

“The presidential election has come to resemble social media”: Dominique Bourg on the French Elections

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Though survey after survey shows rising concern among the public about ecological and climate issues, the French presidential campaign has so far focused on identity and security. The candidacy of far-right polemicist Eric Zemmour has been centre-stage for months. Benjamin Joyeux asked Franco-Swiss philosopher Dominique Bourg about his views on election campaign and how environmental issues might be put back at the heart of public debate.

Benjamin Joyeux: What do you make of the French presidential campaign so far?

Dominique Bourg: Electoral logic plays a huge role and it has completely distorted things. The arrival of Eric Zemmour means that candidates only need to approach 20 per cent of the vote in the first round to have a chance of entering the second round. So everyone, especially on the right, is radicalising their speech to try to surf on anger and resentment as much as possible. Many people are in front of the television watching the news channels non-stop, and the more candidates take up extreme positions, the more attention they get.

The support for Zemmour is completely appalling and he's obtained it through making often infamous and ridiculous remarks. I don't even know if the people who want to vote for him really know why they do. The presidential election has come to resemble social media.

France is not the only country where politics revolves around constant clashes. What share of responsibility is specific to the institutions of the Fifth Republic?

To an enormous extent, the French presidential system polarises opinion. This phenomenon has exploded most forcefully in France and the United States, both Western democracies that are very much in crisis, and it is no coincidence that they are both presidential regimes. In the United States, it gets really scary. We might have thought that Donald Trump was a special case. But he has totally corrupted the political system and imposed himself on the Republican party. All candidates now have to pledge allegiance to him. Three-quarters of Republican voters now believe that the election was stolen. It might be an “alternative truth” as Trump claims, but the crazy thing is that it works.

We cannot understand this phenomenon without understanding what Big Tech and social media has managed to undermine. Social networks steer people towards the extremes and keep them there. The idea of social networks is ultimately to replace traditional information with “punchy”, falsely spectacular information that evolves with our emotions. And, in today's societies, emotions have become extreme: if we try today, for example, to show a teenager a film from the 1960s, they will struggle to watch it because of its rhythm and slowness.

What is happening in the United States and France is the coupling of emotional information with presidential institutions that push for extreme polarisation. In France, we do not have US-style bipartisan polarisation, but we do have a polarisation that operates on the substance, themes, and the type of discourse that takes hold. It's how we end up, particularly on the right, with the worst kinds of discourse, like when Valérie Pécresse promised to "get the Karcher out" [on a visit to towns in the Provence region suffering from high rates of crime, the centre-right candidate reached for the high-pressure cleaner metaphor to explain her approach to law and order].

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This does not match with what the opinion polls tell us. A Eurobarometer survey from July 2021 shows, for example, that for more than 93 per cent of Europeans, climate change is a serious problem, even very serious for 78 per cent of them. But these fundamental concerns of the French people are not at all what stands out in the electoral campaign. In particular because only people who continue to vote, the oldest, the most politicised speak. A whole part of the population, including the most precarious and young people, do not express themselves. Our vision is completely distorted.

Switzerland has a more decentralised and participatory political system. Is the climate cause easier to defend there?

Not really. Last June, for example, there was the vote on a CO2 law that was rejected by public opinion despite already being rather unambitious. The cantons, languages, and cultures are very different compared to France and I think that the sensitivity of public opinion to climate change is lower than it may be in France. On the other hand, some part of the Swiss population remains very aware of these subjects. But political life is certainly not as polarised in Switzerland as in France.

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Does giving proper weight the climate and biodiversity crises require changes to our democratic systems?

Yes, we have to change the institutions. I wrote "Towards an ecological democracy" over 10 years ago. Our current institutional system is incapable of assimilating scientific information and rewards partisanship. We cannot really introduce serious subjects to the election campaign today. We cannot do it on social networks either. In general, the representative political system privileges the present and immediate effects over longer-term action. For

the climate, the logic is exactly the opposite: whatever we do for the climate, there will not be an immediate effect. The effects of our emissions are only felt in 20 or 30 years. The representative system as it exists today is out of step with the temporality of the climate.

In addition, the system rests on interests that it might not be possible to reconcile. In the past, there was a hollow consensus in our democracies on maximising the production of wealth and its redistribution. Today, it is clear that such a consensus, as we have known it since the late 19th century, cannot be reconstructed.

I insist on the fact that the two Western democracies that are at their worst today are the United States and France. Two presidential systems. Parliamentary and prime-ministerial regimes, as in Germany and other European democracies, still suffer from the deleterious effects of social networks and the extreme right, but they don't get to the gangrene currently observable in France.

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What do you make of the “Popular Primary” trying to rally the Left and the ecologists around one candidate?

It's not really working. The Popular Primary would work if there were at least one million people registered, which is unfortunately not the case. I had bet a little on the idea and supported it early on. But it is clear that it does not really work. It also risks just adding one more candidate to the Left, with Christiane Taubira, whose political career is questionable, regardless of her qualities.

This primary process risks that opaque schemes are used to resolve programme issues. I prefer a German-style system; a truly parliamentary regime where a government contract is drawn up by the parties over months in a transparent manner before public opinion. In France, we focus on individuals and then we discuss the programme. People end up not really knowing what they are voting for.

Once again, this sclerotic system of the Fifth Republic does not allow us to take issues seriously. Nor does it allow “compromise” in the good sense of the term. Politics is the art of real compromise. Naturally, we don't agree with each other, but there has to be a compromise. To refuse it in politics is nonsense. In a democracy, there is not one part of society that can impose itself on others. For it to work, it has to be translated in Parliament. But the presidential election distorts everything.

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Don't the two candidacies taking social and ecological matters seriously, Yannick Jadot and Jean-Luc Mélenchon, offer glimmers of hope?

People are likely to split between the two. And the fact that many will not vote is also a real concern, even if Jean-Luc Mélenchon is claiming that he will mobilise their support. Abstention has continued to increase in recent elections and is likely to be very significant again this time. We risk finding ourselves in a paradoxical configuration, with a political expression that is completely out of step with social reality as well as the values and concerns of the population over the long term.

What functional political system can we imagine that would take into account the ecological question?

A counterweight to the representative system is needed. The Citizens' Climate Convention was very nice, but it only changed the opinion of 150 citizens. There were perhaps around 30 climate sceptics at the start who were no longer sceptical at all at the end of the process, but that does not change anything compared to the opinion of the French public. We remain in "mini-publics".

Deliberative democracy conceived in this way does not align with the bulk of opinion and fails to move it. As long as the debate isn't organised to coincide with citizen's convention for the benefit of the whole population, it doesn't change anything. The current gap enables parliament to quietly unravel the citizens convention's work, as it has done.

Couldn't the convention be seen as the beginning of a much larger solution?

Yes, if done on a much larger scale. However, we also need to reform the media system. Our current system does not allow us to tackle serious subjects. If we add to this a short-term political system that favours certain interests, we end up not getting very far.

There is currently a parliamentary inquiry underway in the Senate on media concentration. The billionaires who own most of the French media, such as Vincent Bolloré and Bernard Arnault, have both been interviewed by the commission. What do you think of the current French media landscape and its independence?

Without rolling news channels in general and CNews in particular, Eric Zemmour would not exist. But CNews would also not exist without social media and Big Tech. You cannot isolate the French media landscape from the rest of the world. We have a hyper-divisive informational system that prevents us from going to the heart of the issues and, in France, it is superimposed on a political system with exactly the same faults.

It is clear that without Vincent Bolloré, without the purchase of CNews, without the rolling news channels where people spend their time blabbering, the news would be treated in a less sensationalist way. Zemmour has been serving them up the spectacle they need for months. The other less extreme channels like LCI or BFM follow CNews, which often sets the tone.

In general, social media has caused the media to fragment. The news channels are forced to chase the spectacular to keep their customers. If, for example, you put a CNN journalist on Fox News, it would lose all its customers. We've subjected everything to commercial logic. Remember what François Léotard said about the "mieux-disant cultural". It's silly! [the former minister of culture privatised France's main public TV channel based on the "best cultural offer"] When you commodify the channels, it commodifies the information and that inevitably leads to the crudest because that is what will attract the most people. The media landscape of the 1960s, with a single channel, was the opposite. It, for example, aimed to make French literature accessible to as many people as possible. Today it is the opposite.

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Shouldn't we go back in particular to what the National Council of Resistance advocated and consider information as our common good to be protected?

It should be done on a European scale, first with the creation of a European tech player with public support. We could oblige all civil servants to use this instrument, so that there is immediately a sufficient basis for this tool to be effective. The strength of Big Tech firms is based on the billions of bytes they collect. We also need a European news agency, to counter the very partisan news that you see in national media.

The far right seem to be setting the terms of the debate. Have they won the cultural battle?

Since last September, the far right has indeed imposed all its themes, even the most fanciful. That a someone like Eric Zemmour can say that Captain Dreyfus was perhaps guilty and that Pétain was able to save Jewish people and still sit at 18 per cent in the polls is not possible without first making people totally stupid. You should know that internationally, we now have serious IQ problems. There was an observable rise in IQ level until the 1980s but now it is falling. Look at Japan, there are over a million "hikikomori", people who no longer go out and stay locked up at home on games or social networks. Recently on the Metaverse, a virtual house sold for millions of dollars. The digital world is making people stupid!

If you were to run for president, what would your priorities be?

I'd hang myself. Jokes aside, I'd try to talk about the real problems and be ironic about others. Take the idea of the "great replacement", you just need to look at the figures to see how silly it is. Frankly, if we all end up as crazy as Zemmour, maybe we should be "greatly replaced".

We haven't managed to impose another story. And people have become accustomed to a level of crazy consumerism. But, take permaculture for example, it is not the easiest way to

grow vegetables. Understanding that we have to change means agreeing to make an effort, to limit oneself, to accept a form of wisdom that is difficult to “sell” in a race-to-the-bottom system. If we really want to build an ecological society, there are a number of areas where we will have to make sacrifices. We waste time by trying to dismiss this as a hyper-seductive narrative. We can’t avoid both effort and self-limitation.

So the very nature of the individual has to collective to bring about collective change? It’s back Gandhi and “be the change you want to see in the world”, right?

Yes, at least Gandhi did not conceal the difficulties. At some point, the discourse of hardship can work. It did for Churchill during the war, for example. It is possible that this discourse will take hold by the end of the decade. Because we will then have very serious ecological difficulties. Currently this speech is not cutting through, or only does for certain demographics. The only reason for hope is that as our difficulties increase, reasonable reflexes will eventually come to the surface.

Be careful though, we must not forget that media magnifies certain dynamics and ignores others. There are lots of initiatives and many things are changing. LGBTQ issues, for example, are something anthropologically very important. The traditional patriarchal system is going down the drain too. Zemmour might fantasise about the alpha male who crushes everything around him, and some people might fantasise about it too in front of their TV, but I’m pretty sure that they themselves don’t behave like that.

We are not necessarily immune to a good surprise, but we remain stuck with the magnifying effects of a media system and institutions that tend towards the bottom. This system is so artificial that it is still possible that a different set of voters turn out for the presidential and the legislative elections, for example, or that there are real local campaigns. The votes that we saw in the municipal elections will not necessarily look like the votes in the presidential election, even in those same cities. The perverse effects of the system are extremely reduced in municipal elections but fully effective in the presidential election.

So, in the end, we need to change how we elect our presidents?

Yes, except that you need to change article 89 of the Constitution. Depending on the procedure adopted, you either need a simple majority across two chambers, or a three-fifths majority. So it’s very difficult to change the institutions. It could only be achieved with a totally explosive presidential result, followed by a huge citizen mobilisation.



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