

The hidden cleavage of the French election: Macron, Le Pen and the urban-rural conflict

Vincenzo Emanuele¹

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Notwithstanding Macron's victory, the result of the French Presidential election is the prove that an earthquake hit the political setting in France with the exclusion – for the very first time since 1958 – of both pillars of the Fifth Republic, the socialist and the Gaullist parties.

The second round between Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen perfectly represents the increased relevance of a new dimension of competition, different from the left-right one that had prevailed so far. A dimension which is orthogonal with respect to the left-right axis, and for which the scientific research has not found a shared definition yet. We are talking of a conflict between 'open society' and 'closed society', where those in favour of globalization, multiculturalism and European integration are opposed to those standing for 'demarcation' ([Kriesi et al. 2006](#)), welfare chauvinism and the return to the nation-state. These are two sides of a conflict which involves (not always consistently, especially in the Southern Europe) cultural, economic, and institutional issues, and whose proud representatives are respectively Macron and Le Pen. Marine Le Pen launched a challenge to the French system and to the Gaullist right years ago; yet, these elections are still something new, since for the first time there is a political entrepreneur on the other side of this conflict too, and he was able to politicize the conflict over Europe and globalization (instead of avoiding them, as the mainstream socialist parties usually do), and to mobilize his electorate on these issues.

Yet, are we really faced with a new cleavage, as stated by part of the literature? Or is it just an old – apparently dormant – conflict which is being reactivated again?

My hypothesis – to be confirmed – is that at the basis of this hypothetical new cleavage there would be the reactivation of the old urban-rural cleav-

¹ English translation by Elisabetta Mannoni

age. According to the original formulation by Lipset and Rokkan (1967), the urban-rural conflict was about tariff barriers and commodity prices. The new-born class of industrial entrepreneurs fought for the abolition of tariff barriers, the openness of the market and the consequential decrease in prices for raw materials. The declining class of the landowners was opposing to them, and wanted to maintain the tariff barriers to protect the national agricultural production. We already had, so to speak, a conflict between those in favour of globalization and those in favour of protectionism. Is it possible that this conflict has been somehow reactivated by new political entrepreneurs², who are trying to take advantage of the electoral opportunity that this conflict creates?

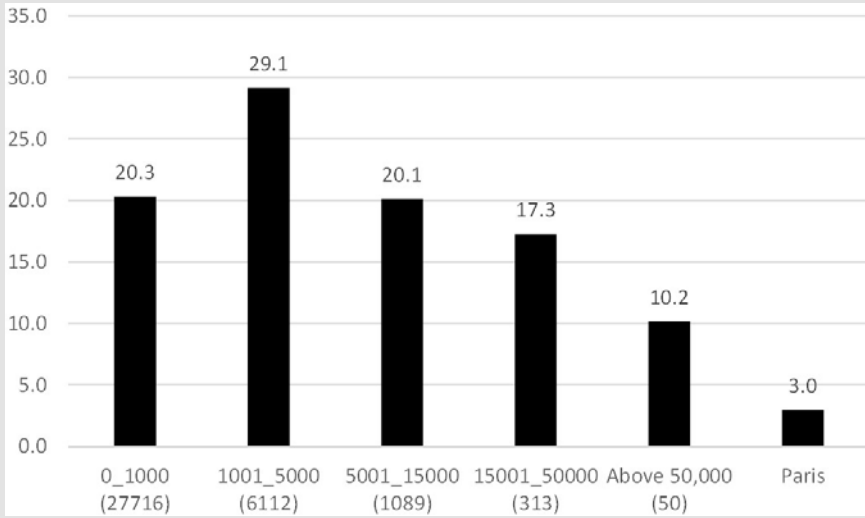
A first– definitely preliminary – test that can be performed to verify such hypothesis is about the analysis of the French vote by demographic size of towns. This latter is a variable that is usually neglected by scholars of elections and voting behaviour, yet it has proven to be an important determinant, for instance, of the vote in Italy (Emanuele 2011; 2013).

From a comparative perspective, we can safely affirm that Italy is ‘a country of small villages’ (Emanuele 2011, 118), with just 23% of the population living in cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants; France, on the other hand, is the most rural European country. In fact, mainland France (l’*Hexagone*) has 35.281 cities (in Italy these are around 8.000), almost the 80% of which having less than 1000 electors (and 12.5% with less than 100 electors). This is a legacy of the post-revolutionary organizational model, that can be noticed in Piedmont too, to some extent. The most incredible aspect, as Figure 1 shows, is that almost 50% of electors live in villages with less than 5.000 electors, while just 13% of electors live in medium-big cities (that is, cities with more than 50.000 electors; in Italy this percentage rises to 35%). The city of Paris only represents the 3% of the electorate.

These data give an idea of how salient the urban-rural dimension is in France, as well as the potential differences (in socio-demographic, cultural, and political-ideological terms) between the electors living in the multitude of micro villages and those living in the Parisian metropolis. Since we do not have individual data to verify these differences, we can analyse at the aggregate level the vote for Macron and Le Pen for the six demographic categories that we saw in Figure 1 below (five categories plus Paris). The result, graphically represented in Figure 2, is remarkable and shows a first encouraging

² The rural parties that politicized the urban-rural cleavage have either disappeared or changed since the 1950s. For the conditions to the rise of agrarian parties, see Rokkan (1970). For the reasons why this cleavage did not give rise to an agrarian party in France, see [Tarrou](#) (1971). For an analysis of the vote in the French rural areas, see Dogan (1967).

Figure 1. Number of cities and percentage of the electorate by category of demographic size, France 2017

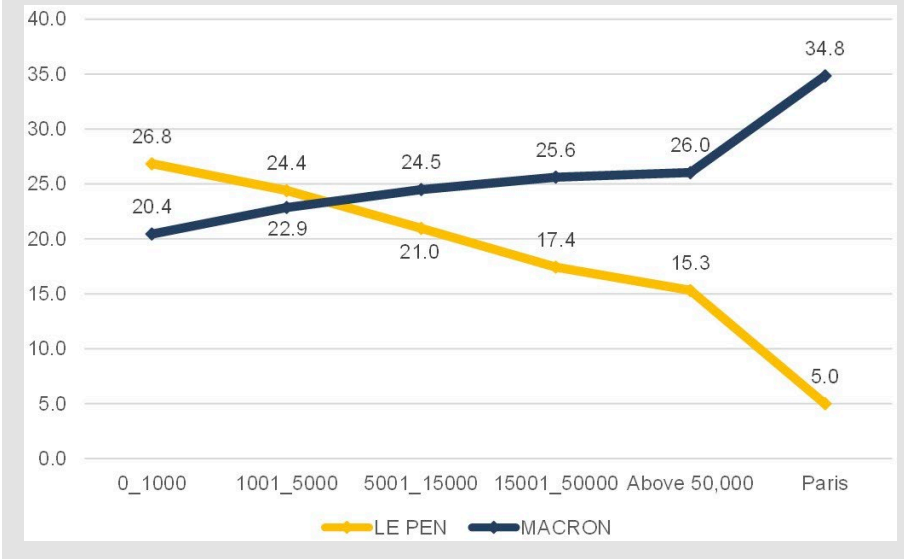


empirical evidence for our hypothesis. The two candidates show a specular profile for the demographic variable. The vote to Marine Le Pen is clearly rural-oriented. Her support is inversely proportional to the demographic size of towns: she is close to 27% in the small villages with less than 1000 voters, and her consensus gradually decrease to 15% in medium-big cities. In Paris it almost disappears around 5% (here she is fifth in voters' preferences, even after the socialist Hamon). On the opposite side, Macron's profile reveals his prevalent urban character: Hollande's ex Minister's support tends to increase proportionally to the demographic size of towns, from 20% in micro villages (in those with less than 100 electors he gets 18.5%), to 35% in Paris.

Data shows the presence of two crucially different realities, coexisting within the same country: there is a swing of 18.1 points between Paris and the villages with less than 1000 electors. There are in fact 6.4 points of advantage for Le Pen in micro villages and almost 30 in favour of Macron in the capital.

We do not know, without a proper individual-level analysis, if these marked differences between city and countryside are just the consequence of other variables that are at stake or if they witness, instead, the reactivation of the old urban-rural cleavage on a new basis. What is for sure, is that such differences between city and countryside have been found in the analysis about Brexit vote too, where the 'Remain' won in London and in many other urban areas, and the 'Brexit' won in rural England. In that case too, the referendum divided parties and the electorate clearly on a different conflict axis from the

Figure 2. Vote trends for Le Pen and Macron by demographic size of towns, French Presidential election 2017, first round



left-right one, with Conservatives and Labour taking different stands within their own parties, whereas UKIP on the one side, and LibDem and SNP on the other politicized the two sides of the conflict.

This is definitely a crucial issue to understand the XXI century politics, and it requires necessarily more in-depth analysis.

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