

# Political Crisis in France: "Macron Has Few Options, None of Them Very Good"

Giovanni Capoccia, Professor of Comparative Politics at the University of Oxford, analyzes the political situation in France, situating the roots of the current crisis in the 2022 elections.

*By André Certã*

*December 5, 2024, 17:12 PM*

Since the dissolution of the National Assembly by French President Emmanuel Macron, French politics has entered a heated phase. The appointment of Michel Barnier, with the implicit support of Marine Le Pen's National Union, calmed tensions temporarily. However, the test of the 2025 social security budget and the insistence on Barnier approving it without Parliament's involvement led to the left and the far-right joining forces for a motion of no confidence, which toppled the government and prompted the Prime Minister's resignation.

In an interview with *PÚBLICO*, Giovanni Capoccia, Professor of Comparative Politics at the University of Oxford, states that the "roots" of the political crisis lie much earlier, in the 2022 legislative elections, which triggered a domino effect culminating in the current situation. Now, according to Capoccia, Macron has three possible courses of action, "none of them very good."

## **How Did We Get Here, and Why Did the Government Fall Over This Issue?**

Capoccia explains, "I believe the roots of this situation lie in the 2022 elections when the centrist government lost its majority. Macron had just won his second term, but in the legislative elections held in June that year, his parties did not secure a majority in the National Assembly. For about two years, the government stumbled without a parliamentary majority, cycling through different cabinets."

"The situation was such that, essentially, Le Pen benefited from the extreme-left's behavior both inside and outside Parliament and from the government's lack of majority. As a result, she could simply vote against the government while presenting herself as the responsible opposition."

This dynamic led to a rise in the National Union's poll numbers, which, following its strong performance in the European elections last June, induced Emmanuel Macron to dissolve Parliament in 2024.

## **Why Start with 2022?**

Capoccia clarifies, "I begin the story in 2022 because I believe it is the primary cause, not the dissolution. The dissolution was an attempt to prevent Marine Le Pen from sitting back and rising in the polls until she won the Presidency in 2027. The dissolution led to a situation where the center and most of the left formed electoral agreements to support their respective candidates."

This created a Parliament with three blocks: a far-right block; a centrist block, including moderate Republicans; and a highly heterogeneous left-wing coalition called the New Popular Front, which included the extremist France Unbowed, a mix of smaller, more moderate parties, and the Socialist Party, which increased its seats since 2022 but not enough to replace France Unbowed as the coalition's largest party.

### **The Appointment of Barnier**

Macron eventually appointed Michel Barnier as someone who could lean on the center while enjoying tolerance from the National Union. However, Barnier's government was essentially centrist and was tolerated by the far-right because the left-wing coalition refused to negotiate as a bloc.

During the budget debate, external factors—primarily Le Pen's legal troubles—led her to withdraw support for the government. This was how the crisis reached its current stage.

### **Could Barnier Have Avoided This Outcome?**

Capoccia suggests, "It's difficult to say with certainty, as we're not privy to the closed-door negotiations. However, in an interview last night on French television, Barnier mentioned that Le Pen had asked him to include one of two measures in the budget: the reinstatement of certain medication reimbursements that were planned for cuts or the indexation of some pensions. When Barnier adjusted the budget to include medication reimbursements, Le Pen demanded that pension indexation also be included."

He adds, "This indicates that it was probably impossible to appease Marine Le Pen because her likely objective was to bring down the government to divert attention from her legal troubles, which could render her ineligible for the next five years. The full truth may only emerge in the spring."

### **What Comes Next?**

Capoccia explains, "The ball is now in Macron's court. Any new government must present a budget, after which Parliament has 50 days to deliberate. In the meantime, a vote to extend the 2024 budget would likely pass, as opposition parties would avoid a government shutdown or Macron invoking emergency powers."

Macron's potential options are limited:

1. **Reappointing a Center-Right Government:** This would involve naming someone like Bruno Retailleau to propose a budget meeting the National Union's demands, forcing their support. However, this risks alienating centrists without guaranteeing far-right support long-term.
2. **A Center-Left Government:** This would require the Socialist Party to break with the New Popular Front, as a purely left-wing government would lack Parliamentary support. However, breaking the left alliance is politically risky under France's electoral system.

3. **A Technocratic Government:** Modeled after Italy's technocratic administrations, this would involve appointing a non-political figure like former Prime Minister Édouard Balladur. However, such a government would likely be short-lived.

Capoccia concludes, "There are no good solutions. The least unstable option would be a centrist coalition including moderate right and left parties, but forming such an alliance remains uncertain."

Finally, regarding the budget, Capoccia considers a U.S.-style government shutdown unlikely in France, as Macron would use constitutional emergency powers to prevent it.