

AN ELECTION LIKE NO OTHER

Visiting the French Political Landscape
Ahead of the Parliamentary Elections



France goes to the ballot box on June 30 and July 7 to elect a new government and fresh members to the National Assembly. In the immediate aftermath of the election results for the EU Parliament on June 9, French President Emmanuel Macron shocked the entire country when he decided to dissolve the National Assembly and call a snap parliamentary election. In the past three weeks, the French political battlefield has attracted widespread attention. The political battle lines have been drawn with the far-right, the centrists and the left canvassing the length and breadth of the country as voters get ready to cast their vital votes in what could be a monumental outcome for France and Europe.

The Background:

The French political and media landscape was ablaze on the evening of June 9, labelling President Macron's decision to hold snap parliamentary elections as a 'poker move' and a 'crazy bet'. Macron's party 'Renaissance' and its centrist alliance 'Ensemble', finished a disappointing second in the EU Parliamentary elections with around 14.5% of the total vote, losing significant ground to his principal rival Marine Le Pen's far-right 'Rassemblement National' (RN) which triumphed in the elections with 31%, and narrowly managing to stay ahead of the centre-left coalition led by the Socialist Party. Although nearly half of the registered voters abstained from the polls, the results reflected a strong surge in support for Le Pen and RN and a strong anti-incumbent wave against a beleaguered Macron and his centrist alliance which already had a tough time passing legislation in a fractured parliament that didn't give his coalition an absolute majority. Acknowledging public resentment towards his and his alliance's rule, Macron believed the decision to call for fresh elections was the best decision to empower the people to 'clarify' the country's political direction by making a just and democratic choice on the ballot box.

The Main Contenders:

The Far-Right:

The dissolution of the parliament was met with approval by Le Pen whose party on the back of a strong performance in the European elections is closer than ever to winning the elections and forming a majority government on their own. This would signal an astronomical rise for RN which for the last four decades has been a pariah in the political arena. While Le Pen still keeps her sight set on occupying the Presidential Office, RN's election campaign is being led by its 28-year-old party president, current MEP and prime ministerial candidate Jordan Bardella. Staying true to their traditional political rhetoric, RN's electoral manifesto principally promises to:

- reform the unpopular pension reforms
- introduce a minimum sanction on crimes committed by recidivists and minors
- promote a policy of 'national priority' by removing access to social benefits and minimum income benefits to those foreigners who have worked for less than 5 years in France
- end the 'jus soli' principle of naturalisation
- privatise public radio broadcasting services
- reduce energy tariffs by re-negotiating with the EU on an exceptional tariff for France

- introduce a cap on prices of essentials in case of high inflation, address the lack of well-distributed public health services across all regions
- reverse the ban on the sale of thermal vehicles by 2035
- end the system of classifying regions as low-emission zones
- encourage enterprises to increase the salaries of their workers in exchange for exemption from employer contributions to the state treasury

Most of the RN promises are identical to those made for the 2022 presidential elections. Socially, RN's manifesto is strongly driven by its anti-immigration stance, promising to act with urgency to reform and tighten legal and illegal immigration, asylum and security measures, introducing stronger sentences to clamp down on crime and insecurity, cutting down on benefits for foreigners and accelerating the expulsion of illegal immigrants and foreign delinquents. Economically, the RN offers a liberal right-wing approach to incentivise growth by reducing taxes and financial contributions paid by enterprises and promoting greater domestic production. Ecology and climate action however doesn't seem to be of immediate priority, with RN's push for strengthening French sovereignty in the energy market posing a fear that France's existing commitments to reducing carbon emissions and



supporting the production of renewables could be impacted. RN's measures of cutting down social benefits to foreigners and revoking the 'jus soli' principle of French citizenship could well see a potential legal battle with the French and European courts over alleged unconstitutionality. Critics towards RN's manifesto also point out the vagueness in explaining the estimated costs of financing its promises emphasised by its unclear stances on certain policies notably on the pension reforms and negotiating energy prices with the EU. Its promises to reduce state spending by cutting welfare benefits to foreigners and reducing France's member-state contribution to the EU's budget will also attract strong political ire and resentment.

The Centre-right:

Besides RN, the traditional Gaullist right represented by the 'Les Républicains' (LR) party, is in the midst of an existential crisis. The party is split into two factions, one that supports entering an alliance with RN and the other that wishes to contest the elections alone. LR and the centre-right in general, have maintained a historic sanitary cordon policy of refusing to work with RN. Hence explaining why the decision of one faction to ally with RN has put the party in chaos. The faction that has allied with RN is led by the party's own president Eric Ciotti. Ciotti has single-handedly taken on the rest of LR's hierarchy in creating the alliance. However, the overwhelming

organisation of LR remain strongly opposed to his decision and even attempted to expel Ciotti. The party is in limbo as they are technically working under a president who has been expelled and only remains in his position due to the judiciary's decision to invalidate his expulsion. While they are expected to gain a handful of seats, there could be a possibility that LR could align themselves closer towards 'Ensemble' for better political mileage as the wider bloc of centrists.

The Left:

History seems to be repeating itself for the voices on the left. Faced with a political situation that has propelled RN into the political limelight, the four main parties on the left of the political spectrum namely, 'La France Insoumise' (LFI), the Socialists, Communists and Greens cobbled up a new electoral alliance in the hours following the snap elections announcement. This alliance called 'Nouveau Front Populaire' (NFP) is an ode to the left-wing 'Front Populaire' coalition that governed the country in the late 1930s in an affront to combat the rising far-right sentiment at that time. The NFP is the second attempt at forging a left-wing coalition, with the previous coalition called 'Nouvelle Union Populaire Écologique et Sociale' (NUPES) being created during the 2022 parliamentary elections. The NUPES coalition despite emerging as the second-largest after the 2022 elections, quickly fell apart due to internal discord, and all the four constituent parties even decided to fight alone for the EU parliament elections. However, the unprecedented nature of the current political scenario necessitated internal bickering to be set aside to face the greater enemy together. True to their ideological positions, the electoral manifesto of the NFP primarily concerns the cost of living, supporting the working class and advancing ecological commitments. Some of their key promises include:

- increasing the minimum wage to €1,600
- abolishing the unemployment insurance and pension reform laws to reduce the retirement age to 60 years
- making all the services in public schools free, setting price ceilings on essentials including food and fuel
- cancelling rising gas prices
- introducing a wealth tax on millionaires and their surplus profits
- indexing salaries to inflation
- promoting domestic industrial production in key sectors
- ending the academic portal service 'Parcoursup'
- putting in place a plan to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050 while reforming the EU's common agricultural pact



Some of its promises have been retained from the previous NUPES coalition while others have drawn inspiration from fellow left governments in the EU. Their manifesto has received backing from noted economists and professionals including Economic Sciences Nobel Prize Winner Esther Duflo. Questions have been raised about the feasibility and realistic repercussions of launching certain measures such as imposing a wealth tax and indexing salaries to inflation. Additionally, measures like raising the minimum wage, reducing the age of retirement, reducing VAT on public transport and abolishing additional surcharges on electricity bills could result in a significant drop in revenue and further constraints in public spending.

The Presidential Coalition:

The centrist 'Ensemble' coalition is fighting a desperate battle to regain lost battleground and re-convince voters to continue supporting it. Seven years in power have however placed the coalition at its weakest electoral point, a product of years of public anger and dissent over unpopular legislation, the state of the economy, growing inequality and insecurity, and the coalition's perceived undemocratic adoption of laws in a hung parliament. Yet, 'Ensemble' has placed itself as the only alternative to both populist political extremes as a liberal and progressive coalition that truly stands for the values of the Republic. Its campaign is being led by the outgoing Prime Minister Gabriel Attal, who at the age of 34 as the Fifth Republic's youngest prime minister, carries an enormous responsibility to ensure continuity in Macron's political vision and legislative projects. Due to the lack of an absolute majority in the previous parliament, 'Ensemble' had to rely on the support of the centre-right 'Les Républicains' to pass legislation, thus resulting in 'Ensemble' bending towards more socially conservative stances to prevent a parliamentary deadlock. 'Ensemble's' electoral manifesto appeals to voters on key issues including cost of living, working conditions, housing and health. Some of the notable promises include:

- reducing electricity bills by €200
- revaluing pensions in line with inflation
- creating a fund to modernise middle and lower-class houses with energy-efficient renovations
- reducing greenhouse emissions by 20% till 2027
- accelerating the construction of 14 new nuclear reactors to ensure France's energy independence
- supporting local territorial authorities with investments for an ecological transition, simplifying access to healthcare and reducing the frequency of medical appointments
- creating a 'Maison France service' in each canton to provide better support for people with their administrative requirements
- pursuing a decentralised administrative approach by giving local territories more control over their competencies



- creating 200,000 more industrial jobs and 400 new factories to boost investments until 2027
- creating stricter sentences for crimes
- relooking into the existing principle of reduced punishments for minor offenders and doubling the military budget till 2030

Many of the promises have already been included in the outgoing government's manifesto or were proposed in the past. The coalition remains resolute in continuing with the largely unpopular pension and unemployment allowance reforms. Yet it has not proposed newer measures that could significantly reduce a perennial worry of the record national debt crisis that it oversaw. The manifesto makes explicit references to military spending and a stronger position on dealing with foreign delinquents and minors, addressing the asylum system, all the while echoing their liberal position on legal migration and the necessity for foreign labour and talent.

Positions and Outcomes:

France's elections are based on a two-round first-past-the-post system where the top two candidates from each constituency after the first round of voting on 30 June will advance to a run-off in the second round on July 7. Candidates who obtain a simple majority in the first round are directly elected to parliament. Latest surveys still place RN and its alliance with the Eric Ciotti-faction of LR comfortably ahead with around 36% of the total vote. However, the same projections do not give it an absolute majority of 289 seats in parliament. Bardella has repeatedly stated that he would not seek the prime ministerial position if RN does not manage to get an absolute majority and has called for voters to ensure that the 'extreme-left' NFP are kept out of power. NFP on the other hand supported by unions, feminist organisations and other social NGOs has launched massive mobilisations and protests across the country against RN and its politics of 'hatred and division'. The NFP has also found support from several notable persons including performing artists, sportspersons, academics and professionals. Yet surveys still place it with a stagnant vote share of around 28%. Disagreements and grudges between the four main constituent parties of the NFP have already emerged in the public domain, particularly over certain electoral promises, allocation of seats, selection of candidates and most importantly a lack of consensus on rallying behind a common prime ministerial candidate. 'Ensemble' despite making some small gains according to the surveys is still projected to finish third, losing more than half of its 2022 parliamentary tally with around 21% of the vote, and LR is projected to finish a distant fourth with around 6%. With the manner in which political lines have been drawn, another hung parliament will only spiral the country into further chaos. It could see an alliance of centrist and liberal voices from either wing coming together to form a temporary government for one year after which the President can call fresh elections.

Many believe that Macron's decision to announce the snap elections was driven by a calculated bet that his coalition would capitalise on a divided left to ensure a direct face-off against RN in most of the constituencies in the second round, banking on the fact that voters would resort to

voting for 'Ensemble' in order to keep RN out of power. This was the similar strategy that Macron banked upon to win the 2022 presidential elections. But it seems that he has not only underestimated the wave of support for RN among millions of voters who no longer view the right-wing outfit as a political pariah but also the ability of the left to come together to form a coalition at short notice. The writing seems to be on the wall for 'Ensemble', with Macron and his government making last-ditch appeals to like-minded liberal voters and centre-left and centre-right political parties such as the Socialists and LR to join their coalition to keep out either political extreme from power. The growing support for RN has coincided with the latest surveys that point to a sharp decline in the popularity of Macron, who has even faced criticism from within his government for making the consequential decision to dissolve parliament. It would be possible that an 'Ensemble' coalition that sits in opposition in the next parliament could well chart a new legislative programme that would sideline the prominence of Macron as the coalition's figurehead.



The country could well be preparing itself for a new period of cohabitation, a political outcome unique to France's semi-presidential regime where the president and prime minister belong to different political parties. Normally when the president and prime minister are from the same party and their party has a majority in parliament, it becomes easier for the president to exercise stronger power in influencing the government to implement their political vision and legislative promises. However, when the president and prime minister are from different parties and the prime minister's party controls the majority in parliament, the president's position in influencing legislation weakens significantly since the French Constitution explicitly states that the government always conducts the state's policies. During a period of cohabitation, the prime minister's powers and influence are significantly strengthened and it is the onus of both the president and prime minister to find consensus on policies and govern the country together. Conventionally during periods of cohabitation, the president controls matters of foreign policy and defence. Under the Fifth Republic, France has undergone three separate periods of cohabitation that also exposed tumultuous times of constant disagreement between the president and the prime minister's government. Yet the previous cohabitations have not produced any outstanding constitutional crises and the legislature and executive have found

compromise and consensus in adhering to each other's constitutional mandates. A cohabitation this time however would be a different scenario considering that Macron will have to share power with either coalition that he has labelled as being on either political extreme. After having claimed that voting for either the NFP or RN could provoke a civil war in the country, it is evident that sharing power with the same electoral rivals would be a bitter pill for Macron to swallow and an immense impediment to his presidential project, considering that he still has three years left till his mandate ends in 2027. For now, the media has generally projected a cohabitation between Macron and Bardella as the most likely outcome. Bardella himself has acknowledged his preparations for a new RN-led government, potentially laying the foundations for an eventual victory of Marine Le Pen in the presidential elections in 2027. It remains to be seen how quickly an RN or NFP government implement their principal promises, how they compromise with the president on sensitive issues and whether the prime minister or president will come out triumphant in cases of disagreement and constitutional roadblocks. More than political engagements, cohabitation could result in seismic changes at the societal level. How far can the country cope socially and economically under an NFP or RN government? And how quickly will the political rhetoric of these two groups normalise itself in society? How will a new government assuage social tensions when the reality of mass unrest after the results remains ever-so realistic? How effectively can a new government ensure continuity in governing the country, particularly in light of the upcoming Summer Olympics? How influential will a new government be on the role of France in defining policies at the regional level within the EU Council? Questions are endless and the election results from the first round of voting in a few days are awaited with bated breath. The results in France could lay the stage for a changing political dynamic across Europe that could divide societies along bitter political lines as liberal democratic thoughts contest a crowded political space rapidly occupied by populist voices.