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A Closer Look at French President Macron and his “Third Way”

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Foreword

Emmanuel Macron's victory in the Presidential and Legislative Elections in May and June of 2017 with his political movement La République en Marche (LREM), which he founded in 2016, was nothing less than a political earthquake. With its first-past-the-post electoral system, France's political landscape had, to that point, been characterised by a classic dichotomy of the socialist Parti Socialiste (PS) and the conservative Les Républicains (LR, UMP until 2015). Macron's movement ended up forming a coalition with the other centrist parties, Mouvement Démocrate and Agir. This new situation also raises the question of which one of these players can be a natural partner for the German Liberals. This political shift further had an effect on the cooperation on European policy: the coming together of several French centrist parties in the "Renaissance" list in the European Parliament Elections, has created a new French voice within the Renew Europe group. The liberal-centrist group has overall increased in numbers, but has also become more diversified. In addition, the renaming of the former ALDE group to Renew Europe showed that the term "liberalism" is understood differently in France, which needs to be explained.

In this connection, the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom acts as a mediator between the political, economic and civil society levels and strives to support the reform path taken by France since Macron's election by setting up and expanding a German-French-European network and providing analyses and insight. With this publication, the Foundation's European Dialogue Programme seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the political compass behind Macron's and the other centrist parties' current policies. The study provides an overview of the different centrist players and thus of a lesser known aspect of France's party system. It particularly aims to clarify the French understanding of the term "liberalism", which is often misunderstood by Germans. It is mainly intended for Francophile policymakers as well as – in line with our mission to civil and political education – for a wider audience with an interest in France.

We are convinced that well-functioning cooperation within the German-French relations overall and the protection and support of liberal values in particular can only be successful when we achieve a clear and in-depth understanding of the other's positions.

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Executive summary

French President Emmanuel Macron's election campaign and first half of term can be described as ambitious, liberal and centrist. What is far harder to read, on the other hand, is what side of the political spectrum the young President can be placed on, what the golden thread of his politics looks like, what "his liberalism" is about and, most of all, what direction his politics will take.

This is not least due to the fact that the attributes that are frequently used to describe Macron already leave much room for interpretation and mean something very different in France than they do in Germany. For instance, the political centre is not only a vague concept that, already as a theoretical idea, hardly provides any clues as to what a centrist party is exactly. In the reality of political life in France, the centre takes many shapes, is quite varied and very fluid. Although there are some rather consistent party traditions in the centre of the political landscape, such as Christian democracy, political radicalism and liberalism, the centre is forever changing with renamed, splintering off, merging or newly founded parties. Different names of the groups in the Senate and the National Assembly and within the parties as well as very frequent changes of positions increase this confusion even more. Moreover, it has recently been attempted to classify Emmanuel Macron and the movement founded by him, En Marche!, as centrist – an approach that is quite understandable given some similarities in agendas, e.g. regarding the pro-European attitudes, but which has failed to yield unequivocal results.

Another aspect is that the French interpret the term "liberalism" in different ways. For some it is a "dirty word", and for others, so it seems based on surveys, it is an empty "plastic word' that can describe both economic policy and socio-political positions. While an economically liberal attitude is generally associated with the conservative right wing, social-liberal values are associated with the left. The centre, on the other hand, is seen as home for some kind of liberal economic world view with a social touch and values somewhere between strictly conservative and libertarian. This makes Macron's allocation to the left/right scale all the more difficult, as he seems to lean towards both forms of liberalism. It is therefore hardly surprising that politicians on the German side of the border see Macron as some kind of "storybook liberal", especially when considering his economic policies.

Given that he ran with a pro-European, centrist and social-liberal platform, Macron's victory as well as the parliamentary majority for En Marche! were surprising in themselves. Never before had a political newcomer managed to achieve the highest public office in the Fifth French Republic out of nowhere and without any fixed affiliation to a specific camp. For the first time, the voters opted for a representative of a Third Way, a politician who consciously intended to work with all camps except the extremes. It thus hardly comes as a surprise that the representatives of the traditional political centre, first and foremost the Mouvement Démocrate, saw Macron as the embodiment of their long-held ambitions to achieve an independent centre capable of governing. Since he was elected, Macron has been cooperating with them and other smaller centrist parties to implement his policies, achieve a governing majority, create a joint list for the European Parliament Elections and form a new and expanded group in the European Parliament with Renew Europe. Supported by many centrist, but also moderate forces from both camps, the governments under Édouard Philippe and Jean Castex started to put their ambitious reform programme into practice. However, this not only caused one of the largest protest movements France has seen in the past decades, the gilets jaunes, but also a general debate about the overall state of democracy in France and the political leanings of the government and the President in particular. All too many reform proposals were seen as business-friendly and thus, from a French perspective, neoliberal right wing politics. Paired with some verbal gaffes on part of the President, he was quickly labelled a "President of the rich". His progressive, social and socio-political projects barely sufficed to change this impression and to uphold his positive image with the more centrist or even moderately left voters.

Nonetheless, even in this can new nuances be observed, especially in most recent times. The management of the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, which put a strong state and the mitigation of social hardships into focus in France, changed the economic priorities as well. At the same time, the appointment of the new Prime Minister Jean Castex, who took office in the summer of 2020, and some reforms have shifted the government's profile to the right. A political classification of Macron and his government thus still poses a challenge and raises the question of how the second half of his term and the 2022 Presidential Election campaign will look like.

Introduction

COVID-19, terrorist attacks, devastating natural disasters – the list of challenges that cast their shadows over France in 2020 is long. Our neighbours to the west, however, see such times of crisis as great moments of the executive branch of their government. During such periods, the public's focus moves to the president, much more so than in Germany. Indeed, the French constitution gives him the most important position in our neighbouring country's political life, which most certainly make him a person of interest.

President Emmanuel Macron, who is quite young compared to his predecessors, is no different. In addition to the usual interest in the president, he and his presidency are intriguing for another reason: the desire to „decipher„ the (at least seemingly) new, unknown and innovative aspects of his politics. After all, when Macron was elected as the French President in the spring of 2017, some seemingly established ideas about the way French politics works were turned upside down. After decades of living and voting in a bipolar party system, now, with Macron, someone had won who did not fit into the classic political camps, and neither did his politics. With La République en Marche (LREM; or briefly En Marche!), he had created a new political movement which had not been expected to be as successful as it was in the French legislative elections that took place a few weeks after the presidential elections. Afterwards, thanks to clever alliances, the centrists of the Mouvement Démocrate (MoDem), who were almost believed dead, regained strength in Parliament and even achieved ministerial responsibility. This means that the party-political representatives of a Third Way outside the traditional left and right camps had become major players in French politics practically overnight. It is thus not surprising that explanations for the success and classifications of the new political power and its allies had been sought ever since, as Third Ways, cross-party governments and centrist alternatives had previously been associated with impending failure.

Many German political players are also looking to classify the current French government, as Macron's labelling and/or allocation to a political camp offers the chance to make the French politics' beacon of hope a natural partner. In the European Parliament, the party of the new European groundbreaker is seen as a challenging new player whose entry was seen as a reshuffling of the cards in the traditional parliamentary landscape. In the course of the 2019 European Parliament elections, the German parties, particularly the FDP [Free Democratic Party], were wondering whether an alliance could be formed. It is therefore hardly surprising that attempts are being made by German parties to allocate Macron and LREM to a traditional (German) party family. However, it is not that simple, for at least two reasons: On the one hand, considering the short time Macron and LREM had been in the political sphere, it is hard to identify an ideological "golden thread", as the external impact of the gilet jaunes (yellow vests) protests, COVID-19 and the "inherited" constraints on the decision-makers in Paris was both powerful and partly unforeseeable. On the other hand, and this makes the comparative perspective even harder, the German party system model cannot simply be transposed over to the French system. In fact, different political party families had emerged from historic developments and political cultures, which makes comparability, i.e. the allocation to the same political and ideological "compartments", rather difficult. In addition, terms and political labels often have different meanings and connotations in the two countries. A frequently asked question regarding the ideological position held by Macron and his Marcheurs and his other current and potential allies on the Third Way is whether the liberals have truly risen to power in France and whether, from a German perspective, there is now a natural ally in France for the German liberals.

From Outsider to President

The 2016/2017 Election Campaign

During the short time Emmanuel Macron had to introduce himself to the voters in France prior to his election, he did not conceal the fact that he had no intention of associating himself with any of the established parties and that he wanted to modernise and transform French democracy. His rhetoric fluctuated between "*neither* left *nor* right" and "*both* left *and* right"; in his programmatic campaign book, he promised nothing less than a revolution.[1] While revolution, transformation and system changes are a recurring theme in French presidential elections, the non-partisan line was a rather bold move in view of the frequent failures of independent or centrist presidential candidates in the past, and has had a significant impact on political actions and positioning. Until February 2017, hardly anyone expected the newcomer to win, given the political traditions of the Fifth Republic of France. Until recently, presidential candidates in France were expected to abide by three "golden rules", which could only be broken in very rare cases: the acceptance of the traditional bipolar left/right structure of political life, the necessity to belong to a *parti présidentiel* (presidential party, i.e. a party able to field promising presidential candidates on a regular basis), and many years of previous experience as a (prime) minister. Observers believe that the fact that Macron was elected despite not meeting any of these conditions is due to a particular political situation in the years 2016 and 2017.

The 2017 Presidential Elections seemed predictable at first: One year earlier, the polls had suggested that hardly anyone doubted that Alain Juppé, a moderate conservative from among France's conservative Republicans, would become the new president. This was supported by the polls suggesting that many French voters positioned themselves in the centre or on the right of a left/right scale, and Juppé fit the bill nicely. However, one aspect spoke against him from the outset: As a previous prime minister and long-term top politician, he was a typical representative of the traditional Fifth Republic, and thus did not meet the expectations of many people who, disappointed in democracy and the political system, were hoping for some kind of (system) change.

In the Socialist Party (PS, *Parti socialiste*), most expected that the acting President, François Hollande, would be available for another term, although his chances for re-election were poor, as could be gathered from the polls. Furthermore, Emmanuel Macron's resignation from the post of Minister of the Economy and the foundation of his En Marche! movement were hardly noticed as relevant for the election at first, as Macron had always been loyal to Hollande;[2] the Socialists did not see him as a rival. Parties from the far-left and the far-right of the political spectrum had chosen and announced their candidates early on: Jean-Luc Mélenchon for La *France insoumise* (FI) and Marine Le Pen for the *Front National* (FN); there were no plans for unity candidacies with the more moderate parties of the respective camps. It all seemed to come down to the battle between left and right, and in the respective camps, between moderate and extreme.

In the preliminary stages of the presidential elections, Les Républicains decided to hold primaries with some potential allies, which had a surprising result: Instead of the moderate Juppé, the Catholic, liberal-conservative François Fillon, former prime minister under Nicolas Sarkozy, was chosen as the top candidate, which immediately resulted in a polarisation on the right. The Socialists also found themselves in a conundrum: The hapless President Hollande did not wish to run for re-election and thus cleared the way for primaries on the left. Contrary to expectations, they were not won by the moderate Prime Minister Manuel Valls, but by the far-left candidate Benoît Hamon; Macron did not run for these primaries and had already announced his independent candidacy.

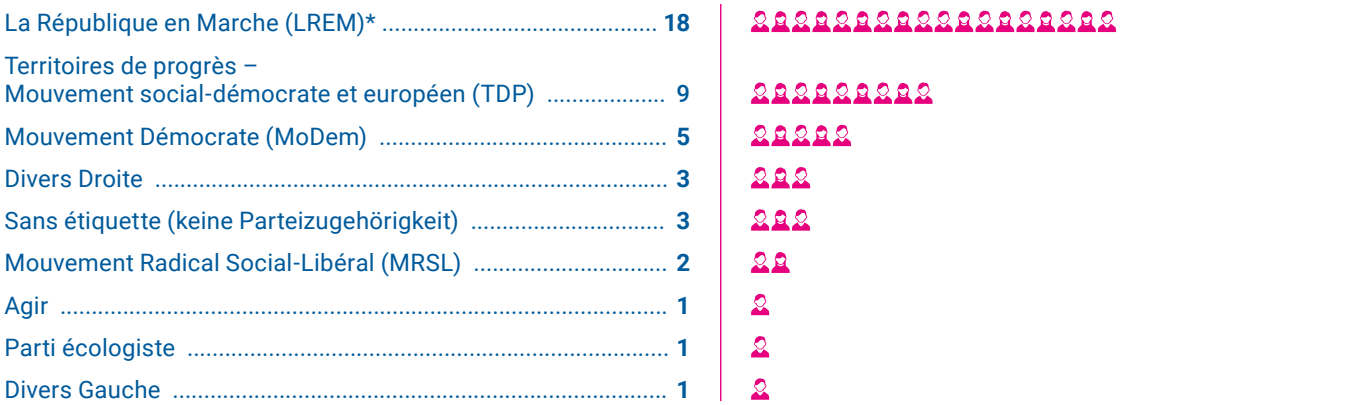
This means that the two established *partis présidentiels*, Les Républicains and Parti Socialiste, put forth candidates who were positioned on the fringes of their respective parties, which opened up a lot of room in the political centre, maybe even a complete vacuum. Emmanuel Macron set out to fill this vacuum. Given the weakness of the traditional centrist parties, especially the MoDem, the goal was to win over as many undecided voters as possible; the polls revealed a huge voter potential among those who saw themselves as centrist or as neither left nor right, as these voters typically make up their minds late and do not feel bound to any particular political camp.[3] The notoriously weak French Greens, who traditionally describe themselves as being on the left, were in no position (contrary to what might have been expected in Germany) at the time to fill the gap in the centre.[4] But it was not until the "Affaire Fillon", which meant the loss of reputation and many votes for the conservative candidate, and François Bayrou's promise of an alliance on behalf of the MoDem, that the tide started turning in favour of Macron. In the final weeks, the election campaign came down to a confrontation between the radical left and the radical right on the one hand, but mainly, on the other hand, it became a battle between the progressive centre and the far-left/far-right candidates, which then, due to the nature of the French electoral system, culminated in a second ballot between Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen.[5]

[1] Macron, Emmanuel: Révolution, Paris 2016.
[2] The name "En Marche!" shows its proximity to its founder, Emmanuel Macron, e.g. in the first letters: EM.
[3] Cf. e.g. Rouban, Luc: Le Paradoxe du Macronisme, Paris 2018, based on the analysis L'enquête électorale française, in: Sciencepo.fr, URL: https://www.sciencespo.fr/cevipof/fr/content/resultats-analyses-notes-de-recherche.html [viewed on 08/11/2020].
[4] In the previous years, the Greens had achieved greater successes with the voters of the French centrist parties, particularly in the so-called "mid-term elections" by proportional representation. In presidential and legislative elections, however, they had hardly any successes.
[5] The results: https://www.interieur.gouv.fr/Archives/Archives-elections/Election-presidentielle-2017/Election-presidentielle-2017-resultats-globaux-du-premier-tour [viewed on 08/11/2020].

Government Formation and Parliamentary Majority

But what do these events tell us, what does the election victory tell us about President Macron and his politics, and what significance does it have for later governance? Let's take a chronological approach first: Macron formed his first government under Prime Minister Edouard Philippe with (former) members of the Républicains, the PS, the MoDem, the Greens, La République en Marche and from civil society. In the final weeks before his election, more and more moderate members of the Republicans and the Socialists, but also of the Greens and the smaller centrist parties had joined En Marche! and thus put themselves forward for a ministerial office or at least a constituency in the legislative elections. The Prime Minister and the State Ministers were members of the LR, the PS, the Greens and the MoDem in the "first Philippe" government, which shows how many different party-political tendencies got together under Macron. The strategy of a synthesis of various perspectives from different political camps was thus working at first; his government included politicians from the centre, from the right and from the left.[6]

Fig. 1 | Overview of the number of French ministers according to party membership
(Last Update: November 2020)



* LREM permits dual memberships so that some players belong to two parties. However, for the sake of clarity, only the original party membership is stated here.

Source: own representation

In the legislative elections several weeks later, LREM managed to win the absolute majority jointly with its allies of the MoDem and members of other parties who had expressed their solidarity to LREM. This resulted in the largest exchange of personnel in the National Assembly in the history of the Fifth Republic and meant a spectacular defeat for Républicains and particularly for the PS, which had a massive impact on their resources due to the party financing system. The parties have yet to truly recover from their defeat and are weakened by intra-party turf wars, scramble to acquire top positions and splintering off of various groups. This means that Macron had started to fulfil another promise which demonstrated his self-positioning outside the traditional camps: breaking away from antiquated customs, which was impressively emphasised by the complete personnel makeover of the National Assembly.

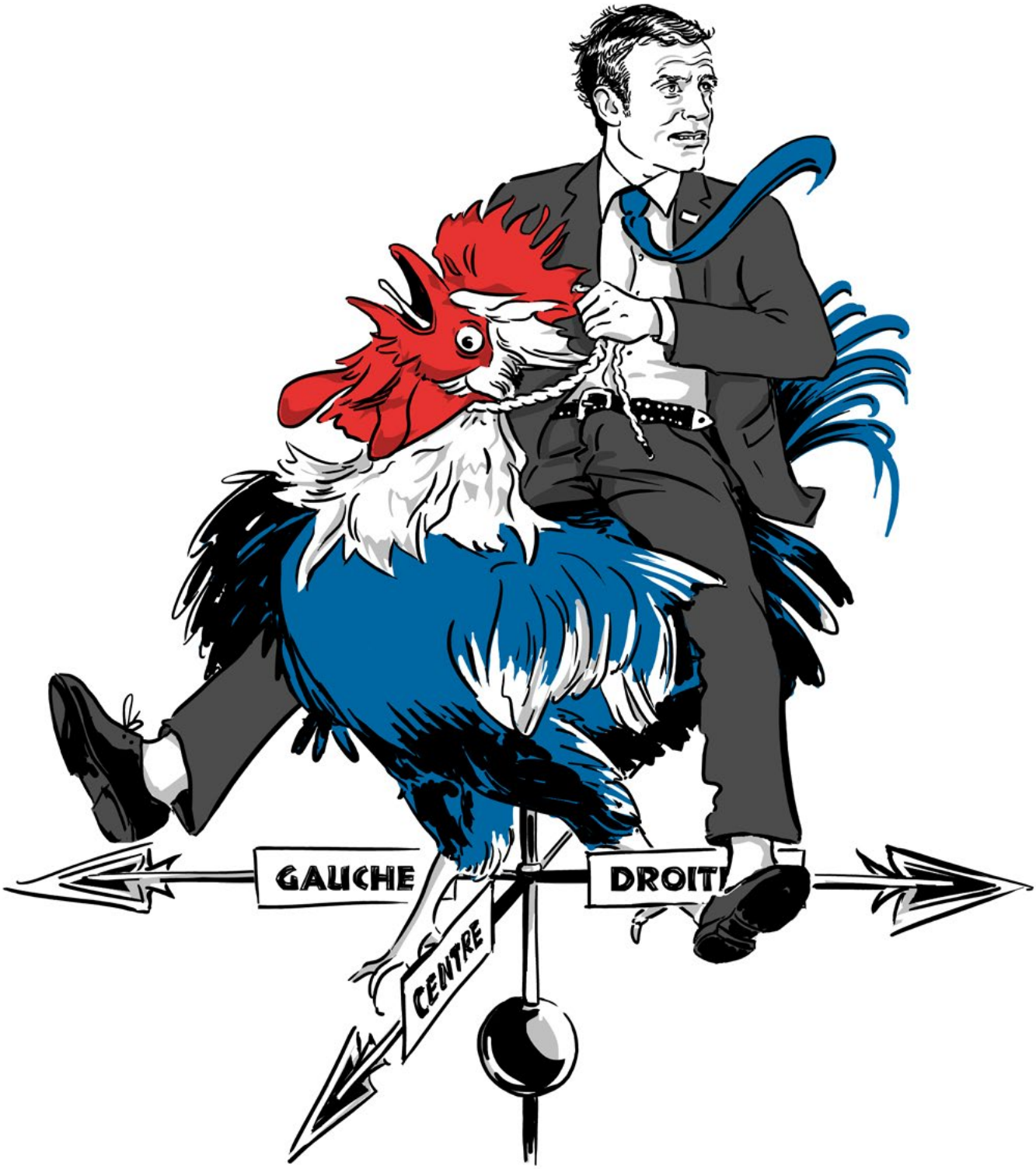
The *majorité présidentielle*, i.e. the governmental majority in Parliament, first consisted of the (parliamentary) groups of the LREM (who had the absolute majority at the start of the legislative period) and of the MoDem. In the course of the legislative period, other groups, particularly from centrist deputies, had joined the majority. With a largely neither left nor right majority composed of a mishmash of different parties behind him, Macron started to make good on his promise to do politics beyond traditional camps from now on.

Interim Conclusion

At first glance, with the formation of a cross-party government, a majority group from among a new movement and the centrist alliance, Macron had achieved something that had been attempted before by representatives of various centrist parties, but had never been successful. Even former president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, who intended to govern from the centre for the centre, for the famous "deux Français sur trois" (two of three Frenchmen), was only been able to do this in alliance with the right, the Gaullists at the time. There had not been any centrist governments and majorities in the Fifth Republic so far who were able to do without any attributes, i.e. a left or right ally; most recently, François Bayrou had failed several times with his hypercentre line (meaning an absolute centre that does not lean either to the left or to the right). With his mix of "both/and" and "neither/nor", Macron at first managed to eliminate the need for leaning to the left or the right. However, does that mean that Macron and his Marcheurs, as the LREM members are called, are centrists?

[6] The other governments formed during Macron's presidency, "second Philippe" and the "Castex", show similar compositions. Jean Castex replaced Edouard Philippe in the summer of 2020 after a spectacular defeat of LREM in the local elections.

Fig. 2 | Neither right nor left – is Macron a centrist?



Graphic: © Studio Nippoldt, Berlin

Centrism in France – What Is It?

Analysts of the political system can be divided into two camps when it comes to the question of centrist politics: the ones who believe that there can be an independent, organisationally autonomous centre which is referred to as "organic" in academic research, and the ones for whom the centre is "only" a place of political practice, a political style and/or a strategy.[7] The attempt to interpret centrist parties as factually impossible in France's political system has a long tradition and is the result of the traditional bipolarisation of political life. From these "centrist deniers'" perspective, the Macron phenomenon can be quickly explained: To them, Macron is a political figure who governs in the centre (although he can be allocated to a camp) and pursues a specific (in his case initially successful) strategy with this. However, it was inevitable that Macron would be forced to lean either left or right sooner or later to secure his political position: Without a strong partner from one of the two traditional camps, long-term political success is impossible. This means that governing in the centre is a typical sign for crisis situations, during which time governments of national unity, pragmatically and temporarily, turn to traditionally rival camps and representatives of Third Ways in the search for joint solutions.

However, if one follows the other line, which considers governance possible not just *in*, but also *by* a centre, it becomes more difficult to classify Macron and LREM. The question then arises what makes up a centrist party, what does its political identity and ideology look like and whether that applies to the current governing party. The positioning as neither left nor right or as between the left and the right provides little help, although the typical functions of centrist parties as "linking parties" or majority providers can be derived from that. The centrists' positioning as different from the other players in the political field seems more informative: On the one hand, they vehemently reject undemocratic or anti-democratic extremes and, on the other hand, they refuse to be classified into the bipolar order. The absolute belief in political ideologies is replaced by consideration, moderation, debate and compromise, so it is not surprising that one cannot speak of a centrist ideology and identity. Although there is a basic canon of typical values and ideas, they come from different party families. (Cultural and socio-political) liberalism, the defence of parliamentarianism, a focus on the needs of the middle class, general connections to humanism[8] and a pro-European attitude represent typical goals and a kind of lowest common denominator of all those whose party families are classified as centrist.

[7] Cf. here and below: Kallinich, Daniela: Das Mouvement Démocrate. Eine Partei im Zentrum der französischen Politik, Wiesbaden 2018, here mainly pp. 171-183.

[8] In France's general political understanding, humanism means that the human being and/or their dignity is the focus of political efforts. Especially the centrist parties explicitly refer to this philosophy or ideology, whose values, however, have become a kind of political consensus in the case of the universally applicable fundamental rights in the Western democracies

In France, these most recently had been the liberal, the Christian democratic and the radical party family, to which the following party organisations refer today:

Fig. 3 | Overview of the most important centrist parties in France

Parteiname(n) 2020	Mouvement Démocrate	Les Centristes	UDI	Mouvement Radical – social – libéral	Alliance Centriste	Agir
Party family	Christian democracy	Christian democracy	Christian democracy	Radicalism	Christian democracy	– (moderate right)
Unique selling point in terms of content or strategy	"Hyper-centrist" without any fixed affiliation to a specific camp Humanism Social-liberal Pro-European	Loyal allies of LR Liberal, humanist, pro-European, pro-decentralisation	2012–2017 alliance of parties, then split From 2017 separation from LR Pro-European; synthesis of the content of the components	Republic Laicism	Humanist, social, liberal, pro-European	Liberal, social, pro-European, humanist, reform-oriented
Year of formation	2007	2007	2012	2017	2009	2020
Known representatives	François Bayrou	Hervé Morin	Jean-Christophe Lagarde	Jean-Louis Borloo (no longer active)	Jean Arthuis (resigned)	Fabienne Keller, Franck Riester
Relevant predecessor organisations, components or split from	(Nouvelle) UDF	(Nouvelle) UDF	(Nouvelle) UDF Until 2017, alliance of NC, PR and AC	Parti Radical, (Nouvelle) UDF	Split from MoDem, (Nouvelle) UDF	Split from Les Républicains, melting pot of different parties
Group allocation in the National Assembly	Groupe Mouvement Démocrate (MoDem) et Démocrates apparentés	Groupe Libertés et Territoires	UDI et Indépendants	Groupe Libertés et Territoires, LR, LREM, Groupe Agir ensemble	LREM	Groupe Agir ensemble
Deputies in the National Assembly	42	2	16	10	5	20
Group allocation in the Senate	Union Centriste	Union Centriste	Union Centriste	Union Centriste, Rassemblement démocratique et social européen, République et territoires	Union Centriste	Rassemblement démocratique et social européen, République et territoires
Senators	6	9	35	9	1	6
Members of the European Parliament	5	1	0	1	0	1

Source: own representation

But what do they have in common with Macron's Third Way? What does the centre currently look like in France? What similarities are there to German liberalism?

The Meaning of Liberalism in France

The term "liberal" has different connotations in French political life. One important distinction concerns the political science *description of the liberal party family*, on the one hand, and the *colloquial attribute* for describing a politician, a party or a political decision or statement, on the other hand. Moreover, the term "liberal" is linked to various topics and fields: While it means, most of all, a liberal economic course for some and is often used synonymously with the term "neoliberal", it could also mean the attitude towards social issues to others. Representatives of liberal economic viewpoints are traditionally placed on the right of the classic left/right axis of France's political life, particularly if they are not connected with cultural liberalism. Ideas of cultural liberalism are generally seen as belonging more to the political left. The fact that the term "social-liberal" is often associated with the social-liberal SPD [Social Democratic Party of Germany]/FDP coalition in the years from 1969 to 1982 in Germany makes this even more complicated for German speakers. However, in France, the term "social-liberal" is used in very different ways: on the one hand, by the centrist parties who see a liberal economic policy connected with a social equality and want to distance themselves from all-too conservative concepts of society; on the other hand, as a category to classify voters who stand out from others due to their special mix of values – they are in favour of as free a market as possible, but are firmly left-wing when it comes to culture, and they cannot be put in the same basket with the typical centrist voters. At the same time, it is important to them to retain a strong welfare state.[9] This clearly shows that social and economic liberalism are not necessarily competing constructs, but rather address different issues. It is therefore hardly surprising that the term "liberal" had little relevance to the classification of politicians in the public debate until the advent of Macron, as other attributes allow for a more exact and less ambiguous classification of political forces.

In France, the liberal party family is traditionally understood as conservative and/or right-wing; the renowned historian René Remond saw it as one of the three historic components of the right.[10] Their party-political representations has formed the *centre droite* (centre-right) for decades and had stood for moderate politics of the *juste milieu*, i.e. for the centre of society and a moderate line, since the start of the 19th century. Their politics included both elements of cultural and of economic liberalism. Depending on the ideas that dominated the party family in its long history, the parties formed their alliances with centrist or right-wing parties. Numerous parties had been allocated to this camp across the decades; their last prominent representative was former president Valérie Giscard d'Estaing. After he was voted out, "his" party, the UDF component Parti Républicain, developed increasingly neoliberal ideas in the 1980s and 1990s, which resulted in numerous overlaps with the RPR, particularly in economic policy. This caused the party Démocratie libérale to merge with the newly established conservative collective movement UMP in 2002.[11] At least as regards a (neo)liberal *economic* policy, there has not been any notable autonomous party in France since. This explains why none of the current centrist parties refers to the liberal party family in the list.

THE UDF

The Union pour la Démocratie Française was founded in 1978 by Valéry Giscard d'Estaing as a confederation of various centrist parties with the aim to form an organisational and power-political counterpart to the Gaullists on the right. From its very inception, it saw itself as *centre droite*, meaning a centre-right union. The UDF was composed of (aside from some smaller players) the Christian democratic Centre des Démocrates Sociaux (CDS, later Force Démocrate), the Parti Républicain (PR, later Démocratie libérale) and the Parti Radical Valoisien. The Union served the components, as the still existing sub-parties of a party confederation are called in France, to gain political significance together and to support Giscard during his presidency. In the following years, it was a vehicle for creating clarity in France's complicated political party system and for strengthening the centrist parties' power, particularly in their competition with the RPR. The different party traditions clashed time and again in the Union, resulting in internal power struggles, intrigues and splintering off of various groups. The main points of contention were e.g. the attitude towards Europe, the relation to the far-right, economic policy issues and – as so often in the centre – the question of alliances. After Démocratie libérale left and the renaming to "Nouvelle UDF" in 1998, the confederation took a path that ultimately led to the separation of the ties between UDF and RPR/UMP and to the formation of the independent MoDem in 2007.

[9] Cf. Rouban, Luc: Existe-t-il un électorat social-libéral? Rapport de recherche, in: https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr, 24/03/2016, URL: https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01293373/document [viewed on 29/11/2020].
[10] Cf. Remond, René: Les droites en France, Paris 1982.
[11] Previously, there had been a long-term dispute regarding the weighting of liberal economic ideas at the UDF, the alliance of the centrist parties. Representatives of Démocratie libérale attempted – without being completely successful – to change the social-liberal centrist consensus towards a neoliberal orientation of the Union. The economic policy thus became a point of contention in the party union.

Of course, the dissolution of Démocratie libérale did not mean the end of liberalism in France. Liberal values with various nuances lived on in the different parties, particularly in the centrist and right-wing parties – depending on the party, sometimes liberal economic ideas and sometimes social-liberal ideas as well as the "welfare" element are of more importance. LR, the UMP's successor organisation, can be regarded today as the party in which the liberal economic ideas and their advocates are represented most prominently – although it also houses other ideological convictions, as is usually the case in "catch-all" parties. Social-liberal ideas, on the other hand, can be found in the centrist parties' programmes and constitute an important part of their identity.

In contrast, the term "liberal" is still used as a political slur in everyday speech and in political competition, despite France's two hundred years of political history and although it has produced many liberal thinkers and had made freedom a state principle with its motto *liberté, égalité, fraternité*.[12] Most of all, neoliberal economic policy is vehemently rejected and accused of being *"pensée unique"* (French for „single thought").[13] This form of critique refers to the fact that the economic policies of the supposedly different French political parties have practically converged into a single idea since the 1980s. It is often argued that no more thoughts are given to alternative economic policies. Furthermore, neoliberal ideas, and a market economy system in general, are often associated with the right and thus with a basic attitude that is hostile to workers and employed persons. This seemingly general rejection is certainly in contradiction with the fact that more than half of the French take a positive view of liberalism in surveys. At the same time – and this is typical for the French faith in the state – about half of them demanded more state interventions in 2018, particularly as regards the protection of citizens experiencing social hardship.[14]

It can overall be said that the attribute "liberal" had played a rather limited role in the public eye and in the self-designation of most parties and politicians in recent years until Macron was elected in 2017. The term was only used in the name of the group in the European Parliament, the ALDE, which included the UDI and the MoDem, and served as the basis for the cooperation with liberal parties from other European countries. With Macron's ascent to prominence and the inability to allocate this new and important player in French politics to the usual categories, and in view of his statements and beliefs, this descriptive gained in importance in the political debate and in the selection of political allies. However, to what extent is this label correct? And how can liberal ideas serve as the glue between the centrist players?

The French Political Centre – Players, Political Weight and Objectives

The French centre seems hard to grasp not only from the perspective of its beliefs and political agenda; it seems fluid and undefined in organisational terms as well. Party organisations and parliamentary groups are founded, break off, form alliances, change their names or disappear from the political map. In view of the confusing number of parties, groups and attributes, it is hardly surprising that many people within and outside France rarely bother to try and remember the names of the individual parties. There are far more important factors than the name, in fact, such as the historical allocation to a political family, a unique selling point in terms of political platform or strategy or, most frequently, the association with a person. Anyone looking at France's political party landscape hardly would have noticed the centrist parties prior to 2017, particularly after the UDF had lost its significance. They were poorly represented in parliaments and important political offices, and their organisational representations were short-lived. Christian democracy in particular is not comparable to Germany's CDU [Christian Democratic Union of Germany] when it comes to political weight. The liberal party Démocratie libérale merged with the UMP in 2002, so that there is currently no notable independent party-political organisation of this political family. What parties and groups are actually labelled "centrist" in France, and what do they stand for?

[12] This makes the French understanding of the term very different from e.g. the American understanding, where the liberals are on the political left. However, there is also a similarity: the word "liberal" is often used as a pejorative in political competition.

[13] The term is not only used for neoliberalism, but also for other, seemingly consensual attitudes that are accused of not considering alternatives – as a way of distancing one's self from them and to criticise them.

[14] Cf. Ifop: Les Français et le libéralisme – Vague 4, in: ifop.com, 08/06/2018, URL: https://www.ifop.com/publication/les-francais-et-le-liberalisme-vague-4/ [viewed on 08/11/2020]. It must be pointed out that the term "liberalism" is not defined or differentiated in the survey, i.e. the interpretation of "liberal" is left to those questioned.

PARTIES IN FRANCE

The constant changes in France's political party system are difficult to understand, especially for Germans. There are various reasons for this phenomenon, which particularly occurs in the centrist and conservative parties; they are linked to both the parties' historical emergence and the deputies' self-image. They tend to see themselves as representatives of their constituency first of all, who also bear responsibility for the good of the entire country, and less as representatives of a party. Many in the centre and in the right wing had been elected in the past due to their role as local dignitaries. Before they were elected, they had achieved a lot for their constituency, mainly outside politics, and then crowned their careers traditionally with a political mandate. These dignitaries only began getting together to form groups and clubs after they had entered Parliament, to be better able to protect their common interests. This means that many centrist parties had their origin not in extra-parliamentary initiatives, but inside the Parliament. Therefore, these parties are of far lesser significance to the voters than is the situation in e.g. the "milieu parties" on the left, such as Parti Socialiste and Communiste, which is reflected in the extremely low number of members and very weak community ties. In addition, political parties, just like other intermediary organisations, have a rather bad reputation and are deemed sectarians and a potential threat to the national unity. There is a reason why very few French parties include the word "party" in their names. They prefer to be seen as a movement, union or assembly.

However, the centrist and left-wing parties have become major players today, e.g. during electoral campaigns. Deputies and parties have become mutually dependent on one another, a dependency which is supported by the system of state party funding. One crucial element of this is the fact that deputies in the National Assembly and in the Senate can decide again each year what party will get their personally allocated state resources, irrespective of the electoral list through which they were elected.

Nonetheless, the current realignment in the centre also shows a dynamic transition phase after decades of relative stability in the French party system. This past phase, which was characterised by a strong bipolarisation between two more or less equally strong camps, a right camp and a left camp, with one stronger and one weaker party, can be declared to have truly ended no later than 2017. However, it could also be said that the rise of the Front National in the early 2000s and the independence of the MoDem in 2007 were signs that things were getting interesting. The foundation of LREM challenged the centre-right, in particular, and forced them to reconsider their position. While the cooperation agreement, which had already terminated the traditional alliances with the right, was relatively simple for the MoDem, the other centrist players faced a crucial question: should they remain loyal to the traditional, but seriously weakened partner Républicains, who was drifting ever more to the right, or should they join LREM and opt for an alternative path where the outcome is uncertain, but which is close to their own beliefs? This conflict, which all centrist parties except for the MoDem are dealing with, is probably the most important explanation for the constant frictions in the centrist group and party landscape in France.

There are four *groupes minoritaires*[16] in the National Assembly as of the autumn of 2020 which call themselves centrist and/or have a clearly centrist heritage;[17] two of them are partners of LREM, one of them does not regard itself as part of the government coalition or the opposition and one is part of the opposition. The group of the MoDem members and some persons assigned to them (56 deputies; part of the majority) has the highest number. Further groups include Agir ensemble (20; part of the majority), the group of the UDI deputies (18; neither-nor) and the group Libertés et Territoires (18; part of the majority)[18].

In the Senate, the French Parliament's second chamber, where the majority is currently held by Les Républicains, there is a small Groupe Rassemblement des démocrates, progressistes et indépendants (23), i.e. senators from the LREM movement; they do not have a majority and are set up as a *groupe minoritaire*. The Union Centriste (54, groupe minoritaire) traditionally stands for the centre; it has most of the centrist senators under its roof and has organised a cooperation of the centrists in the Senate even after the UDF was dissolved. There is also the "Groupe Les Indépen-

[16] There are three different types of groups in the National Assembly: the opposition, the minority groups (*groupes minoritaires*) and the majority group (*majorité*). The groups designate themselves as minority or opposition. The majority group and individual *groupes minoritaires* jointly form the *majorité présidentielle*, i.e. the governing majority.

[17] More information on the changes within the groups in the National Assembly can be found at http://www2.assemblee-nationale.fr/qui/modifications-a-la-composition-des-groupes [viewed on 08/11/2020].

[18] This group includes members of very different fringe parties; most of them are traditionally allocated to the centre. However, it also includes members of the Divers gauche and Divers droite (miscellaneous left and right).

dants – République et Territoire" (13). Both centrist groups have members from very different parties. The opposition group "Groupe du Rassemblement démocratique et social européen" (15) includes some members of the centrist party "Mouvement Radical".

The inconsistency of the group (names) of the parliamentary chambers and parties in France not only makes it hard for observers to keep track of these various groups, but it also reflects the various logics at play in the various systems of Senate and National Assembly, central government and provinces. Furthermore, the senators and deputies of the National Assembly and/or their groups decide on their party affiliation themselves, which in turn determines the distribution of state party funding. It is not a mandatory requirement that party membership, parliamentary group affiliation and financial allocation are consistent.

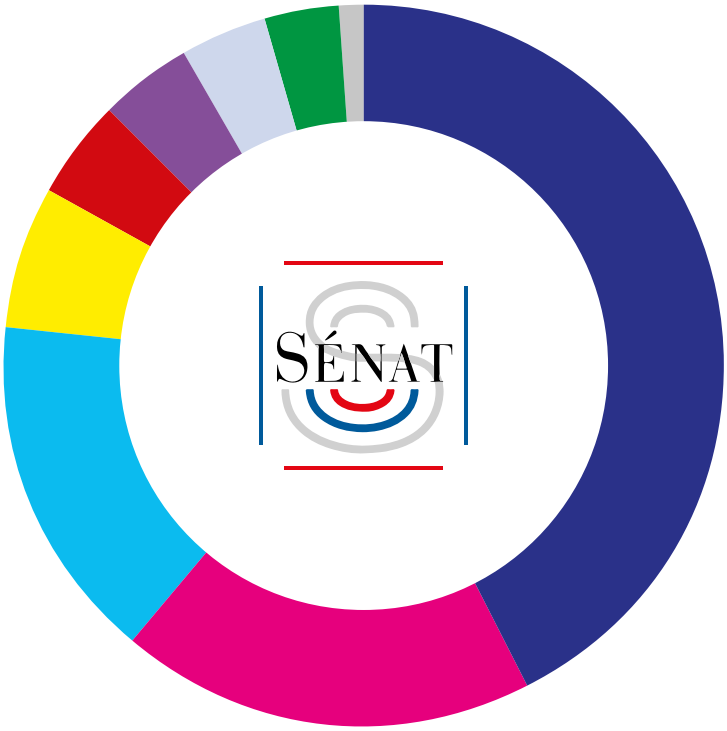
Overall, one only needs to look at which groups are in both the National Assembly and in the Senate to see what parties are currently relevant in the centre, as they have successfully sent deputies to both chambers: the Mouvement Démocrate, Les Centristes, the UDI, the Alliance Centriste, Agir as well as the Radicals.

Fig. 4 | Composition of political groups (groupes politiques) in the Assemblée Nationale

La République en Marche	271
Les Républicains	105
Mouvement Démocrate et Démocrates apparentés	56
Socialistes et apparentés	30
Députés non inscrits	25
Agir ensemble	20
Libertés et Territoires	18
UDI et Indépendants	18
La France Insoumise	17
Gauche Démocrate et Républicaine	16

Source: French Assemblée Nationale, own representation

Fig. 5 | Composition of political groups (groupes politiques) in the Sénat



Les Républicains	148
Groupe Socialiste, Écologiste et Républicain	65
Union Centriste	54
Rassemblement des démocrates, progressistes et indépendants	23
Groupe communiste, républicain citoyen et écologiste	15
Groupe du Rassemblement Démocratique et Social Européen	15
Groupe des Indépendants – République et Territoires	13
Groupe écologiste – Solidarité et Territoires	12
Non Inscrits	3

Source: French Sénat, own representation

LREM AND THE CENTRIST PARTIES IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

The parliamentary group distribution of the French Members of the European Parliament is different from the one in the National Assembly and the Senate on a national level. The MoDem, and its predecessor, UDF, were part of the ALDE group from 2004 to 2019, which united the liberal parties in the European Parliament. This was the centrist members' way to set themselves apart from the UMP, who are e.g. represented in the EPP (European People's Party) together with the German CDU. After the LREM appeared on the political scene and with Macron's ambitions in European politics, it quickly became clear that he would not be willing to join an existing group, unless changes were made to its basic structures, e.g. its political agenda or its name. To resolve this, negotiations were held in the run-up to the 2019 European Parliament Elections to expand the existing ALDE group so that members elected via the French Renaissance list (LREM, MoDem, Agir, MR) could join it. The result is the group "Renew Europe", which describes itself as centrist. The "liberal" attribute has vanished from this description – a concession to the French aversion to this term. The French members of the Renew Europe group come from the following parties: LREM, MoDem, Mouvement Radical and Agir. Members from Germany include representatives of the FDP and the Free Voters.

The MoDem – Trailblazers for an Independent Centre in France

The MoDem was founded in 2007 by François Bayrou as successor of the "Nouvelle UDF". Ever since its foundation, the hallmark of the party has been its positioning in the *hypercentre*, i.e. the fact that it does not have any structural affiliation with either the left or the right. In the 2007 Presidential Elections, Bayrou was able to gain 18.6% of the votes in the first ballot with this centrist line, so that, even if only for a short moment, a centrist president seemed realistic.[19] However, in 2012 his Presidential Elections result returned to the level of approx. 9%, which is typical for the centre; the centre also failed to reap that same level of success in the various mid-term elections. Compared to its predecessor, the (Nouvelle) UDF, who had always done deals with the Conservatives, the MoDem had become a lot less important since its formation. This was shown in 2017 particularly by the loss of nearly all mandates in the National Assembly, noticeable financial losses, a loss of importance at the local level, the departure of numerous important members of the party (the so-called *notables*) and a decline in the number of party members. So it is hardly a surprise that many MoDem members considered supporting the moderate conservative Alain Juppé (who did not become a candidate); they hoped for an alliance that would strengthen their position.

However, the result was different than expected: Thanks to an alliance with Emmanuel Macron, which was announced in February 2017, and the constituencies that were consequently reserved and won for MoDem candidates for the legislative elections, the MoDem was able to re-consolidate their strength. With the return into Parliament in sufficient numbers to form a parliamentary group, some ministerial posts and the better resources that come with it, some other centrist party and LREM members joining it in the summer of 2020 and with the related loss of the absolute majority for LREM, the party's confidence has continuously grown; at the time of writing, it has an estimated 13,000 members. Due to the now weak community ties, there are only few MoDem senators left. The remaining four belong to the Union Centriste.

The MoDem's agenda shows that when it was founded, it was trying to stay true to its humanist-Christian democratic heritage. A liberal economic policy with an emphasis on social issues and a pro-European agenda play an important role and constitute the connection to LREM. The party seeks the establishment of a Constitution for the European Union, taxes collected at a European level for joint future expenses and a country-specific basic income for employed persons. It also wants to have the mission for the euro zone reformulated and establish a joint foreign and defence policy. The MoDem stood in the European Parliament Elections jointly with LREM, Agir and the Mouvement Radical in the Renaissance list and is now represented with five members in the Renew Europe group – the former ALDE group extended by LREM. All the while, the party did stay a member of the European Democratic Party.

With regard to socio-political topics, there are strong similarities to social democratic positions, although the traditional, but increasingly less relevant Catholicism still clashes with modern values within the party. The Christian-democratic heritage is not only reflected in the pro-European attitude, but also in the conception of statehood: The MoDem stands for more decentralisation and endorses subsidiarity and support for civil society and businesses. Local issues should be decided on the local level, the citizens are called upon to show personal responsibility, and the state should only act as the guarantor of their rights. Nonetheless, in a rather atypical fashion for the centre, the party also shows a certain faith in the state again and again, which makes the party more attractive to voters from the moderate social-democratic left. This is supported by the objective to reduce social inequality through a distribution of income. This also causes MoDem to see itself as a kind of social conscience of the majority today.[20]

The last party programme was drawn up in 2011/12, when Bayrou was last put forward as a presidential candidate. In his campaign for this electoral run, he especially focused on a balanced budget and the motto "Made in France" as his stimulus programme. He wanted to increase taxes, particularly VAT, income and wealth taxes, and close tax loopholes. He also did not forget to address the topic of sustainability. Overall, many of MoDem's programmatic aspirations can be interpreted as an economic and social political synthesis of social democratic and social liberal ideas, which entirely corresponds to the centrist Third Way under the keyword of "social economy". Reference is often made to the German social market economy model. Overall, it is possible to say that the MoDem's policy focuses mainly on the *classes moyennes*, the middle classes.[21]

The MoDem is currently in internal digital discussions about key issues of the (further) development of the party programme: sustainability, Europe and international relations, democracy and citizenship, society and solidarity. The MoDem also intends to unite the centre as an alternative to the left and the right wing and relies on a common strategy of all members of the current majority for the 2021 Local Elections.[22]

[19] Cf. Kallinich, l.c., from p. 403, on the current MoDem development.
[20] Cf. e.g., no author given: Le MoDem fait voter des lois „sociales", in: mediapart.fr, 17/05/2018, URL: https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/170518/le-modem-fait-voter-des-lois-sociales [viewed on 08/11/2020].
[21] Cf. Fretel, Julien: Un centre sans gravité, in: in Delwit, Pascal (ed.): Les partis politiques en France, Brussels 2014, pp. 167-179, here p. 173 et seq.
[22] Cf. Darame, Mariama: A l'Assemblée nationale, le MoDem impose son élargissement dans la majorité, in: lemonde.fr, 08/09/2020, URL: https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2020/09/08/a-l-assemblee-nationale-le-modem-impose-son-elargissement-dans-la-majorite_6051421_823448.html [viewed on 08/11/2020].

The UDI – Melting Pot of the Centre-Right

The Union des démocrates et indépendants (UDI) was founded in 2012, first as a federation of parties which – similar to the former UDF – also permitted direct membership.[23] It explicitly followed the tradition of the UDF and highlighted similarities in terms of personnel, agenda and organisation. Traditional figures from the UDF such as Simone Veil and Valérie Giscard d'Estaing declared the UDI (in contrast to the MoDem) as the legitimate successor of their policy. The Union initially included the Parti Radical, the Alliance Centriste and the Nouveau Centre. Its founding chairman, the chairman of the Radicals, Jean-Louis Borloo, had previously been a minister under Sarkozy, as a UMP ally. After the change of government in 2012 and the UMP's new role in the opposition, its previous allies had to find a new strategy allowing them greater independence. They chose a *centre-droite* line with a greater distance to the UMP and a view to a joint centrist solution.

The UDI and its components may be the best example in current French history for the strategic challenges and internal quarrels the centrist parties have been dealing with since the foundation of the Fifth Republic and the related polarisation of political life. The issue of the 2017 presidential candidacy alone serves as a lesson: While the option of *primaires centristes* was still available beforehand as an "alternative"[24] (i.e. the renewed attempt of an independent centrist candidacy), this option disappeared with the preliminary course taken by the MoDem of supporting Alain Juppé as a candidate. Thus remained the possibility to form an alliance with the Republicans, which challenged the UDI as well: Should they participate in their *primaires* with their own candidates? And if not – and that was what actually happened – whom would they support? Neither the components for themselves nor the federation as a whole found common ground and were torn between the tempting Third Way offered by Macron, the different courses the candidates took and the idea to field own candidates. Although federation did finally arrive at a joint decision to support François Fillon, this was repeatedly put to the test, and not only by the "Affaire Fillon". The Alliance Centriste was excluded from the UDI already in March 2017 when it decided by member vote to support Macron's campaign. It was only in the run-up to the second ballot that unity was achieved with the declared aim to prevent Marine Le Pen from winning the presidency.

The UDI failed to find stability even after Macron had won the election: The Parti Radical also left the Union in late 2017 to form the Mouvement Radical – social – libéral (MR) together with the Parti Radical de Gauche (PRG), which brought an end to a nearly fifty-year left/right split of the Radicals in France, at least in the short term.[25] The NC left the federation as well, as described above. What remained was a small party made of direct members and persons that did not follow the departure of their respective components. One of the main reasons for these organisational changes was a change of strategy: With the Republicans' shift to the right under their new party chairman Laurent Wauquiez, the UDI broke away from its base line of a "natural" partnership with the conservative partner and at the same time repositioned itself as *centre droite* (centre-right) in the political landscape. Contrary to the MoDem, who had been driving in the slipstream of Macron's success right from the start, the UDI group in the Assemblée Nationale finally decided to leave the opposition only in 2019 and, as a *groupe minoritaire*, to support the government's policies as an *opposition constructive*. This about equals acceptance or support.

The UDI's agenda follows the tradition of the liberal economic wing of the former UDF.[26] It stands for a free economy based on competition and has an overall more liberal economic standpoint than the MoDem. To be more specific, the party's economic policy envisages a reorganisation of social security contributions away from non-wage labour costs and towards higher taxation of consumer goods. It also wants to modernise the income tax system. It seeks to modify the 35-hour week so that up to 39 working hours per week would be possible, four of which should be deemed overtime. A reform of the unemployment insurance scheme towards lower government benefits is also a part of the party's platform.[27]

Typical centrist guiding principles of the UDI concern the organisation of the state, with massive criticism of the centralised structure of the state and related demands for decentralisation and subsidiarity. Similar to Les Centristes, the UDI thus follows the tradition of the *Girondins* of the revolutionary period. The *"nation girondine"* (more or less: nation organised in a decentralised way) they seek to create should go hand in hand with a *"Europe fédérale"* (federal Europe). To achieve the goal of forming a joint government for economic matters with partners from the euro zone, a "two-speed Europe" would be accepted, i.e. that EU Member States implement further integrative steps in various speeds according to their readiness. It further works towards taxes being levied by the EU itself in order to manage joint expenses, such as for fighting climate change.[28] The leading candidate, Jean-Christophe Lagarde, who competed in the European Parliament Elections with an independent list, attempted to dissociate himself from Emmanuel Macron, apparently

[23] If party alliances allow direct memberships, they can exist independent from the components. This is especially relevant if individual components leave the alliance.

[24] The MoDem and UDI adopted a common charter in 2013 which was supposed to serve as the basis for joint lists in elections and aimed for a primaire centriste in the run-up to the 2017 Elections. The centrists thus jointly achieved just under 10% of the votes in the 2014 European Parliament Elections, all seven elected members belonged to the ALDE. No more joint projects were attempted, although it had been intended from the start to win over disappointed Hollande voters; this strategy was pursued by Emmanuel Macron as well.

[25] The Parti Radical de Gauche left the MRG only a few months after its formation, as it did not want to form an alliance with LREM.

[26] However, it needs to be emphasised that the party "Démocratie Libérale", which had formed the liberal economic wing within the UDF for years, was merged with the UMP after its formation in 2002 and no longer existed as an independent party. This means that although the UDI's programme follows the liberal economic tradition of the French centre, it has nonetheless emerged from the Christian democratic and radical political family when it comes to organisation and ideology.

[27] Cf. UDI: Le Projet de l'UDI pour la France, 2017–2022, URL: https://de.calameo.com/read/0051349199b3272376b74 [viewed on 08/11/2020].

[28] Hausalter, Louis: Quel programme pour l'Europe ? Les réponses de Jean-Christophe Lagarde, tête de liste UDI, in: marianne.net, 09/05/2019, URL: https://www.marianne.net/politique/quel-programme-pour-l-europe-les-reponses-de-jean-christophe-lagarde-tete-de-liste-udi [viewed on 08/11/2020].

for tactical reasons. However, the UDI's European political agenda also includes strengthening the European institutions and the focus on social issues.[29] But this independent course resulted in no UDI member representing France in the European Parliament in the current legislative period.

Les Centristes – Faithful Allies of the Républicains

Les Centristes (LC) were formed in 2007 as well (under the name Nouveau Centre [NC]) and have been fighting with the MoDem for the role of rightful heir to UDF ever since. Bayrou's urge to proceed with the MoDem formation without any (conservative) allies did not meet the expectations of all Nouvelle UDF members at the time, especially those who had offices and mandates. They were aware of the risks to their re-election if they were to compete in their constituencies and municipalities against candidates of the previous ally, the seemingly all-powerful UMP. In addition, there were serious personal conflicts between Bayrou and other top representatives of the centre, who founded their "own" party with the NC. In the following, the NC was a party of dignitaries without a base, while the MoDem initially had approx. 80,000 founding members, a lot for a centrist party, though it had very few experienced office holders.

In the past, the Nouveau Centre was known to oscillate between ALDE and EPP group, which was reflected on the national level in an interplay between UDI and UMP. After a name change to Les Centristes in 2016, the party promised its support to François Fillon in the preliminary elections of the conservative wing in 2017 and finally left the UDI at the end of 2017. While LC continued to see themselves as part of the Conservatives and an ally of the Républicains, the UDI had something different in mind. This became obvious during the 2019 European Parliament Elections: LC campaigned with the Républicains again. Its parliamentary members joined the EPP group.

In 2018, the movement *Territoires!* was founded on the initiative of the LC party chairman Hervé Morin. The attitude and organisation of this movement shows some similarities to LREM: All citizens who believe in liberal, humanist, pro-European and pro-decentralisation ideas are invited to come together to discuss important topics of the future, without party membership and after a simple registration. The initiative is supported by the Mouvement Radical and is thus a new attempt to bring the former UDF members together under one roof.

Les Centristes stand for a programme similar to the one of MoDem and thus for pro-European, Christian-democratic and liberal values, although they seem more conservative when it comes to socio-political issues. The founding programme had many similarities with Bayrou's 2007 electoral programme and e.g. strived for a social market economy that relies on a functioning economy and innovations, but also on the distribution of wealth; the typical centrist programme also includes a balanced budget. Important is that it wants to be a party of freedoms – political, economic, social, individual and collective freedoms.[30] Similar to the MoDem, there are links to humanism and the significance of civil society. Typical for the political centre is the goal to create a "reconciled France" in order to overcome the current challenges and at the same time promote and recognise the opportunities and talents of individuals.

Their policy regarding Europe aims to strengthen the EU beyond a common market; the vision of the "United States of Europe" should not be pursued for the time being, although it is desirable. LC fight against social dumping with their demand for a successively adjusting, but at first country-specific minimum wage.[31] The party sees Europe as a common space that needs to be jointly protected from outside forces and stabilised internally, both in economic and migration matters. It makes the case for a "two-speed Europe", e.g. the creation of a joint energy policy and a financially and strategically independent European government.

According to information provided by them, LC have approx. 8,000 members and approx. 2,000 local mandates. The two LC deputies in the National Assembly first belonged to the UDI group in 2017, but then co-founded the Libertés et Territoires group in 2018. In the Senate, the nine LC members belong to the Union Centriste.

Mouvement Radical – Torn between Left and Right

The traditional Parti Radical is currently inactive. Split into a Mouvement Radical – social – libéral and a Parti Radical de Gauche, it is yet another example for how strong an impact the bipolarisation in the Fifth Republic has on French parties and how it virtually forces the allocation to a specific camp. This caused the oldest French party to also split in 1972 due to the issue of alliance with either Socialists or Gaullists, only to resurface as Mouvement Radical – social – libéral in 2017. However, this unity did not last – the Parti Radical de Gauche left the Mouvement only a few months after its foundation to avoid an alliance with LREM; but many former members, even entire local federations, remained in the MR.

[29] Cf. Belaubre, Nicolas: Européennes: Jean-Christophe Lagarde détaille à Toulouse le programme de la liste UDI, in: lejournaltoulousain.fr, 06/05/2019, URL: https://www.lejournaltoulousain.fr/politique/europeennes-jean-chrisophe-lagarde-detaille-a-toulouse-le-programme-de-la-liste-udi-64856/ [viewed on 08/11/2020].
[30] Cf. Les Centristes: Le Mouvement, in: Les-centristes.fr, undated, URL: http://www.les-centristes.fr/le-mouvement [viewed on 08/11/2020].
[31] Cf. Les Centristes: La motion: Pour une europe des territoires, in: Les-centristes.fr, undated, URL: http://www.les-centristes.fr/la-motion-pour-une-europe-des-territoires [viewed on 08/11/2020].

Today, the party has one minister and one state secretary and is not represented in the National Assembly with its own group; the MR deputies can be found in the groups Libertés et Territoires, Agir ensemble and LREM. The eleven senators of the MR are distributed across the Union Centriste, the Rassemblement Démocratique et social européen and the République et Territoires; the only Member of the European Parliament is part of the liberal-centrist group Renew Europe.

The Parti Radical Valoisien, which now continues to exist as MR, had been part of the UDF for many years, though it kept on losing its political significance over the years. Only when it became the founding member of the UMP in 2002 and entered the conservative majority did the party see a glimmer of hope, although not for long.[32] The party chairman at the time, Jean-Louis Borloo, had initially been full of verve as a charismatic minister from 2007 to 2010. After the party's breaking away from the alliance with the UMP, the end of Sarkozy's government and its switchover to an opposition party, Borloo prevented the PR from becoming completely insignificant as a lone fighter by forming the UDI. Both Borloo and Bayrou had been regarded as potential centrist presidential candidates from 2012, but Borloo had to leave active politics for health reasons. For now, any hope for a "radical" upturn faded with him. On the left, the PRG had been an ally of the Hollande government from 2012 and put forth ministers after the party had already taken part in the left-wing primaries with one of its own candidates.

The Radicals – both left and right – see themselves as the most republican of all parties and therefore as representatives of the key values *liberté – égalité – fraternité*: The individual fundamental freedoms are mentioned first, which also include individuals' economic freedoms. However, large enterprises are held liable as well. The equality principle implies for the MR the right to equal opportunities and the active fight against discrimination. On the other hand, social policies are established both on the principle of fraternity and on humanism, whose goal is social justice. This is used to arrive at an economic programme based on solidarity and aiming for social equity, which nonetheless supports a free market. Moreover, the Radicals see themselves as guarantors of secularism. At the European level, they strive towards a federal system and a balance between economic and social interests. The reliance on humanist values and their interpretation, in particular, makes the Radicals a typical centrist party: They stand for public intervention that is not guided by ideologies, while also standing against populism, sectarianism and ideological battles. The MR demands better separation of powers, stronger decentralisation and more citizen participation.[33]

Alliance Centriste – Macron's Last-Second Friends

The Alliance Centriste, founded in 2009, is also a result of the major changes in the French political centre in the course of the 2007 Presidential Elections. Like the other players, most of its (founding) members and high-ranking officials come from the former UDF and had supported François Bayrou on his path to the centre's independence.

Although the Alliance had some dignitaries, especially senators, right from the start, it had not been able to gain any party-political significance as an UMP ally until 2012. In 2012, it supported François Bayrou's presidential campaign only to become a founding member of the UDI shortly thereafter. While it was first considered to have its own Alliance Centriste candidate, Jean Arthuis, run in the *primaires de droite* for the 2017 Presidential Elections, this option quickly became obsolete. Arthuis himself decided very early on to support Emmanuel Macron[34] – which was at first contrary to the official party line: The Alliance initially supported François Fillon, only to turn to Macron in the spring of 2017, unlike the UDI, which caused them to leave the UDI. However, not all Alliance members and elected officials followed this line, so that many remained in the UDI as direct members. The Alliance benefitted from its support of Macron thanks to an electoral alliance during the legislative elections and has since been regarded as a faithful ally in the majority; their deputies belong to the LREM group and thus to the government majority. The only senator, the party chairman Philippe Folliot, is a member of the Union Centriste. The proximity to LREM also shows in the party's self-portrayal; contrary to its staid image as a party of dignitaries, it attempts to present itself as a start-up and citizens' movement. In the 2019 European Parliament Elections, an Alliance candidate competed on the LREM Renaissance list.

The Alliance party programme has many similarities to other centrist parties, particularly the former UDI members. As centre droite, the party currently emphasises its closeness to LREM and stays true to the typical centrist credos of pro-European attitudes, "humanism", "openness and willingness for dialogue". Under the keywords *"libérer"* (liberate) and *"protéger"* (protect), the Alliance makes its aspiration for a liberation and more engagement, inventiveness and entrepreneurship well known as well as, at the same time, the protection of individuals and a closer economic and social dialogue.[35]

[32] Contrary to Démocratie libérale, the Parti Radical was not merged with the UMP, but continued to exist as an organisationally independent component of the Union.
[33] Cf. Mouvement Radical: Déclaration politique, in: lemouvementradical.fr, 09/12/2017, URL: http://lemouvementradical.fr/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/MRSL_DeclarationPolitique.pdf; PRG: Le programme, in: partiradicaldegauche.fr, undated, URL: https://www.partiradicaldegauche.fr/le-programme/ [both viewed on 08/11/2020].
[34] He has left the Alliance in the meantime and is now a member of LREM.
[35] Cf. Alliance Centriste: Nos valeurs, in: allliancecentriste.fr, undated, URL: http://www.alliancecentriste.fr/nos-valeurs/ [viewed on 08/11/2020].

Agir – between the Centre and the Républicains

Agir, la droite constructive, is the youngest party that can be positioned in the French centre, whereby this allocation is due to the composition of its representatives and its constructive alliance strategy with LREM.[36] Its official foundation charter made it clear that it follows the tradition of and is close to the former UMP, i.e. that it positions itself in the *centre droite* or *centre progressiste*[37]; in the public eye, the party mainly consists of Républicains who changed to the acting president's camp and represent the programmatic course of a moderate right à la Alain Juppé or the former prime minister Edouard Philippe, without becoming members of LREM. The creation of the new party in connection with an independent group in the National Assembly is, in particular, a reaction to the Républicains' shift to the right under the chairmanship of Laurent Wauquiez. An independent Agir group in the Parliament as part of the *majorité présidentielle* resulted from the split of the group UDI, Agir et Indépendants in May 2020 into a pro-government camp and an opposition camp. The parliamentary group thus also includes former members of the LR group, UDI members, some former LREM deputies as well as other scattered moderate politicians of both camps and of the centre.[38] The six senators who side with Agir sit in the groups of the Indépendants and LREM. With Franck Riester, the party at least has one minister from among its ranks in the Castex government.

In its self-portrayal, Agir describes itself as pro-European, liberal and humanist, and as part of the centre (right). The party commits itself to a liberal economic approach with a social touch. To alleviate social hardships and inequalities, it calls for market regulation, but combined with a high level of personal responsibility. It strives for a social reform and a reform of the welfare state, without specifying any concrete details. Agir desires nothing less than a new foundation of Europe, which it regards as an important component of the national security architecture. It wants a "multi-speed Europe", enabling all countries to give up as much sovereignty as they wish.[39] Before the European Parliament Elections, the overlaps in the agendas of Agir and LREM about European policies were highlighted in particular; the parties competed together on the Renaissance list, and the elected MEP belongs to Renew Europe.

Interim Conclusion

The brief analysis of the centrist parties listed makes clear that they have a common set of values, which can be summarised with the keywords humanism, Europe, liberalism in various forms and decentralisation. There are some apparent nuances, e.g. in the significance afforded to social (democratic) and liberal economic ideas and the way in which they are shaped, as well as in socio-political issues. These differences are also founded in history, i.e. whether the parties can be allocated to the Radicals or to the Christian Democrats. The paths taken by the aforementioned parties and/or their predecessors have often crossed in the Fifth Republic and had been organisationally interwoven via the UDF for nearly thirty years, as shown in the following figure. This makes the current differences in organisation (elitist party of dignitaries, member party or the attempt of a movement/start-up) as well as the factual political significance all the more obvious. However, in the past years, the latter results less from the performance of the parties themselves in the elections and more from their alliance policy as well as the existence of charismatic party leaders. At the moment, their political weight depends on their relationship with LREM – as it was in the past, their alliance policy tends to be the key to their political significance. The closeness to the Républicains was terminated for the time being by almost all centrist players, apart from Les Centristes, due to the weakness of LR, but also due to the former ally's shift to the right and in the hope for a unified French centre.

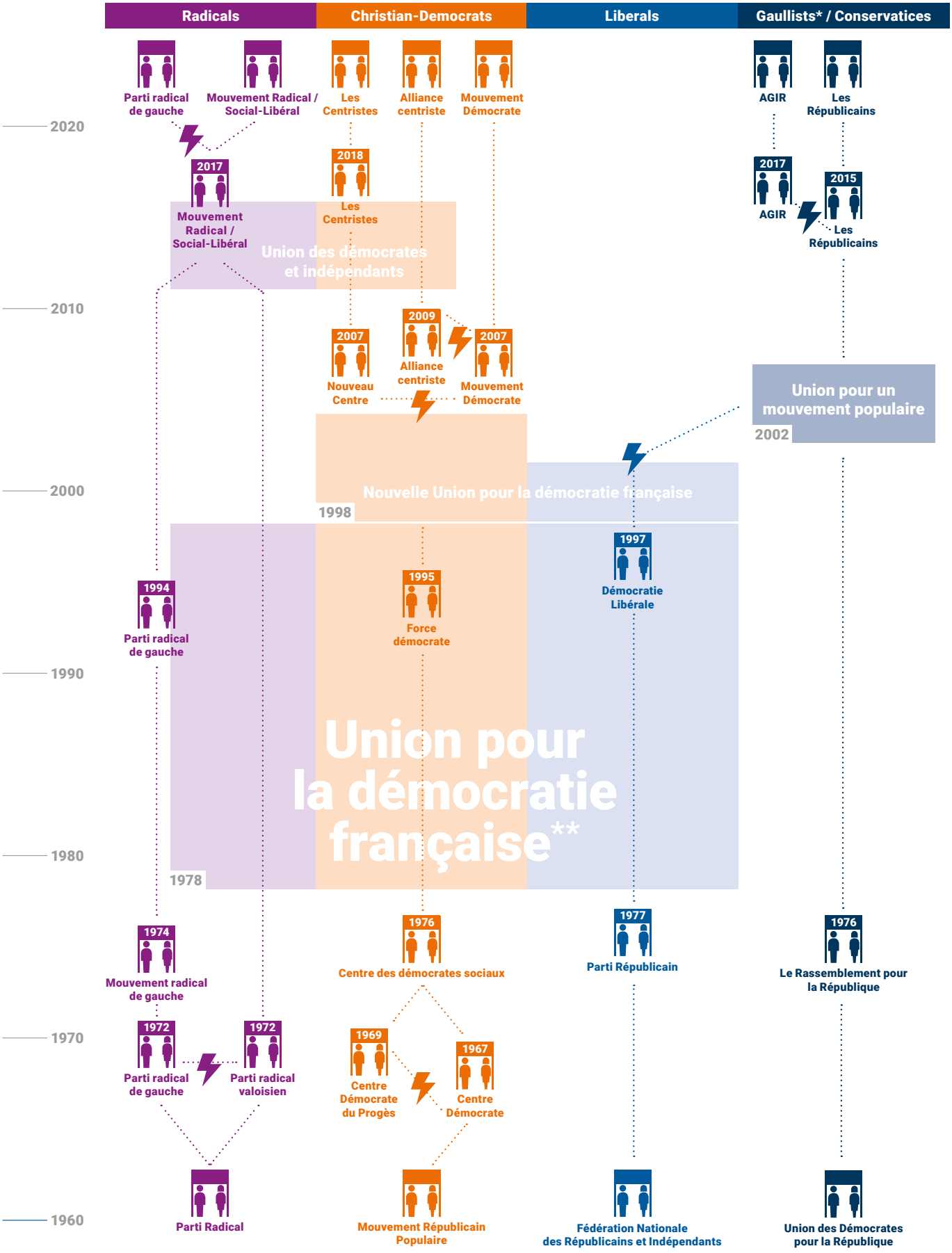
[36] In the winter of 2020, a similar small party formed with Territoires de progrès – Mouvement social-démocrate et européen to the left of the centre and from the substance of the PS. It is the political home of e.g. the numerous former Socialists who joined Macron's government or wish to support LREM in the Parliament without joining (only) LREM.

[37] Cf. Mourgue, Marion: "Agir, la droite constructive", une nouvelle force politique à droite, in: lefigaro.fr, 26/11/2017, URL: https://www.lefigaro.fr/politique/2017/11/26/01002-20171126ARTFIG00022-agir-la-droite-constructive-une-nouvelle-force-politique-a-droite.php [viewed on 08/11/2020].

[38] The foundation of the group Agir ensemble with former members of the LREM group resulted in LREM losing its absolute majority in the National Assembly and thus becoming more heavily reliant on its various allies.

[39] Cf. Agir: Agir autour d'un projet de société, in: agir-ladroiteconstructive.fr, undated, URL: https://agir-ladroiteconstructive.fr/nos-idees/ [viewed on 08/11/2020].

Fig. 6 | Overview of the centrist parties in France since the Fifth Republic



* For the sake of clarity, only simplified and relevant information for the political centrist parties in France is displayed here
** Other members of DF were direct members and further micro parties

Source: own representation

And Macron?

LREM – the President's Start-Up

Emmanuel Macron won his office not only with a centrist strategy which had been deemed to hold little promise in the past, but also with the help of an organisational basis that had never existed before in France. The foundation of the En Marche! movement in the spring of 2016 created a momentum that carried the President to office and gave him a parliamentary majority.

The approx. 400,000 *Marcheurs*, as the LREM members call themselves, are the official heart of the movement. Membership is free of charge and can be applied for online. This means that LREM probably has the broadest basis of party members in France; it is hard to draw parallels to the other parties, particularly centrist parties. Members typically play a minor role in the traditional centrist parties; this only changed with the formation of the MoDem and the loss of many established dignitaries to other centrist parties.

What is remarkable about En Marche! is that the movement is different from both classic political parties and civil society organisations, but has typical characteristics of movement parties.[40] It is more like a start-up, which is reflected in its organisational structure. Parity is of major importance on all levels when filling party posts.

Only when the charter was changed in the autumn of 2019 was the internal party structure, limiting the individual members to acting on the local level, opened up to more intra-party democracy. Indeed, the *marcheurs en colère* and the group *La démocratie en marche* had previously voiced their critique on the fact that there had been hardly any opportunities for ordinary members to present their ideas and suggestions to the next higher level. Furthermore, internal positions had been filled mainly via co-opting and delegation. The persons affected often had no say in the selection of people in leadership roles at the various levels.[41] And even today, after a charter reform, the En Marche! organisational structure is still very different from typical member-based parties with their pyramidal bottom-up structures, numerous intermediary bodies and the opportunity to slowly climb the ladder by doing a lot of political work. There seems to be little intra-party bureaucracy at LREM; many members of various bodies are represented there qua mandate. LREM is controlled by the party headquarters in Paris and a lot of the power is concentrated in Macron himself.

Regarding its programme, LREM is very close to the *catch-all party* model, as there is no ideological grounding of the work. The common denominator is its creator Emmanuel Macron and the desire to support and establish him and his politics at a local level. The LREM members serve as a pool of talent, as election campaigners and, where required, as an idea factory. And although the focus is on work "on the ground" in the small local committees, rhetorically speaking, it is still a highly centralised and highly professional project aimed to secure the presidency and the President's re-election. The party programme is the President's programme.

As a result, the party not only succeeded in achieving an unexpected victory in the election for Macron, but also in becoming the largest group in the National Assembly. This group houses many political newcomers, who had been chosen for candidacy beforehand by an intra-party commission. Some former members of other parties entered the National Assembly under the LREM label as well, after they had promised to support Macron in the run-up to the elections. So far, however, the governments under Macron have been composed of professional politicians from different parties and a few newcomers from other career paths – by no means all ministers are members of LREM or had been recruited from within the movement.

The President's Realm of Ideas

"Comme De Gaulle, je choisis le meilleur de la gauche, le meilleur de la droite, et même le meilleur du centre!" ("Like de Gaulle, I choose the best of the left, the best of the right and the best of the centre!"). With this statement made a few days before the first ballot, Emmanuel Macron made his intentions clear. Despite his relatively young age and his attitude of wanting to wipe the board clean and change everything, this statement connected him and his campaign to the former French President Charles de Gaulle, who strongly personified the tradition of France and the Fifth Republic. And at least when it comes to the composition of the governments, Macron managed to keep this promise. But what exactly is his political agenda? After all, Macron does not explicitly evoke to the tradition of a party family, but rather employs a broad eclecticism with one major goal: a progressive turn of French politics to more optimism and a social change towards a strong and modern France. In terms of style, Macron's way of doing politics can be characterised best with his own term *"en même temps"*, i.e. the simultaneity of different measures, but also ideas and values.

The classification of Macron's political line is relatively undisputed at least in two topics: European integration and his relationship with the far-right. Already before his election, he had drawn attention with his international, pro-European

[40] Cf. Priester, Karin: Bewegungsparteien auf der Suche nach mehr Demokratie: La France insoumise, En marche, die Fünf-Sterne-Bewegung, in: Forschungsjournal Soziale Bewegungen, vol. 31 (2018), issue 1-2, pp. 60-67.
[41] Cf. Choffat, Thierry: Le „macronisme" et la fin des partis traditionnels?, in: Civitas Europa, issue 2/2017, pp. 161-179.
[42] Sabado, Elsa: "LREM : un système néogaulliste, quasi militaire", in: *Médiapart*, 29/07/2019, URL: https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/290717/lrem-un-systeme-neogaulliste-quasi-militaire?onglet=full [viewed on 08/11/2020].

politics that highlighted the strong Franco-German ties. His call for a new foundation of Europe, which remained more or less without response thanks to, amongst others, the quarrels surrounding the formation of a German government, was a strong sign for his ambitions to make the EU project future-proof and protect it from opponents to the European idea. Most recently, he again called for a (more) political Europe which should become aware of its international role and strength and make itself more independent from the international competition – not least in order to secure Europe's special profile and the rights of its citizens.[43] This pro-European stance, described by some as radical, or visionary by others, enabled Macron to form alliances with the centrist parties. Moreover, he opened a door for pro-European voters and politicians of other parties who were no longer willing to accept the Euroscepticism prevalent in all established parties. With this clear stance, Macron positioned himself at the progressive end of an axis running across the entire left-(more state)-right-(more market)-scale, which contrasts social liberalism/universalism with authoritarianism/nationalism. His voters and his allies come from that group which had always voted for pro-European initiatives right from the early 1990s (from referenda about the Maastricht Treaty up to the Constitution for Europe), but had not yet found a joint political home. This stance in connection with his explicitly expressed socially liberal values (he supports e.g. gay marriage) made him the obvious antipode to the far-right Front National in the election campaign. His explicit reference to human rights and his rejection of exclusion are proof for this, although his policy regarding illegal immigrants to France was revised to include a hard line when it comes to asylum-seekers, which has partly been implemented. At any rate, the explicit rejection of extremism and hateful ideologies makes Macron attractive to many people who regarded this as the key issue in the elections. In that sense, Macron is the socially liberal counterpart to politicians such as Viktor Orbán and his "illiberal democracy".

Macron described his ideas of a social and economic model in his book "Révolution": They seem economically liberal, as can be derived e.g. from the calls for tax breaks for enterprises, room for entrepreneurial freedom and less social security contributions. They can be summarised by the terms "liberalisation, more flexibility and improvement of the business environment".[44] However, one social aspect comes forward as well: the goals of reducing social inequality while protecting the most vulnerable in society. At the same time, Macron makes no secret of his criticism of the current form of social market economy, which he calls degenerate and neither able to address current challenges such as climate change nor provide an answer to social disruptions caused by globalisation.[45] Macron, who used to be a socialist government minister and a PS member for a few years to boot, thus seemed to identify with the tradition of "Rocardism", i.e. a French variety of social democracy with a liberal touch.[46] So it initially seemed that he did for France what had been attempted as new Third Ways in England under Tony Blair and in Germany under Gerhard Schröder, only at a later stage. Macron seemed to harmonise social values and liberal economic ideas.

However, in the public eye, these beliefs did initially not result in many words and deeds after the election; instead, an economically liberal and employer-friendly reform programme was launched with a thriving economy in mind and with the goal of securing and creating jobs. While some praise his voluntarist approach of tackling various reforms and highlight the related improved competitiveness, others accuse Macron of doing politics for the rich, i.e. of being a *"Président des riches"*, given his focus on economic policy at the start of his presidency. The wealth tax reform is only the most striking example; a *flat tax* on capital income or the reduction of housing benefits and social housing as well as the reform of the labour code at the expense of labour rights take a similar direction. His provocative rhetoric, e.g. that unemployed people can find jobs everywhere, shows the intention to make the individual responsible for both their success and their failure. He thus opens a social line of conflict between those who are successful and those who (apparently due to their own failings) live in precarious situations.[47] The promised balance between business-friendly and employee-friendly measures is yet to be achieved for the many people who were hoping that their situation would be improved by social security and not by market-based measures. It is therefore hardly surprising that, following an eco-tax and a resultant petrol price increase in 2018, a social movement came into being with the *gilets jaunes* ("yellow vests") which, according to the "people left behind", had remained unheard by French politics for way too long, particularly outside the big cities. The reforms of France's state-owned railway company SNCF and of the pension scheme also caused massive protests and strikes.

The French understanding of an economically liberal attitude that supports the market and enterprises would place a person or party showing such an attitude clearly in the right wing – particularly as an opposition to the socialist left. Macron has supported this tendency, e.g. through the selection of his prime ministers. While the moderate-right Édouard Philippe led the first two governments, the current Prime Minister Jean Castex is close to former president Nicolas Sarkozy and represents a traditional rural France. His stance as a Gaullist with a social streak is a good choice for the upcoming balancing act between mitigating the consequences of COVID-19 and a liberal economic policy. Many observers agree that Macron has taken a liberal-conservative path to secure his re-election in 2022. The attempt to now court votes specifically from among conservatives and not from the modera-

[43] Cf. no author given: Die Macron-Doktrin: Ein Gespräch mit dem französischen Staatspräsidenten, in: internationalepolitik.de, 16/11/2020, URL: https://internationalepolitik.de/de/die-macron-doktrin-ein-gespraech-mit-dem-franzoesischen-staatspraesidenten [viewed on 17/11/2020].

[44] Uterwedde, Henrik: Wirtschafts- und Sozialreformen. Inhalte, Erfolge und Grenzen der Macron-Methode, Deutsch-Französisches Institut: Frankreich Jahrbuch 2018, Wiesbaden 2019, pp. 93-110, here p. 96.

[45] Cf. no author given: Die Macron-Doktrin, l.c.

[46] The term "Rocardism" is derived from the name of the politician and former prime minister Michel Rocard, who stood for a social democratic, reformist and anti-communist line as a member of the Parti Socialiste.

[47] Cf. Pinçon, Michel/Pinçon-Charlot Monique: Le président des ultra-riches, Paris 2019.

tes of *all camps* could be in line with an underlying sentiment that has been prevalent in society for quite some time – more and more people opt for the right instead of the left.[48] Indeed, this trend goes against the 2017 Election, when Macron won his presidency not least by the votes of traditional centre-left voters. Apart from this change of strategy in regard to the core target group, when he selected his second Prime Minister, made it perfectly clear that he would not be making the ecological zeitgeist, which was reflected in good election results for the Greens, a part of his government policy. And: In spite of everything, he has followed his socio-political line until this day by pursuing liberalising reforms, e.g. when it comes to artificial insemination.

Contrary to all accusations, Macron has indeed taken socio-political measures during his term in office, which were hardly noticed by the public. At least until the gilets jaunes protests, he was less about distributing generous welfare benefits, but rather pursued individual support and equal opportunities for all.[49] Macron's socio-political ideas thus match his more fundamental liberal convictions, which put the individual's personal initiative in the forefront. After the *gilets jaunes*, Macron made some of his reforms more social and has made attempts to be more in touch with the people. The immediate response was a series of expensive measures to increase the lower middle-class's purchasing power. In addition, Macron started a *Grand Débat National* (Great National Debate) to counter the citizens' feeling of their voices not being heard. Motions drawn up by a *Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat* (Citizens' Convention on Climate) have recently been included in laws on the matter of sustainability;[50] the government has announced that this type of participation will be supported long-term.

Another U-turn Macron and his government were forced to take came as a result of the COVID-19 crisis: The goal of getting a grip on national debt had been pushed into the background already after the *gilets jaunes* protests, and has now finally fallen victim to crisis management. Numerous state aid measures are intended to mitigate the economic and social impact of the crisis. The visibly positive changes to economic data proved to be a flash in the pan when the COVID-19 pandemic broke out and led to rapidly increasing unemployment figures and a slumping economic performance. While Macron had entered the political stage fully in line with his economically liberal beliefs and the idea of a lean state, this has changed since the COVID crisis started. This is reflected e.g. in the creation of a *Haut-Commissariats du Plan*, which is responsible for considering long-term social developments when public decisions are being planned. As in Germany, the French government is now also attempting to mitigate the consequences of the pandemic "at all cost". This is a Herculean task: This is about nothing less than reducing social inequality, finding a way to overcome the mistrust in the state, counteracting the rejection of political leaders and parties and mitigating the general dissatisfaction and scepticism towards politics that are spreading in the population.

Macron regards a body politic reform as a good starting point. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, he has been stressing that the centralised state needs to undergo a far-reaching reorganisation and restructuring, and more responsibilities must be delegated to the local level. He believes that parts of the Paris central administration should be spread across the entire country. Another aspect is the modernisation of public administration.[51] It should be closer to the people – also geographically – which was an important result of the Grand Débat National in which many citizens complained that they were no longer able to visit local administrative offices to complete their everyday administrative requirements after many of them had been closed.

To ensure that his reform plans are accepted by the people, Macron depends on La République en Marche, the movement he founded. But what kind of organisation is it, and what does it stand for?

A Passion for Europe – but Which One?

Since the 1990s, the whole "Europe" topic has become the main cleavage, or ideological wedge issue, in France's political landscape. For many years, it has mainly been a point of contention across the established parties, who had always been divided, e.g. in referenda about the Maastricht Treaty or the EU Constitution. Only the centrist parties had been entirely pro-European. Accordingly, it is not only a political novelty that a President is governing because he had engaged in an explicitly pro-European election campaign, it is also a new phenomenon to see that several (small) pro-European centrist parties are competing against each other and opting for different strategies.

These strategies are not only manifested in the decision for or against joint electoral lists, but also in the choice of the European Parliament group. One particularly remarkable occurrence in the run-up to the 2019 European Parliament Elections was that the UDI had not opted for the LREM-led Renaissance list, although the former and traditional allies from MoDem, MR and Agir were included. Contrary to Les Centristes, who formed a joint list with the Républicains, the UDI decided to go it alone. This is all the more astonishing as it would have ended up – if it entered the European Parliament – in the same group as the other French centrist parties who campaigned together.

This begs the questions: what are the reasons for these three different strategies? And how did their election campaigns differ with regard to their contents?

[48] Cf. Rouban, l.c.
[49] Cf. Uterwedde, l.c., here p. 100.
[50] Cf. https://www.conventioncitoyennepourleclimat.fr/ [viewed on 29/11/2020].
[51] Cf. Kempin, Ronja/Rehbaum, Dominik: Emmanuel Macrons „neuer Weg", in: SWP aktuell, no. 67, 09/2020, URL: https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/aktuell/2020A67_Macron.pdf [viewed on 08/11/2020].

In his speech at the Sorbonne, where he expounded his ideas of Europe, Emmanuel Macron made a clear statement in favour of a stronger, more democratic and more innovative Europe, first by calling for a joint euro zone budget in connection with a European finance minister. This budget, as envisaged by Macron, would be funded from a common corporate tax. He also suggested a common defence policy with a joint budget and a unified asylum policy. Moreover, Macron called for a more harmonised tax policy, e.g. regarding the taxation of internet giants, and joint initiatives for an economic policy that promotes innovation. The LREM and MoDem election campaign programme for the 2019 European Parliament Elections Renaissance list focused on slightly different aspects:[52] sustainability, a common digital tax, strengthening women's rights and more exchange via an Erasmus programme for broader target groups, not only students. It becomes clear overall that the visionary calls for a united Europe, which Macron had expressed in his role as head of government, have a different dimension than the aspirations of the Renaissance list. At the same time, they do not contradict each other, as Macron, with his Europe-wide call for a European Renaissance, had laid the foundation for the joint project of LREM and MoDem and, shortly thereafter, other French centrist parties.

Jean-Christophe Lagarde, UDI party chairman and leading candidate in the European Parliament Elections, had explained the different course taken by his party by saying that the President's Renaissance project did not go far enough.[53] Although he supported Macron's Europe agenda, he did not think it would be sufficient to make Europe an international power. He calls for a federal Europe and a far-reaching transformation. He wants to maintain the free intra-European market, but protect it from ultra-liberal outgrowth. The EU should gain strength and power vis-à-vis its most important partners in the international system and protect the Community's key values from external influences. Various responsibilities should be delegated to European ministries in strategically relevant areas such as economic and asylum policy.[54] Given the fact that the programmes of the different centrist parties show many similarities in key aspects with regard to Europe, it is easy to come to the conclusion that Lagarde also had strategic reasons for going it alone:[55] From his point of view, a uniform pro-European list would widen the disparities between pro-European and anti-European actors even more and give priority to this conflict over the discussion about specific reform proposals and thus reproduce the second ballot of the Presidential Elections between a progressive pro-European centre and the anti-Europe far-right. This would make the European Parliament Elections ultimately a vote on Macron and his policies, which would not do them justice.

Contrary to the other centrist parties, Les Centristes have remained faithful to their alliance with the Républicains, including when it comes to European policy making. The possibility of filling two promising places on the list was probably one reason for that. With regard to the agenda, the alliance strategy is substantiated by highlighting that European policies must be clear and foresighted, not naive – which can best be achieved by the Républicains. The first key aspect is the management of external borders and the attempt to get (illegal) immigration under control by means of a "Marshall Plan" for Africa.[56]

Interim Conclusion: New Players in the Centre?

When examining the rhetoric, alliance strategies and programmatic eclecticism, there is hardly any doubt that France is governed by a centrist president in the centre. Although Macron and his movement are not part of the traditional centrist party families, they share some of their agenda. This is supported by the fact that the traditional centrist representatives acknowledge LREM as a legitimate ally and Macron as the leader of their common causes. Macron's strategy did indeed include quite a few aspects of Bayrou's 2007 election campaign, with which Bayrou was able to gain many votes utilising a centrist strategy and a hors-système (outside the system) positioning. However, one difference could have been found in the shape of the centrist path: While Bayrou presented himself as a lone wolf and claimed to be neither left nor right, Macron attempted to create a synthesis of left, centre and right. Macron's Third Way thus follows the tradition of various centrist players who had been committed to policy-making across the political camps, to distancing themselves from extremism and to engaging in a certain criticism of ideologies. So far, his attempts to give a social touch to his liberal economic policy and thus follow the tradition of social democratic Third Ways have been restricted to theory.

Nevertheless, polls show that Macron, of all politicians in France, is the most likely to be described as the most important representative of liberalism. At the same time, many supporters of the political left consider his policies too liberal, and many supporters of the political right think they are not *liberal enough* – at least according to a survey, which failed to clearly define the term "liberal" and apparently left its interpretation to those questioned.[57] This shows once again how the French generally understand the term "liberal" – it is first and foremost an *economically* liberal position. A closer look at Macron's political positions, however, reveals a more nuanced picture: By focusing on issues in his rhetoric

[52] Renaissance: En marche pour l'Europe,
URL: https://storage.googleapis.com/en-marche-fr/pole_idees/Programme%20Renaissance%20E%CC%81lections%20europe%CC%81ennes.pdf [viewed on 08/11/2020].
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[55] Cf. e.g. Boichot, Loris: Pour qui voter le 26 mai ? Comparez les programmes des candidats, in: lefigaro.fr, 09/05/2019,
URL: https://www.lefigaro.fr/assets/infographie/print/fixem/INF_HTML/propositions_europeennes_2019/ [viewed on 08/11/2020].
[56] http://www.les-centristes.fr/notre-motion-pour-une-alliance-avec-les-r%C3%A9publicains [viewed on 08/11/2020].
[57] Cf. Ifop: Les Français et le libéralisme, l.c.

that do not fit into the typical French left/right dichotomy, he escapes, as it were, a positioning in this spectrum. It is not far-fetched to classify him as liberal and progressive at a cultural and value level and thus traditionally as rather (moderate) left, given his attitude towards e.g. artificial insemination for all women (i.e. including lesbian couples and single women) or equality between men and women as well as same-sex couples. The profile of his voters in 2017 confirms this perception. On the other hand, his business-friendly and market-oriented economic policy would make him more of a right-wing politician. This persisting confusion about the ideological classification is also reflected in the aforementioned survey, according to which 19% of respondents agreed that LREM should describe itself as liberal, 17% would say social-liberal, 14% would say centrist and 10% would say social democratic.[58] Overall, it seems that Macron thus managed a social-liberal balancing act between, or a creation of an amalgamation of economically and socially liberal values, which is atypical for the political landscape and at least challenging for his own political future.

[58] Cf. ibidem

France, Quo Vadis?

Overall, the 2017 Elections constituted a focal point in the French party system's development, and the consequences cannot yet be definitively ascertained. The current legislative period indeed seems like a transition phase, at the end of which it will be decided what is to be the fate of the established parties and what key issues, or *cleavages*, future elections will be about.

Macron's surprising victory and the pull effect his movement has on moderates and civil society, the crumbling of the Parti Socialiste, the power struggles within the Républicains, the Greens' return to the political stage as well as the strength of the two extremes show the dynamism the French political structures currently have. After decades of stability in which two almost equally strong camps with one stronger and one weaker player had divided the power between them, this system frequently described as *"bipartisme imparfait"* (imperfect bi-partisan system, Grunberg) was challenged and questioned from 2002 at the latest, when the Front National gained influence. While the Socialists had not been able to modernise themselves in nearly five decades and are paying for it today at a national level with fear for their very existence, the former Gaullists have shed their skin so many times over the years to now find themselves, reduced to their conservative-national core, in the weakest position they had for a long time. Both former ruling parties are now in the throes of a battle between moderation and radicalisation, and the traditional rules of engagement are challenged by the polarisation of political life. While François Hollande, a moderate socialist, a social democrat, was elected President in 2012, the ideological hardliners among the parties' members and supporters triumphed in the 2017 *primaires*. However, the candidates so elected were not able to compete with the "originals" of the respective extremes; at the same time, they were hardly an option for the moderates of both camps, the centrists and the distant ones.

Emmanuel Macron filled this gap. Presenting himself as a non-partisan candidate from outside the system, he managed to shake up the existing system. It should not be forgotten, however, how little votes he effectively got in the first ballot, and how few of them he obtained because he had convinced people. One of the main reasons why Macron won this election is the Republican rationality of *vote utile* ("tactical voting", i.e. motivated by reason, not ideology) to prevent other candidates from winning, in connection with the *"ras-le-bol"* (fed up) sentiment many French people harbour towards the established parties' representatives. Many people did not vote for Macron for his agenda, which was thin anyway, but as the lesser evil. The question is what he and his party will make of this extraordinary opportunity, which they took with skill and clever politics. Because: Third Ways are nothing unusual in France, particularly in times of crisis,. What is far less common is the ability to maintain this strategy beyond one success at a certain point and to make it long-term. The last person who achieved it was Charles de Gaulle, who was a sort of cross-party father of the nation in 1958, in the middle of one of the biggest crises the French Republic had ever faced. Unlike Macron, neither de Gaulle nor the Gaullists came out of nowhere. But from this perspective, it is quite understandable why Emmanuel Macron time and again tries to invoke a link to the founder of the Fifth Republic when he puts his policy into a large context.

Time will tell whether Macron and LREM will be able to permanently occupy the space in the middle and enrich the French centre with new and progressive ideas. At any rate, the fact that Macron cleverly occupied a political void in the middle does not mean that he and his party will remain there. A lot will depend on the development of the established parties LR and PS, and on the question of whether they will leave the space left and right of the centre permanently unoccupied. Moreover, the question of whether the Macron government will actually successively shift to the right to appeal to a liberal-conservative audience in the next elections remains unanswered. And not least, the lack of community ties could still turn out to be a problem for LREM, as was proved by the local elections.

However, it has already become apparent that the polarisation between a self-declared "morally good" centre, whose politics address those of higher income who profiteer from globalisation, and the representatives of the far left and right, whose political programme is represented as immoral by the centrists, could endanger democracy itself. Many citizens who cannot identify with the LREM agenda and/or simply cannot afford to do so due to their precarious social situation could thus be led into the hands of the extreme parties. It is not without reason that the electoral geography of Macron and Le Pen corresponds to a map of France's poor and the rich, the winners and losers of globalisation. This polarisation could be contained especially if the party-political players reposition themselves between LREM and Rassemblement National and/or La France Insoumise and recover.

The 2020 Local Elections at least point towards the possibility that both camps have not yet entirely lost their traditional community ties. They also show that the Greens of EELV are still contenders given the increasingly pressing issue of climate change. It has also become apparent that LREM and EELV are fighting for similar voters. Due to their dissatisfaction with Macron's politics, they have turned to a new alternative, the Greens, a phenomenon experienced by François Bayrou in 2009, when his voters in the 2007 Presidential Elections turned to the Greens in huge numbers in the European Parliament Elections two years later. Although Macron has made clear by selecting Jean Castex as the new Prime Minister that he is currently not considering an alliance strategy involving the Greens, this could be a promising way to stabilise the still fragile LREM voter base.

A second general question raised by Macron's election, the success of the LREM movement and the *gilets jaunes* and the Great National Debate is about a re-valuation of civil society and participatory instruments in the democratic process. After decades of politics where party elephants (as party veterans who have forever shared offices are called in France) and now static parties shared the power, only occasionally bothered by ritualised protests and labour disputes of the established trade unions, something has apparently changed in the democratic process. Especially since En Marche! was founded, political commitment is being done differently, at a lower threshold and more modern. Other parties are even trying to imitate LREM's start-up and movement nature. Protests have changed as well; it seems that unions have lost their monopoly in political battles. The yellow vest protests, which were rather decentralised and unorganised, have shown that civil society can organise itself and form an opinion on its own. However, it remains to be seen whether the participatory opportunities which were promised following the wave of protests, will become permanently established.

Macron's election can thus also be seen as an opportunity and a wake-up call for a political system stuck in a rut in which mistrust and dissatisfaction dominated, the parties had hardly been truly representing the country's citizens for a long time, the political representatives, with their *langue de bois* ("wooden language", as the political register is called in France) had long since failed to strike the right note and the existing way to get involved in politics seemed outdated to many. Emmanuel Macron can already take credit for that. Whether he will succeed in leading France through the COVID crisis and its consequences, overcoming the numerous other challenges and completing his ambitious reforms for modernising the country is a different matter entirely.

About the author

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