

The French Fifth Republic Enters Uncharted Waters

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In calling a snap election on the evening of June 9, French President Emmanuel Macron aimed to achieve “clarity” on the will of French voters after his presidential list (14%) had been defeated in the European elections by Marine Le Pen’s far-right *Rassemblement National* (RN), which scored an unprecedented 33%. Yesterday’s elections did achieve clarity, but only in the narrow sense that it is now clear the French electorate is fragmented into four blocs –the left-wing New Popular Front, the centrist Ensemble, the moderate right party *Les Républicains*, and the RN— and, excluding non-aligned MPs, at least ten parties, depending on how they are counted. It is also evident that a large part of the French electorate is not ready to accept the rise to power of Marine Le Pen through her rather vacuous but telegenic dauphin Jordan Bardella, the 28-year-old politician she anointed as President of the RN. Finally, it is clear that the parties must deal with this new reality of French politics. *How* they will do so, however, is less clear.

A week ago, after the first round of elections, the RN and its allies from Eric Ciotti’s faction of *Les Républicains* (LR) were widely expected to form the government. Yet, the electoral barrage against them, informally called the “republican front,” worked against expectations. The RN ultimately came in third place with 143 MPs, behind the New Popular Front (NFP, 182 MPs) and Ensemble (168 MPs). After the first round, the leftist and centrist blocs strategically withdrew their weakest-placed candidates in more than 200 districts and instructed their voters to support the best-placed candidates to beat the RN in the second round. Their strategy bore fruit: voters turned out to vote (participation was up about 20 points from the previous legislative elections of April 2022) and mostly followed their parties’ instructions. Also, the LR faction that refused an alliance with the RN did much better than Ciotti’s rump party, thus burying any project of an organic alliance between the moderate and radical right for the foreseeable future.

Uncharted Waters

The center-left “republican front,” however, remains a negative alliance and is unlikely to turn into a government formula. Various parliamentary coalitions spanning from LR to the more moderate parties in the NFP may command enough seats to just clear the bar of the absolute majority of 289 MPs, but such numerical alliances are unlikely to be politically viable. On the one hand, LR, after reasserting themselves as the “real republican right” (outside the “republican front,” in which they did not participate) against the tendencies in

their midst to ally with RN, are unlikely to join a coalition including parts of NFP. On the other hand, it will be difficult for the parties in NFP to formally break with the radical La France Insoumise (LFI), the largest party in the coalition, to join an alliance with the centrists. To be sure, the declarations of LFI leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon that NFP should govern alone and apply its program by decree, if necessary, may drive a wedge between LFI and the other NFP members. His words, however, are likely just an opening gambit in what promises to be a very complex coalition negotiation that will realistically take the whole summer while France hosts the Olympic Games.

Although caution is very much in order in making predictions at this stage, the most likely outcome is probably a minority government with a restricted mandate to pass the budget this fall, “tolerated” in Parliament by some parties that are not explicitly part of the coalition supporting it. In other words, the “implicit confidence” system of the French Constitution, by which a government can be installed unless it is voted out by a majority in the National Assembly (as opposed to needing an explicit vote of confidence), is likely to make a difference like in 2022. This will, of course, only be a short-term solution until the current alliances have been redefined in view of the 2027 presidential elections, which remain both the big prize and the big unknown of this phase of French politics.

Did Macron Win His Wager?

Many commentators, including myself, argued that Macron’s decision to call snap elections a month ago represented a [high but calculated risk](#). Did Macron win his bet? He certainly shook up a *status quo ante* in which Marine Le Pen was cruising toward a victory in 2027. Thanks to the lack of a parliamentary majority for Macron’s governments after April 2022 and to LFI’s disruptive opposition, favoring street protests, extreme discourse, and unruly parliamentary behavior, Le Pen’s RN had managed to adopt the image of an institutional, moderate, “popular” opposition party that only the self-interested obstinacy of out-of-touch and privileged elites insisted on decrying as unfit for government.

To be sure, the RN remains a formidable force and has significantly increased the number of its MPs, but adopting this rhetoric will not be as easy as before. These elections indisputably showed that very large sectors of the French electorate refuse to consider the RN an acceptable party and are ready to vote strategically to prevent its rise to power. Moreover, about one-third of RN candidates were exposed as extremists or unrepresentable during the campaign. This was not due, as Bardella repeatedly maintained on TV, to the “hurry” with which the party had to select candidates due to Macron’s “irresponsible” decision to allow too little time for the electoral campaign. In fact, rather than being the outcome of occasional “casting errors,” those candidacies had been selected in March 2023 and offer a genuine image of the RN’s underbelly.

At the same time, however, Macron's decision may have sped up the end of his own political project. These elections have certainly revitalized the political center, which obtained a far higher number of MPs than any polls had predicted. However, important centrist figures such as current Prime Minister Gabriel Attal and ex-Prime Minister Edouard Philippe have publicly said that a new political alliance is necessary that goes beyond the boundaries of the "Macronist" coalition in power since 2017. The French President is rather unpopular at the moment, and centrist leaders are eager to distance themselves from him. However, it might be difficult to sideline Macron completely. For him, at stake is not his re-election—he cannot run again in 2027—but his legacy and potentially his future roles (including at the European level) given his young age. It will take time for the centrist parties to build a new political project and a new political alignment that includes parts of the moderate left and right. And most importantly, agreeing on a candidate who can represent this variegated coalition with good chances to beat Le Pen in 2027 will not be easy. Until then, Macron is likely to remain an important player.

After these elections, the French Fifth Republic steps into uncharted waters. In the short term, France's role at the heart of EU integration and as a key supporter of Ukraine remains steadfast. This stability is impressive, given most predictions. However, this new phase of French politics will be fragmented and fluid, demanding a recalibration to find a stable equilibrium while countering the far right. French moderate parties face a tough road ahead. Their success or failure will not only shape France's future but also reverberate beyond its borders.

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