

The far right and radical left after the European and French elections

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After the June European parliament elections, there was talk of a far-right wave given the vote for France's Rassemblement National (National Rally, RN) and other radical right forces. But a month later, the talk is of a radical left victory in France and a crushing defeat for the Conservatives in Britain. How do you explain this supposed swing? Is there a better way to understand trends in European elections?

The idea of waves tends to work in journalistic terms, but less so for analysis. Evidently, the far right has been steadily growing in Europe and is setting the national political agenda in several countries. This was ratified in the European elections. The far right is stronger than before and, above all, has achieved normalisation [in that is seen as a normal part of the political landscape]. However, it has not yet managed to break the hegemony of conservatives and social democrats in the European Parliament, who held onto their majority and re-elected Ursula Von der Leyen [as President of the European Commission].

The far right came first in six countries (France, Italy, Hungary, Austria, Belgium and Slovenia) and second in six more (Germany, Poland, the Netherlands, Romania, the Czech Republic and Slovakia). But it is important to also look at the percentage of votes. [Italian Prime Minister Giorgia] Meloni [and her radical right Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy)] clearly won with 28.7% of the vote, but the Partito Democratico (Democratic Party), led by Elly Schlein, held on with 24%. Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany, AfD) came second with 15.9%, but the real news was the abrupt fall in votes for the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Social Democratic Party of Germany, SPD), which only managed 13.9% — one has to go back to the 19th century to find a similarly bad result.

This is occurring within the context of a very fragmented electoral landscape and a strong mood of rejection towards traditional politicians. Even the slightly more institutionalised far right has had to deal with the emergence of new and more disruptive forces competing for their votes, such as Se Acabó la Fiesta (The Party's Over) in Spain, Přísaha a Motoristé (Oath and Motorists) in the Czech Republic and Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość (Confederation of Freedom and Independence) in Poland.

But it is not all one way traffic. In the Nordic countries — Sweden, Finland, Denmark — the far right

went backwards while the left did well, including forces to the left of social democracy. In Spain, a progressive coalition led by the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party, PSOE) remains in power for now, and in Britain the Conservatives collapsed, largely due to Brexit. Labour swept the board in terms of seats, though not votes.

The context is different in France. Here, the left managed to quickly unite for the legislative elections called by [French President Emmanuel] Macron and select united candidates for every constituency. This, in the context of Macronism's crisis, meant it could present itself as an alternative bloc. Nevertheless, the situation is complex: Marine Le Pen's party won the most votes, though the "Republican front" [formed between the NFP and Macron's Ensemble (Together) coalition] ensured that RN came third in terms of deputies, despite rising from 89 to 142 seats in parliament. At the same time, this Republican front, which involved left-wing and Macronist candidates standing down for the second round in constituencies where the extreme right could win, benefited Macron more: despite his support dropping significantly, Macronists won more MPs than expected.

There has been a reorganisation of the radical right in the European Parliament. What are the main dividing lines between the different groups? Where do they stand on key issues such as the European Union and Russia's war on Ukraine? Why has complete support for Israel and opposition to antisemitism become such important banners for the radical right, given its traditional association with antisemitism?

Various realignments within the far right have occurred in the European Parliament after the elections, though things have not changed as much as it seems. The Identity and Democracy bloc shifted almost *en bloc* to Patriots for Europe, which is led by [Hungarian Prime Minister] Viktor Orbán and Le Pen. It represents a more pro-Russian sector. Surprisingly, they have incorporated the Spanish party Vox (Voice), which until now had been very close to Meloni. Vox's support has stagnated in recent months and it is unclear whether this realignment at the European level reflects internal differences. Meanwhile, AfD created a group with its allies: Europe of Sovereign Nations.

Without doubt, relations with Russia, especially in the context of the invasion of Ukraine, is a point of tension (the Visegrad group — Slovakia, Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic — has seen itself caught up in this conflict). Relations with the European People's Party (EPP) — the Christian Democrat/conservative right — which Meloni has long flirted with, is another source of divergence. The European Conservatives and Reformists Party (ECR), another radical right-wing group in the European Parliament, is closer to the EPP.

The truth is that since the 1980s, the far right has been unable to unite. The idea that the left is divided by ideology while the right is united by its wallets is attractive but not really true. There is a section of the far right that emerged from a culture of small groups riven with various programmatic discussions. To this we can add the more concrete problems of what the French call *la politique politicienne* (the politics of politicking). In several countries, there is more than one far-right group, each with their own links at the European level.

Regarding the EU, the far right has, in general, moved from a position of "exit" to seeking to change Brussels from within in order to make the Union less federalist and more sovereignist. Hungary's bid for EU enlargement (especially by incorporating the Western Balkans) could go hand in hand with this goal: more countries — with nationalist governments — within a less cohesive bloc. Orbán assumed the transitional presidency of the European Council using the Trumpist slogan "Make Europe Great Again" and has spoken of the need for a cultural counterrevolution in Europe. The far right did not achieve its expected majority, but its growth has impacted the EU.

Antisemitism is indeed a key issue because “anti-antisemitism” is one avenue through which the far right has sought normalisation. There are several overlapping issues here. One is the far right having replaced Jews with Arab Muslim as their target of discrimination, together with the fact that Jews have gone from being the “other” in the West to becoming the core of a “Judeo-Christian” West. Moreover, the fact Israel is governed by the far right, with its own radical ethno-nationalist positions, means there are many points of commonality between European and Israeli ultrarightists. Jean-Marie Le Pen referred to the gas chambers as a “detail” of World War II, but his daughter Marine has made the fight against antisemitism one of her banners. At the same time, the right has sought to manipulate the question of secularism and accused the left, especially the radical left, of “Islamism” and being a conduit for the Islamisation of European societies. This discourse sometimes reaches levels of absurdity: for example, Éric Zemmour of *Reconquête!* (Reconquest), went as far as saying that if the French left won, France would become a mixture of Soviet Stalinism and Sharia or Islamic law.

There is an important point to make here. It is true that, in the context of the rightward shift of Jewish communities, certain sections of the left that have lost Jewish votes have sometimes underestimated the issue of antisemitism. But indiscriminate accusations of antisemitism — often simply over criticism of Israel and the massacre in Gaza — are an obscene and dishonest manipulation and trivialisation of antisemitism, including when they come from official Jewish organisations.

While RN finished third in terms of deputies, it won the most votes. This included a high vote not only in the countryside, but among blue-collar workers. What factors explain RN’s continued rise?

The French far right has been steadily growing within the framework of a double process of normalisation or *dédiabolisation* (de-demonisation) — from above and from below. From above, because RN now has 142 seats in the Chamber of Deputies (in 2017 it only had 8), and today has elected representatives on numerous departmental and municipal councils. Its presence in political institutions has become increasingly “legitimate”. And from below, because voting RN, and saying so, no longer means being treated as a political pariah.

Generally speaking, the big issue in recent elections has been the cost of living and deterioration of public services, especially in peri-urban and rural France. But this is being linked to other issues, such as immigration. The far right has constructed a “moral economy” in which immigration is responsible for this deterioration and precarious living conditions.

[Sociologist Félicien Faury has shown](#) how this can operate in different, even contradictory, ways. On one hand, through the idea that immigrants are “stealing” jobs from the French (“A million unemployed is a million immigrants too many” was an old Lepenist slogan). On the other hand, there is the image of the immigrant as unemployed who, in this scenario, is not “stealing” jobs from the French but rather budget resources through the social benefits they receive. In this scenario, the French pay taxes to maintain foreign immigrants, derogatorily referred to as the *assistanat* [roughly translates as those living off welfare assistance].

In terms of RN’s electorate, there is a risk of trying to construct an overly caricatured typical voter. Generally speaking, its voters tend to be less educated and live in the interior of France: RN’s vote is lower in Paris, which is primarily contested by Macronists and the left. There is an RN vote that is tied to the issues raised by the *gilets jaunes* (Yellow Vests) protests [of 2018-19]: the deterioration of public services and sense of being treated with social contempt by the elites. We should also not forget the existing widespread sentiment of rejection towards traditional politicians and the media’s role (particularly 24-hour news channels), such as the Bolloré group’s channels, which hammer away

with an extreme right-wing discourse.

But we should also acknowledge that there are very different realities. In north-east France, there is indeed an RN vote from those who lost out from globalisation in old depressed industrial areas. Yet, as Faury shows, RN voters in south-east France — another stronghold — are very different: they are neither unemployed nor afraid of losing their jobs, yet still feel that resources are being distributed unfairly and complain that their personal efforts are being held back by taxes. They are people who are neither poor enough to benefit from social welfare nor rich enough to feel that their future is secure. Cutting across this in a very complex manner is the question of racism: the idea that people no longer recognise their own country, which has been transformed by multiculturalism. This, in one way or another, is linked to the theory of the “great replacement”.

Marine Le Pen’s decision to put forward 28-year-old Jordan Bardella as party president and candidate for prime minister has refreshed the far right’s image, including on social networks such as TikTok. All this contributed to its electoral breakthrough.

The feeling is that the Republican front — as the democratic *cordon sanitaire* (protective barrier) against the far right is referred to in France — is becoming increasingly difficult and costly, and that the dam is becoming evermore leaky. In fact, the big question — which no one can answer — is whether Le Pen will become president in 2027. This time round, the Republican front resisted better than expected. The process of de-demonisation has not progressed enough for RN to win. But it has progressed enough for it to grow in a way that seemed unimaginable in the past.

What can you tell us about the radical left La France Insoumise (France Unbowed, LFI), the NFP it helped form, and its campaign? What lessons can we learn from the NFP experience?

When Macron called surprise early legislative elections, he thought the left would be unable to unite again. Indeed, the left was entangled in various debates, as we saw in the European elections, including over Gaza and Ukraine. But the left responded quickly and effectively. Within 24 hours, it had formed the NPF. Its predecessor was the Nouvelle Union populaire écologique et sociale (New Ecological and Social People’s Union, NUPES), a united front established in 2022 but dissolved before the European elections.

The NFP spans from the Parti socialiste (Socialist Party) through to the LFI, passing through Les Écologistes (The Ecologists), the Parti communiste français (French Communist Party, PCF), and even the Nouveau Parti anticapitaliste (New Anti-Capitalist Party, NPA, of which Philippe Poutou was an NFP candidate but was not elected). Within 48 hours, united candidates were selected for all 577 constituencies across France. Within 72 hours, a common program was agreed upon, which is well to the left and took clear positions on Gaza and Ukraine that avoided double standards: condemning Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and supporting Ukrainian resistance; condemning Israel’s massacre in Gaza — as well as Hamas’ October 7 attacks — and recognising a Palestinian state. It also took clear positions on the need for an economic program to restore public services and workers’ purchasing power.

However, the crisis inside LFI — where [party leader] Jean-Luc Mélenchon operates as a genuine *caudillo* (party boss) — marred the NFP’s campaign. Instead of talking about their program, NPF candidates from the various parties had to talk about the “Mélenchon purges” of two critical LFI MPs who were excluded as candidates. Mélenchon also appeared in numerous interviews, which contributed to his instrumentalisation by the right who presented him as the future prime minister if the left won a majority in parliament, even though this was not part of the NFP agreement.

But the LFI's internal crisis is above all tied to its lack of internal democracy and organisation. For various reasons, Mélenchon, who in 2022 was a great asset for the left in terms of votes, is today a liability — because of his demonisation in the media and his absorbing cult of personality within the movement. During the second round campaign, François Ruffin — a leading left figure and sitting deputy standing in a northern French constituency where RN was the frontrunner after the first round — decided to leave LFI. With some difficulties, he was re-elected after assuring his constituents he would not sit in parliament with LFI.

There are also strategic discussions inside LFI, one of which is over how to maintain its influence in multicultural urban peripheries (*banlieues*) — some of which remain strongholds — without writing off small provincial towns, where the far right is strong. In Ruffin's words, the left has "three deficits": a geographical deficit, in terms of small-town France; a demographic deficit, in terms of the elderly; and a social deficit, in terms of low-income earners. For example, in the Picardy region where Ruffin ran, 13 of 17 elected deputies are far-right MPs. What is at stake is not just the question of votes, but the "soul" of the left. Putting together "chains of equivalences" to build a socio-political popular bloc is not easy.

But the NFP's success — no poll placed it first in terms of deputies — was also due to the dynamic it unleashed from below. Grassroots associations — trade unions, neighbourhood, professional and cultural groups, etc — and unaffiliated individuals appropriated the NFP's acronym and went out to campaign. Even young people with no previous campaigning experience went house-to-house to convince neighbours not to vote for the far right. This was perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the campaign, especially given the left everywhere finds itself in a rather bleak situation.

For the second round, it was decided to "form a barrier" against the far right that involved voting for Macronist candidates detested by the left. The system of constituencies with a second round of voting allows for this: if no one gets a majority, a second round occurs involving those who obtained more than 12.5% of the electoral roll (this normally means two or three candidates go through to this round). This is not possible, for example, in Britain, where whoever wins by one vote takes all. This Republican front ended up benefiting Macronism and the traditional right more, given they won more deputies than expected thanks to "smart voting" by the left.

More than a great victory, this is an opportunity the left can seize — or miss. But each sector has very different strategic outlooks and political calculations, which complicates unity. We have seen the difficulties in choosing a prime minister candidate. This would put pressure on Macron who, after the elections, has sought an alliance with the conservative right to form an unstable and precarious relative majority that could allow him to govern without the left.

These internal debates threaten to leave NFP voters disappointed. Of course, it is not a question of naively talking about unity: there are different visions, ranging from the PS to the LFI. The issue is finding common ground for action to process differences in the most democratic way possible.

One big election winner was the PS, which went from just about disappearing a few years ago to having almost as many MPs as LFI. How did it manage to revive itself? What impact might this have within the NFP? More generally, given the results for British Labour and the PSOE, can we say the fortunes of social democracy are changing in Europe?

When the PS collapsed electorally after François Hollande's government — PS presidential candidate Anne Hidalgo obtained just 1.75% in 2022 — it decided under the leadership of Olivier Faure to ally with the left within NUPES for legislative elections that same year. This decision provoked considerable internal resistance. In the recent European elections, each party went its own way. The PS managed to reposition itself by promoting an independent candidate, Raphaël

Glucksmann, son of philosopher André Glucksmann. Given his ideologically erratic past, Glucksmann opted to denounce his previous liberal positions and adopt a more classical social democratic discourse, albeit with a rather elitist style. A good debater, he managed to attract urban progressive voters who did not feel represented by Mélenchon.

In these elections, the major media outlets and Macronism virulently attacked the PS for supposedly “allying itself with antisemites”. On the other hand, the PS, which sees itself as a party of government, has to coexist with a left that is more radical on issues such as police violence. LFI deputies will, for example, say “the police kill”, which puts the Socialists on the spot in debates.

I do not think social democracy is changing. Social democracy has for some time been going through a very strong identity crisis, especially after its Third Way experiments. In some cases (Sweden, Germany) we can see a very cautious attempt at renewal, though without any great ideological audacity.

In the Spanish case, [Prime Minister] Pedro Sánchez has been able to interpret the moment — more because of his political savviness than due to any ideological reasons. He has positioned the PSOE as the axis of a progressive coalition that has so far survived, but is far from having consolidated any kind of ideological hegemony. The fact that the PSOE is still in government is mostly down to simple political maths: the conservatives of the Partido Popular [Popular Party] needed Vox, but Vox was a red line for the “bourgeois” nationalists of Catalonia and the Basque Country, so a right-wing majority became impossible. The space to the left of social democracy — Sumar, Podemos — has also collapsed, electorally and emotionally. Sánchez is politically very skillful, but his views are not in the majority among broader society.

Labour won in Britain — with fewer votes than when Jeremy Corbyn was leader — thanks to the unprecedented collapse of the Conservative Party. It remains to be seen whether [Labor leader Keir] Starmer’s positioning somewhere between the Third Way and more classical social democracy will pay off. For now, it appears he has not been able to generate much enthusiasm, though he does have a large parliamentary majority to pass reforms.

We will have to see if the PS will once again play a central role in French politics. Undoubtedly, the LFI is no longer as hegemonic on the left as in recent years, and internal divisions portend the emergence of new spaces. There is no certainty that the NFP will remain united, which will be key if the left is to be a major player in the coming period.

Taking all this into account, there are at least two possible readings of the French election results. The first is that broad left unity in the first round, and the tactical alliance with Ensemble in the second, were crucial to stopping RN. The other is that this has only slowed, but not stopped, RN’s rise. Furthermore it benefited the PS and Macronism at the expense of the radical left, and has allowed the RN to present itself as the only real opposition to the political class, as the NFP supported Macronist candidates and some of its affiliates may enter government. Which of these is more accurate? Or do you have a different reading? What lessons can we draw on how to best confront the radical right?

All of this is true. Democratic cordon sanitaires come with a cost. As part of the Republican front, the French left had to hold its nose and vote for figures such as repressive interior minister Gérald Darmanin and former prime minister Élisabeth Borne who is strongly associated with the unpopular pension reform. The problem is the same in the United States: stopping Trump means allying with mainstream Democrats. No doubt the far right will use this to demonstrate that they are the ones who represent something “different” and “new”.

Nevertheless, the French left has won in political-moral terms. It led the cordon sanitaire against the far right, which posed a threat to republican equality. However, it is a long way from ideologically convincing a majority of the population. Ideological rearmament is not easy. It will require combining theory and practice. When it comes to its program, the left today has little credibility anywhere.

It seems clear today that neither the radical left nor the social democrats can go it alone, and that broad progressive coalitions are needed. The big question is whether these coalitions can offer responses to the key issues of the day, which are, above all, reversing the crisis of the public sector and providing some certainty about the future. Beyond its advances and setbacks, new far right forces have managed to capture the mood of the times, the crisis of the future — viewed by many as a mix of dystopian and catastrophist scenarios — and the anxieties of the present.

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