

In the month between French President Emmanuel Macron's surprise dissolution of the National Assembly and the country's second round of elections, many observers looked to the past to better discern what the future might hold. Inevitably, many cited the crisis of 1958, which ushered in the Fifth Republic, or the crisis of 1940, when France's military defeat bore the Vichy regime. However, there's another historical crisis — one dating farther back a few decades — that observers missed. And that is la crise of May 16, 1877.

This earlier political predicament, which mirrors the current one, had a seismic impact on the course of French history. More importantly, it hints at what may now follow in France, with prospects not nearly as bleak as those most often mentioned.

The New Popular Front stands on the cusp of a victory that has the potential to transform the course of French history.

In 1877, France was only just recovering from a traumatic military debacle at the hands of the authoritarian Prussian military, followed by the bloody suppression of the Paris Commune at the hands of the republican French army. The Third Republic that emerged from these catastrophes was, in turn, challenged by reactionary forces known as the "Moral Order," seeking to reestablish the monarchy. This conflict reached critical mass when a large republican majority swept into the National Assembly after legislative elections.

The president at the time, former Bonapartist General Patrice de Mac-Mahon, happened to be one of the leaders of the "Moral Order," and he immediately dissolved the newly elected legislature before calling for new elections. Mac-Mahon was confident the French electorate would come to its senses, and found that it did — just not as he imagined — as voters once again elected a large republican majority.

"Believe me, gentlemen," the brilliant republican tribune **Léon Gambetta** warned the monarchist camp, "when France makes its sovereign voice heard, you will have to either step in line or step down."

Ultimately, Mac-Mahon conceded defeat to republican forces and resigned from the presidency. His abject surrender had a deep and abiding impact on the relationship between the president and parliament in the Third Republic, as the former would never again challenge the latter with the threat of dissolution, cementing the National Assembly's political ascendancy until the republic's collapse in 1940.

Today, it's difficult to discern much about what exactly is going on in France's rapidly shifting political landscape. Though the adjective inédit, or unprecedented, has been used and abused over the past month, truth is, the present situation is undeniably inédit. The Fifth Republic has never before seen the extreme right wing come so close to power, never before had a sitting president come so close to powerlessness, and never before had it witnessed a radical left-wing coalition bolted together in such haste, and yet with such resounding success.

Of course, one critical difference between the early Third Republic and aging Fifth Republic is that, this time around, there are three political and ideological blocs, not two. But while Macron's Renaissance party performed better than expected — as *Le Monde* reported, Prime Minister Gabriel Attal managed to "sauver les meubles," or salvage what he could from Macron's debacle — the party seems fated for a still-birth rather than a rebirth.

It's a very different story with the two other blocs, however.

While the National Rally did not, as pollsters predicted, finish with either an absolute or even relative majority, it nevertheless increased its share of the vote to, *mais oui*, unprecedented heights, from 9 million in the first round to more than 11 million in the second. Marine Le

Pen's party also bears more than a passing resemblance to the Moral Order in its allergic reaction to the ideals of 1789 — liberty, equality, and fraternity — as well as its Bonapartist blend of authoritarian rule with a democratic patina by recourse to referenda.

A Historical Parallel: What 1877 Tells Us About Today's France



Finally — and this is where the key similarity lies — the New Popular Front stands on the cusp of a victory that, much like Gambetta's republicans a century and a half ago, has the potential to transform the course of French history. Namely, it could reshape what has been, in effect, a republican monarchy established by Charles de Gaulle in 1958 into the parliamentary republic that was envisioned, though not fully realized, by Gambetta in 1877.

Shortly after the second-round results were announced — with the New Popular Front's first-place finish surprising everyone, including its own leaders and rank and file — Attal declared "the center of gravity will be in the hands of parliament now more than ever." And this is precisely where the four parties that comprise the coalition — Socialists, Ecologists, Communists and Defiant France — have long insisted power belongs.

However, there remain formidable forces, external and internal, to overcome, and they both begin with the letter "M": Macron, on the one hand, will use what powers he has — beginning with his freedom to choose who he wishes to form a new government — to undermine the process. On the other hand, Defiant France's unbending leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon will use his influence to prevent the compromises necessary to form an effective government.

The stakes couldn't be higher. As Clémentine Autain, the eloquent ex-member of Defiant France —and prominent critic of Mélenchon's own tendency toward authoritarianism — summed up the challenge the coalition faces: "The New Popular Front now finds itself against the wall and must restructure itself to maintain the hope it has inspired. If this coalition collapses, we will fail the historic duty we've been given."

Nearly a week has passed since Autain's warning, but the New Popular Front has yet to agree on a candidate for prime minister. And as France approaches this historic turning point, it now faces the risk of its coalition leaders failing to turn with it.

The echoes of 1877 resonate strongly today. Much like then, France stands at a crossroads,

with the potential to redefine its political landscape. The lessons of the past serve as both a warning and a beacon of hope, reminding us that out of crisis can emerge a more robust and democratic order. As France navigates this unprecedented terrain, the resolve of its leaders and the will of its people will determine whether this moment becomes a turning point for a stronger republic or a missed opportunity fraught with regret.