

France's Left Still Needs to Broaden Its Base

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France's elections in July handed a surprise first place to the New Popular Front, which is now demanding the right to govern. To really change the country, it needs to broaden its base of support among nonvoters and the working class.

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Lucie Castets (L), candidate of the New Popular Front for prime minister, walks alongside MEP Manon Aubry in the southeast of France, August 24, 2024. (Nicolas Guyonnet / Hans Lucas / Hans Lucas via AFP / Getty Images)

France's parliamentary [elections](#) went better than expected for the Left. While polls predicted victory for Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National, her defeat in the July 7 runoff votes was a relief for the left-wingers who rallied against her. Their Nouveau Front Populaire (NFP) alliance took 193 seats in the 577-member National Assembly, against 166 for President Emmanuel Macron's allies and 142 for Le Pen's supporters.

Seven weeks on, the picture is hardly rosy. This is partly because of the basic numbers : the Rassemblement National was still the biggest party by vote totals, and had already in June's European election surpassed ten million votes. In the French parliamentary election, voters from the center and the Left [rallied against](#) the far right and denied it a majority. But this, and even the NFP's ultimate first-place finish, was more a "dam" against Le Pen's party than a real show of mass support for the Left.

Moreover, even after Macron's incumbent prime minister, Gabriel Attal, promised to resign, his government remains in place. The Left had an important moment at the polls. But with many challenges ahead, this looks more like a reprieve than a real victory.

Alliance of Circumstance

Formed after Macron called snap elections in June, the NFP was an alliance of circumstance between the left-wing parties, from Jean-Luc Mélenchon's France Insoumise to the Greens, Communists, and Socialists. Yet if this was crucial to resisting the Rassemblement National, there are still many uncertainties about the NFP's future.

After days of conflict-ridden talks following the election, the NFP nominated [Lucie Castets](#), an activist for the defense of public services, as its candidate for prime minister. However, with the Paris Olympics, the stalling of negotiations, and president Macron's pushback, it seems that an NFP-

led government is becoming ever-less likely.

Recently, the president received the leaders of the NFP parties and Castets. But it seems that he is stubbornly [refusing to appoint](#) her as prime minister, to even try and implement the NFP's program. Since the pretext for this is a refusal to allow France Insoumise to enter government, this weekend Mélenchon said that his MPs could support a Castets-led cabinet even without directly joining it. This exposed Macron's real agenda — stopping any prospect of a left-wing government committed to a rupture with neoliberalism.

Yet there are deeper problems. While the NFP has the largest number of MPs, it has neither an absolute majority, nor even the biggest share of voters behind it. This also raises the question of how to broaden the left-wing bloc into a majority that can govern.

One approach means [breaking up](#) the NFP. Indeed, the alliance's more centrist elements have floated a pact with Macron's own camp — an idea promoted by more right-wing figures in the Parti Socialiste such as former president François Hollande, former prime minister Bernard Cazeneuve, and the liberal-left's rising star [Raphaël Glucksmann](#). Such an alliance would exclude only "the extremes" of Rassemblement National and France Insoumise. Recently, this idea was [proposed](#) by current premier Attal, who wanted to form a government ranging from the Right to the Communist Party.

France Insoumise's idea of expanding the NFP's support instead looks to future elections, based on the idea of using a radical discourse to win over current abstainers — the so-called "fourth bloc" apart from the Left, the Macronites, and Le Pen's base. There are also those like François Ruffin — an MP who recently broke from France Insoumise — who insist on the need to win back the parts of the working-class electorate most likely to vote for Le Pen, especially in rural and small-town France. The claim that these voters can be won back on the basis of their class interest will likely be among the more controversial debates on the Left in coming months.

On the Ground

For several years, the question of the Rassemblement National's electorate has been a recurring theme in debates on the Left. More specifically, the question of how to broaden the left-wing electorate is posed in a moment when it is conspicuously absent from whole swaths of national territory.

Following the initial warning that came from the 2022 parliamentary elections, several scholars have examined these gaps in the left-wing electorate. Firstly, the Institut Jean Jaurès, under the direction of Thibault Lhonnor and Axel Bruneau, carried out an analysis of the so-called "[France of the sub-prefectures](#)," referring to areas far from the major cities, with significant social divides, which today provide key support for Le Pen's party.

Then, economists Thomas Piketty and Julia Cagé produced an [analysis of voting](#) in France since 1789, and put forward the idea of "socio-spatial" class. They spoke of a new electoral dynamic molded by voters' place of residence (smaller or bigger towns, richer or poorer areas) combined with their more strictly economic position. On this reading, the fundamental difference between the Rassemblement National's working-class electorate and the one that backs the Left lies in the different kinds of areas they live in.

Still, a criticism often leveled at this approach is the lack of consideration given to questions of identity, which have become decisive for the far-right electorate. Recently, sociologist Félicien Faury

published a [book](#) based on his research on the Rassemblement National's middle-class electorate in southeastern France. One of his key findings is the primacy of issues of identity and racism as a driving force behind the Rassemblement National vote.

This gets to the heart of the current debate on the Left, which can be roughly described as a clash between Ruffin and Mélenchon, even if it also goes beyond these two figures. The question is : Is racism producing an antagonism between the working classes in the suburbs of the main cities and the "white" working classes — and is such a conflict really inevitable ?

As French politics divides into a three-cornered contest, questions of identity are surely playing a key role in shaping the political map. This is particularly true of the [working classes](#), whose worldview can be radically different, depending on their material living conditions (income, place of residence, etc.), and who take clearly different stances on questions of identity.

The current electoral map includes both center-left voters who themselves embrace the neoliberal paradigm, and working-class people who vote for the far right. The prospects for expanding the NFP's base into either group, without breaking up the left-wing bloc that exists already, are surely complicated.

Minority in Society

The left-wing electorate is clearly a minority in society. Despite the unprecedented mobilization ahead of the recent election, and the increased turnout, the NFP scored 28 percent in the first round — only slightly more than in 2022. If it won more seats than its competitors, it is still far from a stable majority. The Left achieved significant scores among certain sectors of the population, but which are unrepresentative of France as a whole : mainly centered in the large cities and the working-class suburbs, among young graduates, public employees, and working-class immigrants.

This also contrasts with the "de-toxification" of Le Pen's party, which is today allowing it to reach into parts of the electorate that had previously presented it with difficulties, for example, the [economic elites](#). Its ideas, its talking points, and its worldview are not only shared by many French people (presumably including many of its ten million-plus voters) but are the basis around which media-political debate has been framed for all too long now. Outside of markedly left-wing constituencies where it still struggles, the Rassemblement National voter increasingly looks like [any other kind](#) of voter.

We may then deduce that the primary challenge is to get away from the Rassemblement National's chosen themes, instead framing politics around the Left's favored social issues. It's common for social crises to accentuate identity crises among populations feeling economically or culturally insecure. The Left, then, has to find ways of reassuring these populations. This isn't just about having a program that responds to social problems — something the Left already has. Rather, it has to use this moment to shift the political focus to these problems rather than eternal polemics around Islam and immigration.

Crisis of Democracy

France is in many ways living through a slow-motion version of a crisis that other European countries have seen already. With the weakening of parties' traditional roots, and a democracy that mobilizes a shrinking share of the population, France's institutions are engulfed by an increasingly tense battle in which no party or even coalition can claim a majority.

However, even faced with a crisis like this, it would be a mistake to think that the party system cannot stabilize itself on new bases. This is what has happened in other European countries undergoing similar political crises. In fact, France is currently one of few exceptions (along with Belgium and Ireland) in which this stabilization has not already taken place to the detriment of a marginalized left, no longer able to mobilize en masse.

The Left has an often disastrous penchant to [divide and quarrel](#). But it's also important to define clear political limits. The hope of the reemergence of a loosely progressive liberal left is an especially [dangerous illusion](#), inconsistent with the political conflicts that would be needed to pursue a transformative policy within the neoliberal EU framework. Moreover, although the Left is a minority in society, it also needs a certain coherence in order [to advance](#) among a volatile electorate that may easily turn to abstention if it is disappointed. So, it is essential to maintain a clear and consistent approach.

At present, no single left-wing party or figure can claim hegemony over the left-wing bloc. In this regard, it would be useful to create a genuine space for debate within the NFP rather than just add together its member parties at election time. However, the competition among these parties makes this difficult to achieve in practice. Another hope lies with the social movements, and the trade unions in particular. The parliamentary elections in fact brought a historic first as the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT) called for a vote for the NFP, in a country where unions have always strongly guarded their independence from politics.

Faced with a still-rising far right and a media system that is preparing the ground for Le Pen, the Left has a historic responsibility. It would be a trap to ignore the cultural antagonisms among various parts of the population, including *within* the working classes, that make it difficult to reconcile them on the ground of a common class interest. At the same time, it's just as illusory to believe that the Left has a sufficient base to govern, with an at best temporary majority.

These are two sides of the same dilemma currently facing the Left. To win, it will be essential to create an electoral dynamic, to build the political contest around its own chosen themes, and to form a bloc in which a majority of French people — from the suburbs or the small towns — can each identify.

One first proposal is set to be published by the Institut de la Boétie, a foundation close to France Insoumise. It will advocate a strategy centered around radical social program and a cultural battle against racism. This seems to fit into a more long-term war of position — and supposes that cultural divides can eventually be overcome. This is surely open to debate, given the depth of such antagonisms within French society. Above all, there's a lot of work to do to counter the far right — and turn around the effect of decades in which the Left's strength has declined.

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• Jacobin. 08.26.2024 ;
<https://jacobin.com/2024/08/france-left-nfp-voter-base>