

Reflection  
Paper

# European Elections and Snap Elections in France: Analysis and aftermaths



منتدى البدائل العربي  
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## **European Elections and Snap Elections in France:** **Analysis and aftermaths**

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### ***The European Elections: the rise of the far right and its consequences***

Between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> of June 2024, the elections for the European Parliament elections, in which more than 360 million Europeans were eligible to vote, were held. The outcome of this four-day democratic marathon across the 27 EU member states , —determines the influence of political forces in Europe over the next five years.

The European Parliament represents the interests of EU citizens while the European Council represents the interests of EU countries and both shape, scrutinize, and adopt European Commission proposals.

A total of 720 MEPs were elected in the June 2024 elections, that is 15 more members compared to the previous elections yet still under the maximum of 750 MEPs allowed. The number of MEPs elected from each EU country is agreed upon before each election and is based on the principle of degressive proportionality, which means an MEP from a larger country represents more people than an MEP from a smaller country.

Moreover, it is worth mentioning that elections are contested by national political parties but once MEPs are elected, they become part of a total of seven transnational political groups. Most national parties are affiliated to a European-wide political party such as the center-right European People's Party (EPP) and the center-left Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D), which are historically the two largest European parliamentary groups.

Overall electoral participation was 52 percent, a low turnout yet a slight increase from the 50.66% of the 2019 elections<sup>1</sup>. Results were probably more “strongly driven by national issues than EU-wide concerns,” as Prince Michael of Liechtenstein put it,<sup>2</sup> As a result, the more nationalist parties gained ground in most countries although they are not all necessarily averse to the European Union.

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<sup>1</sup> “Final turnout data for 2019 European elections announced”, *European Parliament*, 29/10/2029. ([here](#))

<sup>2</sup> Prince Michael of Liechtenstein “European elections: Interesting consequences”, *Geopolitical Intelligent Services*, 14/06/2024. ([here](#))

As a matter of fact, the European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR), dominated by Italy's Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, earned four more seats than the previously elections' 62 seats,<sup>3</sup> but it was in France where the surge of far-right populism provoked the biggest reaction from the executive. In fact, French President Emmanuel Macron dissolved the Assemblée Nationale and called early legislative elections after his coalition finished second, well behind the far-right party, the National Rally or *Rassemblement National* in French, led by Marine Le Pen's lieutenant Jordan Bardella who won 31.5% of the votes. Many political experts have ever since been calling this election a high-risk national decision that could determine the future not only of France but of the European Union itself. In fact, France is a founding member of the European Union, the second largest economy in the EU, the only EU member state with nuclear weapons, and a member of the UN Security Council. It is the United States' oldest ally and a strong supporter of Ukraine.

A far-right party has not governed France since the Nazi occupation 80 years ago, but could soon see one win a parliamentary majority.

On the very same evening, in a televised address, Emmanuel Macron called his decision "grave, heavy," but argued that he could not "carry on as if nothing had happened." The fresh vote, the president declared, was consistent with the democratic principle that "the word should be given to the sovereign people."

In the vein, in an interview with RTL radio, finance minister Bruno Le Maire did not hesitate to assert that "this will be the most consequential parliamentary election for France and for the French in the history of the Fifth Republic."

### ***The controversial past of the National Rally***

The aforementioned reactions can be explained by the threat the National Rally has represented and still represents for French democracy. In fact, the party's first political bureau, founded in October 1972, included several figures who fought against the French resistance or supported Philippe Pétain, the head of France's collaborationist Vichy regime in World War II. The most significant of them is undoubtedly Jean-Marie Le Pen, a former paratrooper who ran for president five times, sending shockwaves through France in 2002 when he made it to the second round of the election, which was won by Jacques Chirac.

Co-founder of the Front National, later renamed Rassemblement National, – Jean-Marie Le Pen spent decades whipping up anger over immigration. While his political fortunes fluctuated sharply over more than half a century, his unabashed racism earned him the name "Devil of the Republic"<sup>4</sup> and he once boasted that the rise of the far-right around Europe showed his ideas had gone mainstream. His daughter Marine Le Pen later tried to clean up the image of the party and kicked him out in 2015 over remarks he made that the Holocaust was merely a detail of history.

### ***Closer to power than ever: A new far right dawn?***

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<sup>3</sup> "European elections 2019: Live results", *Financial Times*, 02/07/2019. ([here](#))

<sup>4</sup> This nickname was given by former French President François Mitterrand in the 1980s' when they faced each other at the 1986 French presidential elections largely won by Mitterrand.

The party has since made significant inroads in both European and French politics as the European elections and the first round of French snap elections demonstrated.

The party of Marine Le Pen and Jordan Bardella topped the poll with 33.15 percent of the votes cast, hence ahead of the left-wing New Popular Front (NFP) alliance, which got 28.14 percent and Macron's centrist Ensemble coalition, which got 20.76 percent, during the first round of the French snap elections.

RN and its allies obtained around 9.3 million votes – more than double that of the previous legislative elections in 2022. It qualified for the second round in 455 of France's 577 constituencies and came out on top in 297 of them.

Campaigning on a promise to boost purchasing power by cutting VAT on fuel and some essential items, RN performed strongest in the northern Haut-de-France region – a depressed former industrial region that used to vote Communist or Socialist but has swung to the far right over the past decade.

Moreover, since the start of the snap election campaign, Marine Le Pen's far-right National Rally party has delivered mixed messages on dual nationals. Speaking in the pre-election TV debate on the 25<sup>th</sup> of June night, party leader Jordan Bardella listed the dual-nationals' job ban as one of the party's key priorities in office.

As part of its 'French preference' policy for employment, the party also proposes to prohibit "access to jobs in government departments, public companies and legal entities entrusted with a public service mission to people who hold the nationality of another state."

Nevertheless, this measure is likely to be rejected by the country's top constitutional council, said Anne-Charlène Bezzina, associate professor in public law and constitutional expert at the University of Rouen Normandy. Allocating benefits by separating people based on birth or citizenship cuts against the fundamental constructs of the French Republic, dating back to the era of Enlightenment and enshrined in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1789, Bezzina explained. "You can't differentiate between French people who are national or binational," she said in an interview. "It's the same for differentiating French by birthright or blood. It goes against the principle of equality."

Besides, other policy priorities in the National Rally's program include restoring order in France, curbing immigration, and addressing the cost-of-living crisis.

Among Bardella's plans are stripping away the automatic right to French citizenship at age 18 to children born in France to non-French parents and ending free medical treatment for undocumented people, except in very specific emergencies. He also wants to block convicted criminals from living in public housing and slash the country's sales tax on all forms of energy, from fuel to electricity.

However, how he will manage to implement those ideas is not entirely clear. The party's 21-page program, bursting with photos and graphics, is thick with sweeping ideas but thin on details on how to realize them. And over the past weeks of furious campaigning and debates, Bardella backtracked on several of the party's pledges or shelved them for later.

To fund his policies, Bardella's main promise has been to greatly slash the country's sales tax on energy. When pushed on how he will pay for that measure, estimated at 17 billion euros (about \$18.2 billion) by the Ministry of Finance, Bardella offered a number of possibilities, including cutting France's payments to the European Union by €2 billion.

According to several specialists, those policies will not easily come to reality. For instance, Rémi Lefebvre, professor of political science at the University of Lille, affirms that "they will definitely have difficulties putting some of their program into place."<sup>5</sup>

### ***The strategy of the "dam" against the National Rally***

On the other hand, the strategy of building a "front" or "dam" against the far right led to the creation of the alliance of the New Popular Front (NFP) right after Macron called the snap elections. The left-wing coalition chose its name in an attempt to resurrect the original Popular Front that blocked the far right from gaining power in 1936. The alliance is made up of several parties: the far-left France Unbowed party, the more moderate Socialist Party, the green Ecologist party, the French Communist Party, the center-left Place Publique, and other small parties.

"Following his side's defeat at the European elections, Emmanuel Macron has opted for a gamble at a time when the far right is at its most powerful, running the risk of seeing it come to power for the first time since Vichy," Socialist leader Olivier Faure said last month, referring to the French government that collaborated with Nazi occupiers during World War II. "Only a united left can stand in its way," he added. The alliance's most prominent – and divisive – figure is Jean-Luc Mélenchon, a 72-year-old populist firebrand and longtime leader of the France Unbowed party. However, he is more and more contested, and a more acceptable face of the coalition could be the Socialist Faure, or Raphaël Glucksmann, the moderate leader of Place Publique and a member of the European Parliament that could become the future Prime Minister. However Unbowed is projected to be the largest single party within the coalition, with as many as 80 seats.

The NFP plans to raise the monthly minimum wage to €1,600, impose price ceilings on essential foods, electricity, gas and petrol, repeal Macron's deeply unpopular decision to raise the retirement age to 64, and invest massively in green transition and public services. On foreign policy level, the NFP has pledged to "immediately recognize" a Palestinian state and will push for Israel and Hamas to cease fire in Gaza.

### ***The success of the NFP: an outcome that brings a lot of challenges***

Finally, at the close of the second round of France's parliamentary elections on Sunday July 7, the left, which came second in the total first-round vote share, has risen to first place in an unexpected turnaround, gathering 26.3 % of the polls.<sup>6</sup> According to initial projections by Ipsos Talan for French broadcasters France Télévisions, Radio France, France 24/RFI and

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<sup>5</sup> Ellen Ioanes. « France's elections showed a polarized country », *Vox*, 09/07/2023. ([here](#))

<sup>6</sup> Hanne Cokelaere and Victor Goury-Laffont. "France election results 2024: Who won across the country", *Politico*, 07/07/2024. ([here](#))

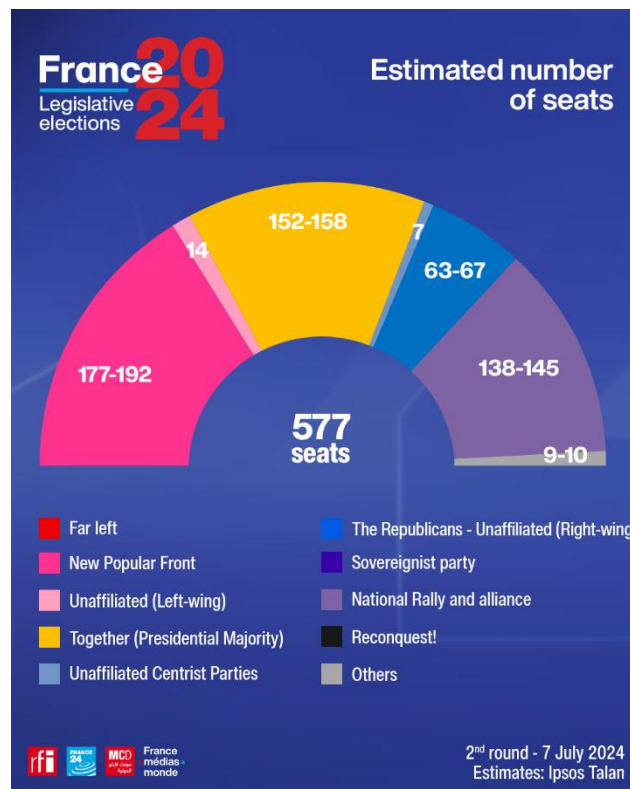
LCP-Assemblée Nationale, the NFP alliance of left-wing parties would, , have between 171 and 187 MPs in the Assemblée Nationale. This represents at least 20 more than the 151 MPs elected in June 2022 as part of the previous left-wing alliance, the New Popular Ecological and Social Union (NUPES).

The far-right National Rally is trailing third in the final round, estimated by Ipsos Talan to have won between 138 and 145 seats in the National Assembly. Marine Le Pen’s party needed 289 seats to win an absolute majority in the 577-seat lower house of parliament.

Part of the National Rally's ultimate defeat can be explained by the endurance of what is known in France as the “Front républicain,” when voters turn out in force to defeat the far right. Minutes after the first-round results were announced on June 30, France Unbowed founder Jean-Luc Mélenchon announced that the NFP had a plan.

This strategy of building a “front” or "dam" against the far right was broadly followed by Macron’s camp as well, with both coalitions calling on their voters to cast ballots for better-placed political rivals to keep the RN from power. Between the first and second rounds, more than 200 candidates stood down to stop the far right from crossing the threshold to victory.

Nonetheless, although the left-wing alliance is in the lead, hence is ahead of President Emmanuel Macron's coalition (projected to have secured between 152 and 163 seats) and the far-right Rassemblement National (RN) party and its allies (between 134 and 152 seats), its score is still far from an absolute majority, which would require 289 out of 577 seats.



*Updated estimates of the make up of the new French parliament. © RFI*

As the above diagram shows, with no one party winning an absolute majority, parliament looks set to be divided into three big groups with hugely different platforms and no tradition of working together. That could potentially herald a period of instability, unless the left manages to strike a deal with other parties to work together.

They will first face the difficult task of agreeing on who will be the next prime minister, who will take on the difficult task of forming a government capable of uniting the parties and a country extremely divided before the next presidential election in 2027.