

## Bleak outlook for more democracy in France

Two months in, the presidency of Emmanuel Macron has him welcoming Donald Trump to Paris to celebrate the beginning of a war instead of bringing the people back into politics. So far, his administration does not look good for citizen participation.

The playwright Molière's works always ended with a “deus ex machina”, a mechanical God who solved the characters' problems and made a happy ending for the theatre stage. President Macron's political victory seems similar to this literary metaphor.

In the last **parliamentary election**, Macron's “En Marche” party won the first overwhelming majority of the Fifth Republic (established by the constitution of Charles de Gaulle in 1958). The National Assembly was renewed with 75% of parliamentarians elected for the first time. Women, with 38% of the seats, are now better represented than at any time in French history.

Political observers agreed that Macron could revitalise political institutions through a combination of strong leadership and democratic reforms. Instead, he gathered politicians from the political left and right to focus on economic reforms.

His prime minister, Édouard Philippe, a former conservative member of parliament, chose ministers who are experts in their fields. The goal is to make the country adapt quickly to globalisation, which means that some reforms should be achieved through presidential decrees.

With a high unemployment rate, the new majority supports the idea that more flexibility is needed to create jobs.

### Popular votes

Macron wants to be a strong leader on the national and international stages. But he already risks overreaching when basing his legitimacy on the popular votes in April, May and June.

During an **extraordinary congressional session**  
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in the royal palace of Versailles on July 3, he tried to reinforce his delivery on some campaign promises including proportional parliamentary elections, agenda initiative rights and presidential plebiscites.

The introduction of a proportional election system for parliamentary elections is an updated promise of his predecessor, François Hollande, but Macron has introduced it in the form of an agenda initiative.

The agenda initiative means that citizens can directly address their legislative proposals to the parliament. However, they cannot defend these proposals themselves in the parliament as the law committee of the National Assembly examines the initiatives and decides if they can be sent to a minister. In reality, it is very rare that an agenda initiative has any political consequences, and most of these proposals are dismissed without leaving a trace.

Participatory democracy is not a visible topic of the “En Marche” movement. President Macron has not said anything about how he wants to reinforce the right to an agenda initiative. In his Versailles speech, he instead underlined the possibility of presidential referendums on key reforms in case the parliament does not support him.

### **Voter fatigue**

But the political fairy tale of political change in France has a dark side: voters' growing indifference.

More than the half of eligible citizens did not take part in the last round of parliamentary elections. While it's difficult to find scientific evidence for this record-low turnout, the lack of participation suggests a mistrust in the democratic institutions of the country.

People know that the choices of their new elected “king” are prevailing, and so they may be inclined to neglect more and more other types of popular votes.

### **Myth of strong leader**

Like the young Napoleon Bonaparte after the French revolution in the late 1790s, Macron sees himself as the only man to reorganise the political landscape and defend the interests of the country.

Only he can save France from bankruptcy, and only he can save the European institutions as well as the 2015 Paris climate agreement.

Macron controls his own communication. He does not talk to journalists like former President Hollande did, and his advisors are very careful when they give official information on Macron's political decisions.

Macron cancelled the traditional presidential interview with the press on Bastille Day. Instead he welcomed United States President Donald Trump to celebrate America's entrance into the First World War 100 years ago.

The “**En Marche**” movement recently held its first convention, where debates on democratic reforms were roundly ignored and grassroots movements had no say in the further development of the ruling party.

All key party positions are now controlled by cabinet and parliament

members, while other members of “En Marche” have no say. The rules of the party reveal a top-down management style that might be difficult to enforce long-term.

“En Marche” doesn’t want to reproduce the political rituals of traditional parties such as motions or ideological affiliations. Instead, it is a movement that promotes the renewal of politicians and the necessity of having a variety of experts in democratic arenas such as the parliament. The main idea is to rule the country by importing the management methods of companies.

### **Prejudice against democracy**

There is an unfortunate ideological prejudice in France against the democratisation of institutions. The logic of this prejudice is: that “too much democracy” would create instability and the spectre of ungovernability would reappear.

These fears have played into the hands of the new leadership. The president now uses his extensive powers, the opposition is weak and the traditional parties in decline. There are virtually no participatory tools that could balance this and include French citizens in the renewal of their society.

In the next few weeks, we might see the cabinet imposing the views of the government in the new National Assembly. Can the technocrats save us from populist voices without implementing other democratic tools such as citizen juries, consensus conferences or citizens’ initiatives?

The political opposition is also fragmented in parliament which does not help to have a thorough debate on the nature of the reforms. The National Assembly has begun to examine a specific law that allows the government to act through decrees to reform the labour market.

Last year, the social movement, Nuit debout, gave some insights into the potential of a democratic movement. It is a great challenge to identify the remaining spaces where a democratic debate could take place.

The “deus ex machina” was important to renew the political scene but it is now up to political actors to implement institutional changes. President Macron wanted a rebirth of the institutions of the Fifth Republic with a strong leadership. It is too early to say if he will implement some democratic changes in a difficult economic and social context.