

# European elections: what's at stake with the vote in France

Monday 22 April 2024, by [ESCALONA Fabien](#) (Date first published: 21 April 2024).

**European Union countries head for the polls in June to elect, country by country, their future members of the European Parliament. In France, the elections coincide with the mid-term point in Emmanuel Macron's presidency and that of parliament, where no party has an absolute majority, and the poll in June represents the first nationwide test of political opinion since 2022. While they are of a so-called "second order", they are also typically the stage for voters to cast aside strategic choices and display their true preferences. Fabien Escalona reports.**

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France goes to the polls on June 9<sup>th</sup> in elections to choose its own future members of the 720-seat European Parliament, alongside country-by-country voting across the European Union.

When the counting of votes is over, the one thing that is already certain is that those parties in France which do badly will roll out well-prepared arguments about how the European poll has little significance with regard to the presidential and legislative elections due in three years' time.

They will point to the atypical nature of the European elections - held halfway through France's current presidential and parliamentary terms - which traditionally attract a far lower turnout than in the presidential poll, the pinnacle of the French electoral cycle. They will also underline that those who do turn out to vote in European elections are generally of a higher social position and age than those who take part in other polls.

If, as opinion surveys of voting intentions indicate, French President Emmanuel Macron's Renaissance party comes in well behind the far-right Rassemblement National (RN) party - which the surveys presently forecast will lead the poll with close to a third of votes - it will surely point out that France's governing parties, in general, achieve a mediocre score in European elections.

Meanwhile, if the radical-left La France Insoumise party finds itself behind the Parti Socialiste (PS) and its ally Place Publique (PP), it will explain that such a poor showing in comparison with the relative success of its figurehead Jean-Luc Mélenchon in the 2022 presidential elections (who came third in the first round, behind Macron and the RN's Marine Le Pen), was due to a low turnout among working class voters.

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## How the European elections work, in brief

The elections to the European Parliament – the legislative assembly of the European Union (EU), based in the eastern French city of Strasbourg – are held every five years (those this June will be the first since the UK's departure from the EU in 2020). A total of 720 seats are up for grabs in polling across all 27 EU member states, and the number of seats allocated to each of those countries is degressively proportional to population size. Germany has the most, with 96 seats, followed by France, with 81 seats.

All of France's principal political parties, and many smaller ones, will be represented in the poll, held under a system of proportional representation, when they present a single list of candidates – whose numbers vary from party to party – to become Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). Each list has a lead figure, whose fellow candidates are featured in a descending order, and just how many are elected – or not – depends upon the percentage of votes cast for each list.

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Such self-justifications might include a part of the truth, but would they be truly convincing? And should the European Parliament elections be considered, as some argue, to be largely unrevealing about the reality of national elections – the subject of greater media attention and party strategy-making?

One could argue that by citing a [1980 analysis](#) by political scientists Karlheinz Reif and Hermann Schmitt, which characterised European Parliament elections as “second-order national elections”. This was based on studying the first European elections of 1979, and concluded that, like in regional and local elections, they did “not precisely reflect the ‘real’ balance of political forces”. While not fully taking into account the diversity of electoral configurations in European countries, the premises of Reif and Schmitt's arguments have mostly, but not always, proved true over time.

In her essay *Sociologie des comportements politiques* (The sociology of political behaviour), French political scientist Nonna Mayer, a member of France's National Centre for Scientific Research, and director emerita at the Centre for European Studies and Comparative Politics at the Sciences Po school in Paris, said of European elections: “Electoral participation is systematically weaker than in a national poll, the results are unfavourable to governing parties, more favourable to small rather than large parties, and encourage a vote of no confidence from the electorate.”

In the case of France, that has translated into the breakthroughs, more or less spectacular, of political formations which prove unable to keep the momentum going in the long run. Among examples of this are the European elections in 1994. A respectable score of 12% of votes cast achieved by a centre-left list of candidates (the newly formed *Énergie radicale*, which emerged from the *Radicaux de gauche* movement), led by French business tycoon and maverick politician [Bernard Tapie](#), gave them briefly the hope of emancipation from the dominant *Parti Socialiste*. But that perspective would fade after just a few months.

In the European elections in France in 1999, the veteran Gaullist Charles Pasqua headed a list of candidates in partnership with hard-right maverick Philippe de Villiers. After coming second with a

score of 13.1% of votes cast, the pair launched a rightwing sovereigntist party called Rassemblement pour la France, which very soon after became divided, after its two founders fell out, and marginalised.

As for France's Greens, who have always obtained their highest scores during European elections, they have established themselves as a perennial force among French political parties. But the electoral potential suggested by their achievements in the European polls has never translated into any significant gains in French parliamentary or presidential elections. In the European poll in 2009, they achieved a score of 16.3% of votes cast, almost equalling the tally of the Parti Socialiste, but in the subsequent presidential elections in 2012 they obtained just a seventh of that score (2.31% of votes cast), and around a third in the legislative elections that followed soon after.

### **The exception of the far-right**

Nevertheless, the story of the European elections in France is not only about short-lived successes, as illustrated by the case of the far-right Rassemblement National party (the former Front National). The party was at the centre of "two major moments in electoral evolution in France" observed Florent Gougou, senior lecturer at political sciences school Sciences Po Grenoble, and the setting of both was the European elections.

The first was in 1984, when the Front National, then led by Jean-Marie Le Pen, its founder, achieved its first electoral gains at a national level, when it garnered an 11.1% share of votes cast. For a long time after that, the party would achieve much the same share (or even a few points above) in national and regional elections. During the European elections of 2014, the Front National, then led by Marine Le Pen, the founder's daughter, won a 25.2% share of the vote, a level that would also be maintained, and ultimately increased, in national elections over the following years. Not only were the two European elections the stage for an enduring change in the party's electoral performances, but also the abstention rate proved to have no negative effect on this.

"That is all the more remarkable in that the working class is less mobilised in that [*European*] election," observed Gougou, "whereas the working class is at the centre of the electoral core of the RN. It is also [*a moment*] when European integration is talked about. By voting, one gives, in a certain manner, approval of the European system of governing, yet the RN is a nationalist party that is very critical of European integration."

### **The election pendulum of the radical-left**

Why, then, does the French radical-left appear less successful than the far-right in European elections? Manuel Bompard, national secretary of the radical-left La France Insoumise (LFI) party recently argued that if 50% of those who voted for Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the party's candidate in the 2022 presidential elections, cast their vote in favour of the LFI's candidates in the forthcoming European elections, it could reach a score of 20%. However, that scenario appears just as improbable as it was in the last European elections, in 2019, when the party gained just a 6.3% share of the vote.

On the one hand it is probable that the working-class electorate who vote LFI in national elections, notably those from the suburbs of large towns and cities, are less inclined to remobilise for European elections than supporters of the RN. That hypothesis is accredited by an example from the 2017 presidential elections. In the Paris suburb of Aubervilliers and the town of Liévin, north-east

France, Jean-Luc Mélenchon and Marine Le Pen both garnered 41% of votes cast. But in the 2019 European elections, when turnout significantly fell in comparison to that in 2017 (by 34% in Aubervilliers and 26% in Liévin), the score of the RN in both was well above that of LFI.

The other consideration is that, unlike LFI, the RN has no real rival within its electoral sphere. For Florent Gougou, LFI fights for the vote of an electorate that is “shared” with other parties, including the Greens and the socialists. “These are educated people who don’t vote in the same way according to the power stakes,” he said. “LFI is strong when the competition is about national power, but that changes when the stakes are weaker.”

### **An election that better reflects true preferences**

The radical-left party can always look forward to returning to the front of the stage with the approach of the 2027 presidential elections, and has tried to draw on that in its current strategy for the June elections. Its likely candidate in 2027, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who ran for president in both 2017 and 2022, has declared the European elections to be “the first round” of the 2027 presidential poll.

But if political parties see their clout reduced in European elections as opposed to those for the presidency, it is not only because the turnout is different but also because a section of their potential electorate turns towards others.

“During the European elections, the constraints on voters loosen up,” commented Anne Jadot, a senior lecturer in political sciences at the University of Lorraine. “A presidential election favours a ‘strategic vote’, which is supposed to be ‘useful’, or a ‘barrier’ [*editor’s note: when a section of the electorate will vote for a candidate they would not normally choose in order to keep out another, such as when the second and final round was, in both 2017 and 2022, a choice between centre-right Emmanuel Macron and far-right Marine Le Pen*]. On the opposite, in this ballot with less at stake, and held under proportional representation, it is the logic of a protest vote and an ‘expressive’ vote – when one gives free rein to one’s true preference – that is encouraged.”

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I wouldn’t bet on there being an appalling turnout.

Anne Jadot, political scientist

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It should be noted that the turnout in France for the 2019 European elections was more than that in the legislative elections of 2017 and 2022. The 2019 poll recorded a turnout of 52.2% of registered voters, a proportion never reached since the European poll in 1989, while that in legislative elections is on an increasingly downward trend.

*Above: turnout in France’s legislative elections (in red) and the European Parliament elections held in France (in blue). Move your cursor over the dots to bring up precise data. © Infographie*

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“In 2019, the European elections were the first [*of any*] to be held at a national level since 2017,” said Anne Jadot, referring to the 2017 presidential election won by Emmanuel Macron and the ensuing legislative elections which returned a thumping parliamentary majority for his party. “That place at the start of the electoral cycle, which the electorate privileges for sending messages, is an important key regarding turnout. Often, in the past, local elections were organised ahead of the European elections. What’s more, in 2019 we returned to a ballot that was more legible, with lists [*of candidates*] on a scale of the whole of France, abandoning a ballot divided up among major regions, which made no sense for anyone.”

“This year, we’re in the same situation,” she observed. “So, I wouldn’t bet on there being an appalling turnout.” In as far as the level of turnout, to within a few decimal points, has in recent years played a decisive role on forming a majority in parliament, and therefore the capacity to govern, the balances of power that will emerge in the European elections are of importance. “Even if the nature of the election is different, there are the same structures of age, education and socio-professional categories,” added Jadot. “In terms of turnout, the major sociological inequalities always work in the same way.”

Which does not mean that the poll in June will foretell the result in 2027. The situations of the moment, and the electoral systems concerned by these differ, and the strategies of political parties can also evolve. But nevertheless, the scores that emerge in June will be far from insignificant.

## Fabien Escalona

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### P.S.

- MEDIAPART. 21 April 2024 à 19h01:  
<https://www.mediapart.fr/en/journal/france/210424/european-elections-what-s-stake-vote-france>
- English version by Graham Tearse.
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