

Parliamentary Elections day analysis: France on verge of political upheaval

Monday 1 July 2024, by [DEJEAN Mathieu](#) (Date first published: 30 June 2024).

A collapse in support for the centre-right camp of President Emmanuel Macron, a stronger leftwing alliance and a potentially game-changing breakthrough by the far-right Rassemblement National ... as voters head for the ballot box today for the first round of what is both an uncertain and an historic parliamentary election, Mediapart examines what is at stake for the main political groups taking part. Mathieu Dejean, Pauline Graulle, Youmni Kezzouf, Ilyes Ramdani and Ellen Salvi report.

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A week to agree on a manifesto and candidates, fifteen days to campaign, and a few hours to get a first impression of what the future National Assembly might look like. By [announcing the dissolution of the National Assembly](#) on the evening of June 9th, just as the Rassemblement National (RN) was registering historic scores in the European elections, Emmanuel Macron has accelerated the political calendar. He has thrown into turmoil a country that, for the first time since 1945, is at risk of handing the keys of power to the far-right.

In the space of three weeks - it feels more like six months - the political landscape has been completely upended. The various forces within it have forged alliances that would have seemed inconceivable until just a very short time ago. The leftwing factions have united at record speed under the banner of the Nouveau Front Populaire (New Popular Front) or NFP, the conservative Right has splintered, the centre-right presidential majority has sunk into depression, and the far-right has calmly advanced towards its goal: the office of prime minister.

Today, June 30th, voters are being called upon to vote in 577 constituencies to decide between 4,011 candidates. These snap parliamentary elections have generated significant interest, judging by the number of proxy votes taken up since June 10th: 2.1 million, double the number recorded in the 2022 election. A potential increase in participation could multiply the number of three-way races by effectively lowering the qualification threshold for candidates to progress from today's first round to next Sunday's decisive second round vote. To do so, a first-round candidate needs to attract the support of at least 12.5% of registered voters.

Here is an overview of what's at stake in the first round.

Jordan Bardella on the politics show 'Dimanche en politique' on France 3 television, Paris, June 16th 2024 © Photo Eliot Blondet / Abac

Far-right RN plays for time

“Demagoguery and good intentions have never made realistic policy.” This assertion from Jordan Bardella, president of a party – the far-right Rassemblement National (RN) – that has built its recent electoral successes on promising the moon with no regard for any inherent contradictions, is certainly not lacking in nerve. During this short campaign that was triggered by their strong result in the European elections, the RN has mainly tried to “reassure” voters, at the cost of numerous policy reversals and vagueness.

From the moment the National Assembly was dissolved, the far-right party has campaigned to install Jordan Bardella in the prime minister's official residence, Matignon, and he has [stated](#) he will not accept the role of prime minister without an absolute majority. “It's a choice between Jean-Luc Mélenchon and us,” he claimed, talking about the founder of the radical-left La France Insoumise (LFI). He is talking up the likely disappearance of the centre-right Macron camp so as to better position himself as a bulwark against the “widespread chaos” he says would result from victory by the united Left.

The chief purpose of signing an electoral pact with Éric Ciotti, president of the conservative Les Républicains (LR), a deal which involves few senior members of that party, was to allow Jordan Bardella to portray himself as the potential embodiment of a “national unity government” and to field candidates, in around sixty constituencies, from the far-right fringes or familiar faces from the studios of the CNews television news channel. As usual, the RN has nominated at least forty candidates who have made racist or anti-Semitic remarks.

The party has opted to present a minimal political plan that is focused on “emergencies” – the cost of living, law and order, and immigration – over future “reforms”. It cites the country's “near bankruptcy” to justify its U-turns on the social aspects of its manifesto. The core of the RN's discriminatory project, the introduction of national preference – preferred treatment for French citizens over foreign residents or asylum seekers – and the distinction to be made between French citizens and dual nationals, remains firmly in place. This would require a change to the Constitution in order to challenge the fundamental principle of equality among citizens.

“The actions we will implement are intended to start at Matignon and continue with Marine Le Pen at the Élysée [*editor's note, referring to the presidential election scheduled for 2027*],” repeats Jordan Bardella when the media points out that large parts of his manifesto require winning the presidency. Three-time presidential candidate Le Pen, who will stand trial on September 30th for misappropriation of public funds, claims she intends to lead any future majority in the Assembly to better prepare her bid for the Élysée.

Demonstration against the far-right in Paris on June 10th 2024 © Photo Jérôme Gilles / NurPhoto via AFP

The Left's unity on a knife-edge

"With the president in a weakened position, we're the only ones capable of blocking the far-right: it's between us and them," said Pierre Jovet, spokesperson for the Socialist Party (PS), summing up the strategy of the Nouveau Front Populaire (NFP). The threat of the far-right taking power has led to a unified response from the Left.

This [new alliance](#) aims to be more than just the coalition of parties that was the Nouvelle Union Populaire Écologique et Sociale (NUPES), the broad-left alliance that contested the 2022 Parliamentary elections. On the one hand, it seeks the broadest possible support from civil society and, on the other, the way it works is intended to be more collective. Gone are the squabbles and individual strategies, say its strategists, who want the NFP to embody a "democratic and republican bulwark".

To resist the far-right bloc, which has been invigorated by its unprecedented surge in the European elections, the united Left has rallied around a common programme that reflects the shift towards the social-democratic stance of Raphaël Glucksmann (whose party is called Place Publique and who campaigned as part of the Socialist Party grouping at the European elections). This re-centring symbolises the direction the NFP has set: this is to unite the Left in the first round of the election and to broaden its electorate in the second round to block the RN, which it will face in head-to-head duels in many constituencies. "We need to increase turnout among young people and in working class areas, where we are strong, and attract more centrist voters. These are the two issues that we have to focus on," explains Clémentine Autain, who is from the LFI.

For the NFP, the election will hinge on dozens of pivotal constituencies where the gap between the Left and the RN or the presidential camp was narrow in the 2022 elections. The NFP has therefore launched an [extensive grassroots campaign](#), energised by a significant influx of activists. However, it has to contend with some internal contradictions - [former socialist president François Hollande](#) and the former candidate of the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (New Anticapitalist Party) or NPA, Philippe Poutou, are running under the same banner. These contradictions have caused some turbulence within the alliance in recent days.

LFI at the heart of the divisions

To win, the NFP must counter a fierce campaign of demonisation, as evidenced by the [presidential camp's repeated use of rhetoric about "two extremes"](#), claiming the new leftwing alliance is just as much a threat to the country as the far-right RN. The presence of the radical-left La France Insoumise (LFI) in the coalition and LFI founder Jean-Luc Mélenchon's public support for it have been targeted in an unprecedented manner. Emmanuel Macron even suggested that victory by either the RN or LFI could plunge France into "[civil war](#)".

LFI founder Jean-Luc Mélenchon voting in the European elections in Paris, June 9th 2024. © Photo Arnaud Finistre / AFP

In response to this strategy, leftwing leaders have announced their commitment to the concept of being a republican barrier against the far-right, and LFI's partner parties in the alliance have generally resisted attempts at false equivalence, as exemplified by green senator Yannick Jadot. However, no one is fooled about the significant divisions within LFI itself.

The "purge" of five outgoing "non-aligned" MPs in that party has caused considerable internal

upheaval, as did the dissolution of the Parliamentary group chat a few hours before the candidate nominations. Since then, outgoing LFI MP François Ruffin, who on the night of the dissolution had quickly called for a “Popular Front,” has distanced himself from the party leadership, claiming that Jean-Luc Mélenchon is an “obstacle” to victory.

Mélenchon, former presidential candidate for LFI, who insists he neither wants to “eliminate” himself from nor “impose” himself for the position of prime minister, believes that Ruffin has isolated himself. Although the conflict remains largely subdued – despite some harsh tweets from LFI party officials directed at Ruffin – it sometimes muddles the coalition’s message, which needs to present a united front at this critical period.

PS: one step ahead on the Left?

Pronounced dead after the 2022 presidential election, the Socialist Party (PS) led by Olivier Faure seems to be rising from the ashes. Although the LFI remains the central force of the NFP, it is no longer so dominant. The LFI has conceded an additional hundred constituencies to the PS to field candidates in this time around, after the party was strengthened by the European elections and the result of its lead candidate Raphaël Glucksmann who obtained 13.8% of the vote.

Les Écologistes national secretary Marine Tondelier and the PS’s Olivier Faure at the protest against the far-right in Paris on June 15th 2024. © Photo Zakaria Abdelkafi / AFP

This new situation explains the return to the fold of anti-NUPES factions, such as the socialist president of the Occitanie regional council in southern France, Carole Delga, mayor of Rouen Nicolas Mayer-Rossignol and, especially, former president François Hollande, himself a candidate under the NFP banner in Corrèze in central France. In a recent interview, the former president estimated that the PS group in the Assembly could grow from 31 to between 80 and 100 seats, enough to imagine the old party rebuilding its foundations. Especially if PS MPs – whose candidates could benefit from the withdrawal of centre-right Macronists in the second round – end up outnumbering LFI MPs in the chamber.

Could this open a new chapter on the Left? An article written by several socialist leaders, including Raphaël Glucksmann, Olivier Faure, Chloré Ridet, and Boris Vallaud, as well as Marine Tondelier, national secretary of the green Les Écologistes party, called this week for democratic forces – including some in the Macron camp – to “agree to prevent the RN from obtaining a majority”. The communists and LFI members did not sign it. “It already comes across as a form of betrayal of the NFP’s commitment, which has to take note of any breaches,” warned communist Elsa Faucillon.

Macron camp in disarray

After the losses two years ago – when the presidential camp lost half its seats and thus its absolute majority in the 2022 Parliamentary elections – outgoing MPs from the ruling Renaissance party and their allies now expect to see their group reduced to a meagre fraction in the next Assembly. During this brief campaign, the incumbents were focused on one goal: to be saved, once again, by a vote to keep out the far-right... provided their candidates manage to make it through to the second round or stay in second position in a three-way race against the Left.

Emmanuel Macron during his press conference in Paris on June 12th 2024. © Photo Eliot Blondet / Abaca

To achieve this, references to Emmanuel Macron have been almost entirely erased from election campaign material, and the chorus about the dangers of the “two extremes” has been chanted at high intensity to position the centre-right Macronist candidates as an alternative to a Left that is supposedly “ambiguous” on anti-Semitism and capricious on [economic and budgetary matters](#).

Having nevertheless abandoned any idea of a Macronist majority, several candidates have already begun their negotiations for the “third round,” the necessary recomposition of the political groupings in the new Assembly. Under the guise of creating a “grand coalition” to prevent Jordan Bardella from reaching Matignon, some Macronists claiming to be “leftwing” are envisaging the creation of a centrist bloc with the greens and socialists - but not LFI MPs.

Former prime minister Édouard Philippe also intends to secure his future amid the ruins of Macronism. He has put up candidates for his centre-right Horizons party in 80 constituencies while sparing certain opponents. “It’s about creating a mindset for the future,” says a source close to Macron’s first prime minister.

For now, however, neither the Left nor the conservative LR right are considering these “little deals” being suggested by some in the Macron camp. “The Macronists are ready to do anything to save their seats and still live under the illusion that they have a central role in political life, but they haven’t yet understood that, come Sunday night, they will be nothing,” a close associate of François Hollande noted last week.

The presidential camp will, in any case, have a major responsibility between the two rounds of voting: if they refuse to give clear voting instructions to their supporters to block the RN in the second round on July 7th, they could hand dozens of constituencies to the far-right - and thus add dishonour to their defeat.

Party boss Éric Ciotti in front of the conservative LR headquarters in Paris, June 11th 2024. © Photo Eliot Blondet / Abaca

LR: what future?

For the opposition conservative Right, the outcome of these snap legislative elections might spell either obliteration or a long-anticipated schism. Caught off-guard by the president’s decision, the MPs from the conservative Les Républicains (LR) felt the sky fall in when their party boss [Éric Ciotti announced he was doing a deal with the RN](#). Threatened with implosion, the party held firm: except for Christelle d’Intorni from Nice in the south of France, no incumbent MP followed the LR president into his extremist venture, nor did any senior party figure.

As in 2022, the incumbents have launched their campaigns relying on their personal standing and local roots, hoping to withstand the pressure of the three-way split in the political landscape. Decimated in successive Parliamentary elections (they had 320 MPs in 2007, 196 in 2012, 100 in 2017, 62 in 2022), the LR group is likely to face another significant reduction. Elected mostly in rural areas, its members have watch with concern the RN’s electoral advance in their territories.

What next for them? Depending on the outcome, several survivors might be tempted to make the leap, some towards the RN, others towards the presidential camp. Interior minister Gérald Darmanin, who determined to return to the Assembly, already hopes to attract a few to his side. Discreet deals between Macronists and the mainstream LR have already been made during the nomination of candidates.

However, an LR group is expected to survive, probably led by Laurent Wauquiez, who is running in his Haute-Loire stronghold – he is president of the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes in central southern France. Given his presidential ambitions, the former minister under Nicolas Sarkozy could maintain the party's independent line. But though it would be autonomous, how many would be left?

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P.S.

- Mediapart. 30 June 2024 à 13h55:
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English version by Michael Streeter

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