

Parliamentary Snap Elections (France): Combating the major risk

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The far right is on the brink of an absolute majority following the first round of early parliamentary elections in France.

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Whatever the absurd scenario imagined by Macron in announcing of the dissolution of the Assembly on the evening of the European elections, the practical effect is rolling out a red carpet under the feet of the Rassemblement National, giving it the chance to win a majority of seats on 9 July.

Since last Monday, the whole of the workers' movement and the social and political forces committed to democratic rights have been up in arms to prevent the extreme right of Pétain and the fascists of the Militia from returning to power in France 80 years after their emulators were ousted, and from applying a policy of "national preference", racist discrimination and the undermining of social and democratic rights, while at the same time being subject to the interests of the big capitalist groups, like the regimes of the same ilk in Argentina, Italy and Hungary.

In the coming weeks, it will be time to draw all the political lessons from the last few years, which have seen a steady rise in the far right, but the first observation is simple:

The Rassemblement National and its allies from the Républicains and Reconquête won 33.18% of the votes cast, more than 10 million votes. The Nouveau Front Populaire won 28.1%, and Macron's candidates 21.60%.

This result came three weeks after the European elections in France, which saw the RN list already well ahead with 30.5% of the vote, more than double the list of the presidential camp, with 14% of the vote (led by the president of the Renew Europe group, Valérie Hayer). The lists of the four parties of the former NUPES (LFI, PS, Greens and PCF) came in behind in scattered order, even though they totalled 30.7% of the vote.

Faced with a fractured left, the RN has been able to capitalize on its place in the French political landscape over the last two years.

Like many other far-right forces in Europe, it has applied the "respectabilization strategy" to appear as a force that respects the institutions and, above all, is prepared to govern in compliance with European rules, following the example of Giorgia Meloni. This does not prevent the RN from making an intensive effort to inculcate in its cadres the fundamentals of defending the European identity of the New Right and GRECE, with the Iliad Institute.

All this smoothing work went hand in hand with the desire to appear as the only force in opposition

to Macron during the social movements that have marked the last two years, in particular the mobilization against pension reform in the first six months of 2023 and the farmers' movement last winter. This was accompanied by an editorial line in the major press organs that played to the full this de-demonization.

On the other hand, for various reasons, for the past two years the components of NUPES have not built this alliance of left-wing parties as a common militant force, accompanied by the search for militant convergence with the forces of the social and trade union movement.

Since 2022, even during the mobilization against pension reform, the left was present on the streets and in the assembly to block the extension of the retirement age, but without coming forward united around a plan of social measures commensurate with the most powerful mobilization in 20 years and without taking any united initiative to assert itself politically during the movement.

Worse still, the parties making up the NUPES openly announced the end of their alliance at the very moment when, after pensions, inflation and growing job insecurity made it even more urgent to build a front for a policy in line with social needs. As a result, neither in working-class neighbourhoods nor in rural areas, and independently of the grassroots work carried out by many activists, did the left emerge as a national force capable of changing everyday life and claiming to embody a political alternative to Macron and the far right.

What's more, the government never stopped trying to legitimize the RN as a respectable opposition and to demonize France insoumise as a threat to democracy, even pushing part of the left to "break with Mélenchon".

The concerns of the working classes are obviously first and foremost purchasing power, wages and energy prices, health and housing, and the loss of public services, particularly in rural and suburban areas and in the working-class neighbourhoods of large conurbations. All this at a time when social injustice, a tax policy and budgetary choices that benefit the upper classes have further accentuated inequalities. At the same time, gender-based violence and state violence continue to make themselves felt on a daily basis, with the only response being a police presence and an Islamophobic, security-oriented discourse targeting the racialized working classes.

The far right was therefore at ease in developing its discourse, often developing the themes put forward by the government itself on immigration and insecurity (the RN itself set the tone for the latest immigration law last January). What's more, it has surfed on the anxiety-inducing climate distilled by the 24-hour news media, whose editorial line echoes the far-right's theses on the insecurity-immigration nexus.

A SUICIDAL DISSOLUTION

Macron was blocked in the National Assembly by his lack of a majority, limiting his room for manoeuvre, but faced with the disavowal of the European elections he made a suicidal political calculation.

At the moment when the RN was riding the wave of its electoral victory and his own party had just suffered a magisterial disavowal, the choice of dissolution was quite simply suicidal, offering the RN an ultra-short campaign for which they could benefit from the same breath of air that the president's parties have often benefited from in France. Since 2002, the presidential election and that of the assembly have been held in quick succession, a few weeks apart giving an almost automatic advantage to the president's party. Macron was offering a similar situation to the RN on a platter.

He might have hoped, with a disunited left, to play the saviour once again against the far right, himself provoking the electroshock of the threat of Bardella and Le Pen taking the helm of state.

But from Sunday evening, the reaction came from social movements, trade unions and in particular Sophie Binet [leader of the major trade-union confederation the CGT], calling for a Popular Front against the RN. While various calculations were still at work, this unitive pressure from militant networks imposed unity on the left to fight the threat together.

Against all expectations, given the problems and tensions accumulated over the previous months, the union was built with a programme taking up part of that drawn up for the NUPES and also echoing a joint declaration by the CGT, Solidaires, FSU and CFDT trade union forces. In less than a week (there were only five days in which to submit candidacies in 577 constituencies), the agreement, the programme and the distribution of constituencies were completed. The pleas from Macron's camp for the Socialist Party, the Communist Party and the Greens not to put this new Popular Front into practice had no effect.

From then on, Macron's scenario collapsed like a house of cards, and it only took a few days for his "primed grenade", as he described it to someone close to him, to explode in the middle of the Macronist camp.

POPULAR FRONT ONLY ALTERNATIVE TO RN

The Popular Front emerged as the only alternative to the threat posed by the RN, thereby appearing as the incarnation of its rejection by the vast majority of trade unions, social movements and associations. Destabilized by its defeat at the European elections and the lack of understanding of the presidential manoeuvre, the candidates of Macron's coalition Ensemble went into the campaign without conviction.

On the right, the LR (Les Républicains) party exploded in mid-air, with its own president, Éric Ciotti, rallying to the RN as did Marion Maréchal, the spokeswoman for Reconquête (the party created in 2022 by Éric Zemmour), accentuating the polarization of the far right.

In just a few days, the high stakes of this election led to an unprecedented mobilization of the electorate. Turnout was 66.71% of registered voters, the highest since 1997.

This surge in turnout was reflected in a high level of mobilization, albeit divided between the three blocs. Two contradictory phenomena emerged:

Although there was no surge in the RN vote which, having absorbed the bulk of the Renaissance (Macron's party) electorate and two-fifths of that of the LR, nevertheless garnered 33% of the vote; there was a territorial homogenization of the Rassemblement national, clearly more marked in rural areas: out of 577 constituencies, the RN and its allies elected 39 deputies in the first round, led in 260 constituencies and were present in the second round in a total of 443 constituencies.

Macronism collapsed, with only two deputies elected in the first round, leading in the second round in 68 constituencies, and in a position to stand in a total of 321 constituencies (before the withdrawals on Tuesday evening).

The New Popular Front elected 31 MPs in the first round, are leading in 128, and qualifying in a total of 413, far more than in 2022. What is most notable is the urban concentration of the vote for the NFP. Twenty-one of the 31 elected in the first round were in the Paris region, particularly in

Paris (where it should win two-thirds of the 18 seats) and the neighbouring districts. Similar successes, albeit to a lesser extent, were recorded in Marseille, Bordeaux, Lyon, Toulouse, Nantes and Strasbourg. The vote was otherwise concentrated in Brittany, the South-West, the Massif Central, Martinique and Guadeloupe and Réunion, with 6 out of 7 constituencies.

These results therefore show strength in the working-class districts of major cities and weakness among working-class populations in rural and suburban areas.

The second round poses the problem of building a democratic front to prevent the RN from obtaining an absolute majority of 289 seats in the National Assembly.

The Front populaire has clearly positioned itself by withdrawing its candidates who had come third against the RN.

The LR, who came out on top in the second round in only 19 constituencies, generally refused to position themselves between the Popular Front and the RN, while being clearly courted by the RN.

The Macronists, meanwhile, are split down the middle, from the point of view of their leaders, between the Ni Ni position of Edouard Philippe, the former prime minister, and those of voting for the Popular Front put forward by former ministers such as Clément Beaune. Gabriel Attal, the outgoing prime minister, said he wanted to “block the FN”. A new splintering, a sign of the movement’s agony. Tuesday saw a succession of withdrawals by Ensemble. By 4 p.m., the number had risen to 75, out of the 325 candidates standing for the movement in the second round. This would leave around 100 constituencies with three candidates.

During this week, tens of thousands of activists have been mobilized and the trade union movement has multiplied its statements against the threat of a RN majority.

We must not rule out this possibility, because in all cases the number of RN elected representatives will be between 250 and 290, even if the upper range falls with the withdrawals. It is therefore the task of the moment to avoid this risk and – even if the worst is avoided, to maintain the mobilization on the left and not dissolve into a new combination in which Macron no doubt hopes, one last time, to be in the driving seat.

Thus there remains the question of mobilization and building a social and political front of resistance to the far right and all the combinations that would apply its policies. The worst thing we could do would be to repeat the splintering seen in recent years. The primary responsibility will therefore lie with the social and trade union movement to maintain a front of national and local unity of militant forces in workplaces and neighbourhoods, to oppose the abuses of the extreme right and, more than ever, to assert the demand for a united and radical alternative based on social needs.

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P.S.

• IVP. TUESDAY 2 JULY 2024:
<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article8578>

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