

France: The French elections and the defeat of the far right

An interview with Sylvestre Jaffard

Sunday 18 August 2024, by [JAFFARD Sylvestre](#), [Tempest](#) (Date first published: 10 August 2024).

Tempest interviews Sylvestre Jaffard, member of the NPA-l'Anticapitaliste, about the French elections last month, their political impact on both the right and Left, and the prospects going forward.

Tempest: *Given the success of the far right in the European elections, and how quickly the national elections were then called, what accounted for the change in outcome and the defeat of the far right and the Rassemblement National (RN)?*

Sylvestre Jaffard: The main reason was not people voting differently. It was the fact that the rules are very different for the elections to the European parliament and for the national parliament.

European elections have just one round of voting, and the seats are allotted proportionately. Legislative (national) elections are really 577 different elections in the different constituencies to elect one deputy each, and they usually have two rounds, with only the two or three candidates leading in the first round making it to the run-off.

Altogether, the far right got 37 percent in the [European elections](#), and 35 percent in the first round of the [legislative elections](#). Not much difference here. But what you don't get from these numbers is how many people absolutely reject the far right. The two-round system is widespread for all sorts of elections in France, and there's a saying: "In the first round you choose, in the second you reject." What happened is that the electorate rejected the RN.

The different rules have another consequence. In a proportional election like the European elections, there is little price to be paid for disunity. The different parties of the Left saw it as an occasion to test their relative strengths. If they had presented a united slate they would probably have got the same number of MEPs altogether. Also there was no direct risk involved in the RN coming first in terms of actual political power.

Things were very different in the national election: In order to make it to the second round and win, having two, three, or four Left candidates in each constituency would have been a disaster. This puts a lot of pressure in favor of unity, even from a very narrow electoral viewpoint.

And there was another, more powerful reason for unity on the Left: the very real danger of the RN forming a government in a matter of weeks, with powers over the police, the secret services, the possibility of them having enough of a majority in parliament to enact laws restricting liberties even further than Macron has already done. Making it easier to sell what remains of public broadcasting to their millionaire friends, etc. And last but not least the likely unleashing of all the racist forces at play in society. In fact, there were [a spate of racist and homophobic attacks](#) between the European and national elections, with the attackers often referring to the coming victory of the RN.

There was massive popular pressure from left-wing activists and ordinary people for unity, with protests on the very night of the European elections from members of various youth organizations, followed by weeks of protests from both established organizations such as trade unions, human rights groups, independent media, and from more rank and file groups and individuals. It was incredible to see the variety of left currents coming together on those rallies, from the Palestine solidarity movement to LGBT groups, to revolutionary socialists, to much more moderate groups in or around the *Parti Socialiste* ("PS").

As a result the *Nouveau Front Populaire* (NFP) was formed quickly and a detailed, fairly radical [manifesto](#) was published, which remains the reference text for a potential NFP government.

I said the vote share was not the main reason for the different outcomes, but it did change a bit during those few weeks. Many more people voted for all parties, with participation rising to historic heights. Young people who largely stayed home for the European elections voted for the national elections, overwhelmingly for the Left, as did black people and people of north-African descent. RN voters also turned out in greater numbers, but overall the far right lost a few percentage points, the Left gained a few, and the Macronist center recovered some ground while remaining in third position. It's impossible to compare the second round with the first or with the European elections given the different configurations, but there was a definite sense of dynamics for the Left and against the far right. Left wing voters were focused on making sure there should be as few RN deputies as possible and campaigned accordingly. Many centrist voters shared in that preoccupation, although some thought *La France Insoumise* ("[LFI](#)") (but not the PS) were just as dangerous as the RN.



In the aftermath of the second round of parliamentary elections at a rally in Paris, France, demonstrators climb on the statue in the Place de la République. Photo by [Martin Noda / Hans Lucas](#).

Tempest: *Was there a strategic voting arrangement between the Nouveau Front populaire and Macron's Ensemble coalition? What accounted for the second round voting?*

SJ: There was no arrangement. At no point did NFP and *Ensemble* representatives meet and discuss a strategy. The NFP took an immediate and unilateral decision to withdraw its candidates from the second round where they came third, i.e. when there was no chance of winning the seat anyway, and where staying would mean splitting the anti-fascist vote and giving the RN the possibility of winning the seat.

This in turn put pressure on the Macronists and on the traditional right-wing party, *Les Républicains* (LR), to do the same. Their position was muddled, with no clear call to vote for the best place candidate against the RN in every situation. As it turned out, most *Ensemble* and LR candidates in third place did withdraw, with some notable exceptions leading to a few seats which

could have been won by the Left going to the RN. This demonstrated that the only serious antifascists were the NFP. This is very important for the future.

Tempest: *What is the state of the RN and the French right generally? Prior to the election, it seemed as though the far right had increasingly been able to integrate itself into mainstream politics and was gaining hegemony, and broader political acceptance, over the traditional right. How, if at all, has this dynamic changed with these elections?*

SJ: Macron and the mainstream right have played a very dangerous game by going along with Marine Le Pen's strategy of normalization. This has been most evident in the media, where the RN's smoother image has been taken at face value. The extent of investigation into the RN's racism was to ask Le Pen if she was racist, inane segments about Le Pen's love for cats or her lieutenant Bardella's appeal on TikTok, etc. It had its political equivalent with Macronist deputies in 2022 voting for the RN to head parliamentary committees, hold the vice-presidency of the assembly, etc. The RN has reciprocally supported Macron's camp in a [number of votes in parliament](#).

But while it is clear that the Macronists and LR share a lot with the RN in terms of policies and even language, they remain distinct forces, if only in organizational terms. The RN is an extremely top-down organization, with Marine Le Pen having the final say on absolutely everything. The Macronists and LR are much looser traditional bourgeois parties, where having a local base as mayor or deputy means you can do pretty much what you want.

Interestingly, this time around, the Macronist deputies have not voted for the RN to hold important posts in the National Assembly. Macron himself denounced this, but he is now largely considered a spent force. The constitution bans him from running for president again at the end of his mandate, and the decision to call a snap election was seen as an own goal by his deputies.

One of the great merits of the NFP campaign has been to unmask the RN for what it is : a party founded by ex-collaborationists, with a fascist core to this day. The fact that one of the actual legal founders of the then Front National was an ex-member of the SS was suddenly brought to national attention, as were the antics of a number of RN candidates for the elections. One candidate was photographed wearing a [nazi cap](#), another had run an holocaust-denying bookshop, various racist and homophobic utterances were [unearthed](#), etc. Many of the candidates were also simply absent, or unable to answer simple questions about their programme.

Here's the paradox: the RN has advanced massively during this campaign. It came first in the European election and the first round of the legislative elections, it has more deputies than it ever had. But it was rejected as a party to rule France. Worse than that, it has been upstaged by the Left as the most likely alternative to Macron.

It's up to us to weaken them further, by developing organizations, making sure there's a Left, trade union, anti-racist presence to counter the influence of reactionary ideas, and pushing for social improvements both through an NFP government and through direct struggle. Importantly there needs to be an ongoing specific fight against the RN, in order to stop them from developing an active membership.

For this remains their great weakness. In [Jean-Marie Le Pen's days](#) there was a real effort to build a party with an active membership, i.e. people who could give out leaflets, put up posters, and even physically attack opponents. He would hold big rallies, with sometimes tens of thousands of attendees. Marine Le Pen has distanced herself from this strategy, relying instead both on the media to gain supporters and on the massive support she enjoys within the police to enforce her power once she gets to office.

Tempest: *Can you politically characterize the NFP and its constituent parts? How, if at all, have the elections impacted the relative balance of power among the parts (e.g. La France Insoumise, Socialist Party, far Left)?*

SJ: There are two ways of looking at this. One is to evaluate the relative strengths of the main parties in the NFP in terms of how many seats in the National Assembly each one has. LFI is still the biggest force, but not by much relative to the PS. The reason more winnable seats were allocated for the PS than in 2022 is the good performance of their list in the European elections (14 percent, while the LFI list got 10 percent). The Greens and the Communists are smaller forces but they can tip the balance.

But you also have to look at the wider political dynamics. On the ground LFI managed to get tens of thousands of people to campaign, both existing activists and newer, younger people. The other parties don't have the same power of attraction. Further, many organizations joined the NFP or have expressed support for it, including the CGT trade union. This is quite an important step as in France trade unions usually avoid involving themselves in electoral politics.

[T]he campaign saw an explosion of activity, with hundreds of thousands of people campaigning in one way or another for the NFP, marching, putting up posters, leafleting, going from door to door, etc.

Generally speaking the campaign saw an explosion of activity, with hundreds of thousands of people campaigning in one way or another for the NFP, marching, putting up posters, leafleting, going from door to door, etc. Very often this was coordinated by the main parties especially LFI, but also via other, independent networks. Two mass rallies were called by independent media, with tens of thousands of people gathering in the *Place de la République*. Many local marches took place, called nationally by trade unions, or more locally by NFP-supporting organizations. I know of people who had no connection at all to any political organization who decided they would make their own posters and put them up by themselves.

The conflict between this popular push and the media propaganda barrage against the Left meant that the moderate Left had to clarify its position in order to defend its strategy of unity with the more radical elements. One particular bone of contention was solidarity with Palestine. During the European election campaign LFI suffered a deluge of accusations, mainly due to the fact it had held fast to its position of solidarity with Palestine and against Israel's genocidal war. Its position was actually moderate, focusing on respect for international law. But even this was too much for the mainstream, and led to a deluge of unfounded accusations of antisemitism. Those were happily taken up by the RN, to the extent that the notion that LFI were now the real racists became almost common in the media.

To their shame, the PS and the Communist Party/ *Parti communiste français* (PCF) were only too happy at that time to distance themselves from LFI, in the competitive context of the European elections. But once the national elections were called, they were faced with a stark choice : either stand on their own, getting a small number of seats and being accused of opening the door to the RN's coming to power, or joining forces with LFI as they had done in 2022. Once the NFP was formed the PS and PCF behaved correctly, quickly turning their fire on the RN, at last stating the

obvious, i.e. that a party which takes its roots in the Vichy collaborationist regime has no right to call Left parties antisemitic, and that its policies remain xenophobic and racist to the core.

This doesn't mean the unity will last forever. The tension between LFI and the PS remains very high, as was shown during the negotiations over who should be the NFP prime minister. But right now it seems very difficult to break, especially given the Left coming first and Macron's obstinacy in denying it the possibility of forming a government. The mass politicization during the campaign means there are a lot of new activists for whom unity around the NFP programme is central.

Tempest: *What is the political significance of choosing Lucie Castets as the NFP prime ministerial candidate? How do you expect a government to be formed, given the lack of any electoral majority?*

SJ: To understand the significance of this, we have to go back a bit. There's a lot of speculation about why Macron decided to call a snap election, but I think it is clear he was counting on the division of the Left to allow him to once again appear as the only way to stop the far right coming to power. The fact the NFP was rapidly formed with a common detailed and fairly radical programme was a big blow for him. Similarly the very fact that someone has been chosen as the NFP's choice for prime minister is in itself a victory, even if the negotiations were more arduous this time. Macron refuses to admit defeat, and is still hoping against hope he can break the NFP and patch up an alternative majority but he can't pretend the NFP is not ready to govern.

Lucie Castets is a compromise candidate between the main parties of the NFP. She's a member of none and was almost completely unknown before being nominated. She has been a member of a collective for the defense of public services and has also been present in the media voicing [opposition to Macron's pension reforms](#). Right now the campaign to get her to form a government is a campaign for unity on a left-wing basis, for lowering the pension age, raising wages, etc.

Even without a parliamentary majority, i.e. without the ability to pass laws, an NFP government could do a lot. Certain things can be done by governmental decrees, such as raising the minimum wage. The whole education system is run directly by the ministry, as are the police, which is a rather important fact given the level of repression and racist police violence under Macron. So the demand for an NFP government makes sense both in political and in immediate practical terms.

The French constitution gives the president a lot of power, so Macron may choose to prevaricate as he is doing right now, using the Olympic games and the summer break as an excuse. But he can't go on for long with a now completely illegitimate government (which has actually resigned but is still in place while a replacement prime minister has not yet been named by Macron). Even if we don't get an NFP government, it's an important demand to raise, if only in pedagogical terms. There may be new elections next year, and we'll be able to say "Macron has tried to deny the result of the last elections, now is the time to give the NFP a clear majority." Just as important, or more important, in every strike and every struggle we can say the government has no legitimacy, the legitimacy is ours.

Tempest: *From the perspective of the revolutionary Left and the [NPA-l'Anticapitaliste](#), how would you characterize the discussion and debate that took place in the lead up to the decision to participate in the NFP? Have the conditions for the growth of the revolutionary Left changed in the course of these elections? What impact on the trade unions and social movements?*

SJ: This debate had basically already taken place before the European elections. The NPA split in 2022 in large part because of a different approach to unity work, when we had already decided to support the NUPES which was a forerunner of the NFP. In my organization ([NPA-l'Anticapitaliste](#)) there was no doubt the NFP had to be supported and we actually joined it, albeit as a very junior

partner. Philippe Poutou was the NFP candidate in one constituency. Philippe was our presidential candidate and is nationally known, and widely loved as a genuine activist, so this gave a good deal of energy to the general campaign, and brought us massive sympathy. The fact that unity could be formed from the PS to the NPA when faced with the immediate threat of a fascist party coming to power was a real boost for the whole Left.

Naturally this doesn't stop us from having our own politics, our own estimation of the limits of the NFP program, and of a strategy which is entirely focused on elections. Many of the activists who were campaigning for the NFP are very receptive to the notion that even if we get an NFP government, there will be a need for strikes, demonstrations, and so on, so we have a real audience.

[B]y being part of the general movement against fascism and for left-wing policies as has coalesced around the NFP, the revolutionary Left can find a wide audience and grow.

Other organizations stood aside from the NFP, such as *Lutte Ouvrière*, the *NPA-Révolutionnaire*, *Révolution Permanente*. The arguments vary a little, but to my mind they share the same basic weaknesses: the RN is seen mainly as just another version of bourgeois politics and there is [no immediate fascist danger](#). They will argue that instead of the NFP there should be a broad movement, elections don't matter but [we'll stand our own candidates](#) anyway. To me these are all very abstract, sectarian positions. On the contrary, by being part of the general movement against fascism and for left-wing policies as has coalesced around the NFP, the revolutionary Left can find a wide audience and grow. We have been weakened by the splits and therefore have to start again from a low level of membership, but there definitely was an impressive surge in contacts from people wanting to join the *NPA-L'Anticapitaliste* during the weeks around the elections.

It has to be acknowledged LFI remains the most important point of attraction even to revolutionary-minded new activists, because of its size and reach, but so far it has failed to build a democratic membership organization with a capacity to act on all fronts. It remains a reformist organization with a focus on electoral action within the confines of the nation state. We definitely have to engage with them, as with many other organizations, trade unions, groups organized around specific issues such as feminism, environmental politics, antiracism, etc. which have also seen a rise in people wanting to join. There is every reason to think the coming months will be full of opportunities as well as challenges, and this means our responsibility to engage in the general movement for left policies and against the far right is particularly high.

Tempest

Sylvestre Jaffard

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and or French.

P.S.

Tempest

<https://tempestmag.org/2024/08/the-french-elections-and-the-defeat-of-the-far-right/?s=09>