

# France's Legislative Elections and the Uncertain Path to 2027

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As most expected, Marine Le Pen's *Rassemblement National* (RN) was the clear winner of the first round of the snap legislative elections in France, unexpectedly called by President Macron three weeks ago. Le Pen's party, allied with a rump *Les Républicains*, led by Eric Ciotti, obtained 33.1% of the votes. A coalition including moderate and radical left parties, the *Nouveau Front Populaire* (NFP), came second with 28.1%, while the centrist parties supporting Gabriel Attal's government received 21.3%. The mainstream right *Républicains* who refused to ally with the RN stopped at 6.6%.

The RN confirmed its strong showing at last month's European elections and more than doubled its votes in comparison to the last legislative elections of April 2022. Yet, an RN-led government is not a foregone conclusion.

## A Three-Way Competition

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Despite the RN's strong result, the outcome of these elections is going to be decisively influenced by the combined effect of three factors: the significant increase in turnout, which went from 47.5% in the 2022 legislative elections to 66.7%; the tripolar structure (left-center-right) of the French party system, which replaced the traditional left vs. right competition of the French 5th Republic when Macron rose to power in 2017 on a centrist platform; and the workings of the electoral system.

The French electoral system divides the country into 577 single-member districts. In each, parties can get to the second and decisive round of competition only if they receive a share of votes at least equal to 12.5% of the electors registered in the district. The real threshold, therefore, depends on turnout. In 2022, with a 47.5% turnout, parties had to clear a threshold that was *de facto* higher than 25%. The much higher turnout in these elections lowered the real threshold to around 18% in most districts (the exact level depends on the participation in each district), thus making it possible for centrist candidates supporting Macron to reach the second round in many districts. In 306 electoral districts, instead of the usual two-way competition, three candidates, in most cases representing the three main coalitions, qualified to run in the second round. For comparison, in 2022, there were only eight such "triangulaires".

## The Importance of Between-Round Agreements

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The outcome of these elections will therefore depend heavily on the agreements for mutual withdrawal that parties will make before the second round, scheduled for July 7. Immediately after the results were announced, all parties of the left and center coalitions publicly announced that they would form such agreements with the explicit goal of preventing the RN from attaining an absolute majority of seats, by concentrating votes on the candidates best placed to beat it in each district. Centrist leaders such as PM Gabriel Attal and ex-PM Édouard Philippe declared that they would not support some of the radical left LFI (*La France Insoumise*) candidates, but otherwise, all leaders of the center and left parties, as well as President Macron himself, committed to mutual support in a common anti-RN “republican front”. At the time of writing, less than 24 hours after the announcement of the first-round results, they had reached such agreements in 173 districts. This number is likely to increase further in the hours left before the official deadline (July 2) to field second-round candidacies.

By contrast, the RN has no prospect of similar between-round agreements. The party formed an electoral coalition before the first round with Ciotti’s faction of *Les Républicains*. The RN did not field candidates in 60 districts, where it instructed its voters to support Ciotti’s candidates. This is a numerically important coalition as it is symbolically significant. The abandonment of Jacques Chirac’s “cordon sanitaire” vis-à-vis the extreme right marked a historic change in the strategy of the post-Gaullist right, enhanced the “normalization” of the RN, and provoked an implosion of the *Républicains*, leading to Ciotti’s expulsion from the party.

The RN’s chances in the second round may still be improved by voters’ decisions, however. Some centrist voters may abstain if a leftist candidate is chosen to oppose the RN in their district, and vice versa—thus weakening the new-born “republican front”. Furthermore, despite denouncing Ciotti’s alliance with the RN, the other *Républicains* leaders did not participate in the anti-RN agreements and left their voters free to choose in the second round, which is likely to bring votes to the RN in some districts.

## Preparing for 2027: Three Scenarios

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Essentially, three scenarios can emerge from these elections. In all of them, the main political actors, while obviously attentive to the short term, will also be driven by the objective to position themselves in the best possible way to win the 2027 Presidential elections. This was likely the [overarching logic](#) of Macron’s decision to call snap elections too.

A first scenario is one in which the *RN secures an absolute majority*. This may happen on July 7 or, if the party falls just short of 289 seats, in the ensuing weeks if the party attracts the support of a few extra MPs in the National Assembly. In this case, a government led by RN chairman Jordan Bardella will govern in “cohabitation” with President Macron. This

outcome is unlikely to bring stability. As the electoral campaign has already shown, an RN government will backtrack on many of its promises and implement quite divisive policies. To avoid that the resulting unpopularity seriously erodes her chances to win the Presidency in 2027, Marine Le Pen (who will be the real decision-maker behind a Bardella government) will likely try to shorten the cohabitation period by pushing the RN to adopt a more polarizing stance, and generating a political or even a constitutional crisis that would induce Macron to resign before the end of his term. Some circles in the radical left, eager to take the fight against an RN government to the streets, may well make Le Pen's task easier.

As Bardella clarified during the campaign, if the RN only obtains a relative majority of seats, it will not form a government. With the RN at only a plurality of seats, centrist, moderate right, and left will try to form a "*republican front*" government, probably (if numerically possible) excluding LFI from the majority supporting it. This government, likely unstable and with a limited agenda, would realistically leave space for the RN to again position itself as the "true opposition", thus consolidating Le Pen's position as the frontrunner for 2027. At the same time, however, it would give the center and the left time to reorganize and support a small r "republican" candidate to oppose Le Pen. Presidential elections could also be called earlier by a carefully timed resignation by Macron at the best possible time to defeat Le Pen.

Finally, if neither an RN nor a "republican front" government is possible, a *technocratic caretaker government* may be installed for a year, which is the minimum period before a new dissolution is possible. All parties will have that time to realign and form new coalitions to confront the RN more effectively in 2025 when new elections would most likely be called.

As anticipated when Macron called early elections three weeks ago, none of these scenarios promise short-term political stability. What's clear is that they disrupt the post-2022 status quo, where Marine Le Pen was on track for an absolute majority and poised as the 2027 favorite, buoyed by a centrist minority government systematically hobbled in parliament and by a disruptive radical left. French politics now faces a crucial period of realignment and change to safeguard both liberal democracy and EU integration. The utmost urgency of this task will be starkly highlighted in any of the above scenarios.

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