

Macron's Snap Election Gamble Could Prove Less Risky Than It Appears

France's conservative parties are riding high in polls, but could be handicapped in the legislative election by the two-round majority voting system within constituencies.

<https://www.nysun.com/article/macrons-snap-election-gamble-could-prove-less-risky-than-it-appears>



President Macron during an EU summit at Brussels, March 24, 2023. AP/Geert Vanden Wijngaert



[MICHEL GURFINKIEL Tuesday, June 11, 2024 14:46:20 pm](#)

Jordan Bardella's National Rally won a stunning victory Sunday in the French elections for the European Parliament: 31.4 percent of the vote, 30 of the 81 seats allotted to France. President Macron's Renaissance party is lagging well behind at only 14.6 percent of the vote and but 13 seats.

One may ask, however, how decisive is Mr. Bardella's victory.

It can be argued, naturally, that he won because he addressed issues seen as priorities by growing numbers of citizens: law and order, the migratory crisis, the economy. Whereas Mr. Macron lost because he did not address these issues convincingly.

Yet there is more to politics than right and wrong policies. The President called a snap election on June 30 and July 7 for the National Assembly, France's main legislative body. In constitutional terms, there was no need for him to do so, since Euro-elections are not part of the French political process proper. In practical terms, however, the best way to refresh political legitimacy in a democracy after an electoral defeat, any style, is through new elections, any style.

Can Mr. Macron make it? At least, the move is not as desperate as one thinks.

To start with, general elections in France do not necessarily mirror the Euro-elections, since a different electoral law applies: a two-round majority voting system within constituencies — France's standard system — rather than a nation-wide proportional representation.

In order to win under proportional representation, one only needs votes. Under the majority system, on the contrary, you need to capitalize the votes you earned, usually through coalitions with other parties. Short of that, your votes are as good as canceled, for all practical purposes.

For decades, French politics were dominated by the "Le Pen curse:" whatever their returns in terms of the popular vote, Jean-Marie Le Pen and then his daughter Marine, seen as "Far Right," could not secure seats in the National Assembly, since mainstream organizations would not enter in coalitions with them.

Ms. Le Pen garnered 17.90 percent of the vote in the 2012 general election, and then 24.86 percent in the 2014 European elections; but the party won only two seats in the general election of 2012. Likewise, she won just less than 34 percent of the popular vote in the second presidential ballot of 2017, and 23.4 percent in the Euro-elections of 2019, but only eight seats in the National Assembly elected in 2017.

Indeed, the glass ceiling was broken in 2022 — to a point. Ms. Le Pen won 41.45 percent in the presidential election and 89 seats in the National Assembly. Still, the coalition mechanics worked less well for the National Rally than for other parties. The classic conservative party LR, for instance, won 61 seats through coalitions, with barely one half of the National Rally's votes.

Mr. Bardella, who succeeded Ms. Le Pen as party leader in 2022, may or may not do much better than her in this respect. Ironically, this has to do with his victory at the Euro-elections. In terms of popular vote, National Rally is not just the largest party on the right by now, it is the right.

The two other conservative parties — Marion Maréchal's *Reconquête* with 5.3 percent of the vote and François-Xavier Bellamy's *Républicains* with 7.3 percent — are so small that they barely can provide additional forces, if they so wish. A global conservative, or “national-conservative,” alliance could not get further than 44 or 45 percent of the popular vote

On the Macronist side, things look much better. One important point is that there are actually two Macronist parties: one, Renaissance, is openly branded as such; the other one, Raphael Glucksmann's *Place Publique* — Public Square —, which passes for a new Europhile, social-democratic party, is just in fact a semi-dissident branch of Renaissance. Since it came third in the Euro-ballot, with 13.8 percent of the vote and nine seats, the Macronists' real electoral weight may be actually closer to 29 percent.

Renaissance and *Place Publique* are calling, in near identical terms, for a large “republican” coalition against the “Far Right.” Many *Républicain* politicians, including Bellamy and Gérard Larcher, the president of the Senate, are indeed willing to join, even if they may lose voters in the process. The party leader, Eric Ciotti, however, has decided for a coalition with the National Rally.

Some very small parties, that did not pass the 5 percent threshold at the Euro-elections, may also be tempted to strike a deal with the Macronists. Yet the ultimate trick would be to bring the left into the fold, at least for the second and final ballot on July 7.

In the outgoing National Assembly, the radical left — the socialists, the communists, the Greens, who amount to a sum total of less than 10 percent of the vote— partnered with Jean-Luc Melenchon's extremist group *La France Insoumise* (LFI) — Rebel France — 9.8 percent, whose main asset is the growing French Muslim community, and whose emblem is not the red flag anymore but the Palestinian flag. While they ran separately in the Euro-elections, they have agreed to reunite with LFI for the general election, as a single Popular Front.

No doubt that they will turn up the volume against the Macronists in the first ballot. However, they can support them crucially in the second ballot, in the name of “anti-Fascist resistance.” Provided they get as much concessions as possible.

“Gestures” towards Muslim causes will be most welcome. Shortly before the Euro-elections, Mr. Macron personally excluded several dozens of Israeli firms from Eurosatory, the yearly armaments fair held near Versailles. More will be needed, naturally. Including, perhaps, a formal recognition of the “State of Palestine.”

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(This is an updated version of the article published by The New York Sun on June, 11.)