically undermined already frayed public trust in the government's crisis management abilities.

Mayors are the only underline trusted political figures in France, and they play an important role in the country. France has almost as many municipalities as the other 26 EU member states combined. After difficult discussions regarding postponing the election, the government kept the date. "Democracy cannot be stopped", was the motto of the opposition. The lockdown started two days later. The election led to many clusters of cases and deaths, including among newly elected councillors and mayors.

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Generally speaking, the crisis revealed how France's over-centralised Jacobin political system leads to decision-making failures. Going into the crisis, France lacked sufficient masks to protect its nursing staff because of earlier strategic mistakes. The management of stocks from the 2009 swine flu crisis had been given to companies and hospitals which did not renew them. Hospitals themselves had seen 10 years of cost-cutting, to the extent that emergency services were on strike for almost a year. France's only mask factory was closed down in 2019 before a former Green minister managed to reopen it as a cooperative.

In this context, Greens won several big cities such as Lyon, Strasbourg, Marseille, and Bordeaux in the second round of elections in late June. The outcome reflected the fact that the Greens managed to embody concerns about health and safety. But their results were not as good as expected and the unusually high abstention rate raised concerns about the legitimacy of the new leaders.

Still, there are grounds for optimism. In big cities, for example, new cycle paths have been created. How long these "*coronapistes*" (pop-up bike lanes) will last was a point of negotiation in the second round of elections. That they

will stay is a clear success story for Green ideas. Beyond improvements in soft mobility and health, the Greens also support the decentralisation of the French state but the plan still needs to make it into mainstream discourse. Preferably in the run-up to the regional elections in March 2021, if they go ahead that is.

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