



July 2024

An Unexpected Result

Four key takeaways and three potential scenarios following France's parliamentary election.

By Alexandra de Hoop Scheffer

July 2024

The outcome of the French parliamentary election is unprecedented for four reasons.

- For the first time in French political history, **the second round of legislative elections overturned the results of the first round.** The National Rally (RN) was relegated to third place after leading in the first round, while the left-wing coalition, Nouveau Front Populaire (NFP), comprising the far-left France Unbowed (LFI) and the Socialist and Green parties, emerged as the leading political force, surpassing President Emmanuel Macron's centrist coalition. An alliance between centrist and left-wing parties, aimed at countering the RN in three-way contests, proved effective, as did the withdrawal from some races of Macron's centrist candidates. The shifts in support, however, are attributed solely to tactical voting.

Yet, in terms of voter share, the RN still holds the lead. In fact, **it achieved its highest-ever percentage of the popular vote, 37.1%**, and will hold 143 parliamentary seats, a gain of 54. But the left-wing bloc actually won the second round. It will have 182 seats, an increase of 51. Macron's centrist coalition finished second with 168 seats, a loss of 82 and its majority in the National Assembly.

- **No clear majority or opposition exists. A tripartition of the French political landscape has instead emerged, indicating a significant shift in the balance of power within a deeply polarized nation.** There is now a fragmented left-wing bloc, a weakened centrist bloc that is holding together, and an RN that has confirmed its foothold across France. The result hints at more proportional representation within the National Assembly, mirroring a political situation that the Fifth Republic has never seen. The absence of a dominant political force or a unified opposition, coupled with a potential inability to form a governing coalition, is unique for France and may challenge established operational norms in the country's institutions.

The election's purpose—to establish a functional government—was not fulfilled. Instead, a pattern of obstruction is emerging, with each political faction focused more on hindering the others than on governance. This will lead to deadlock. The historical bipartisanship of the Fifth Republic has evolved into a profound trichotomy. Three distinct conceptions of democracy—radical, illiberal, and liberal — will jockey with one another.

- **The current political climate is marked by improvisation,** intensified by Macron's hasty and unprepared decision to dissolve parliament. The move thrusts France into a period of significant political instability. Unlike the calculated planning shown in 1986 when then-President François Mitterrand meticulously prepared for a coalition government with a budget and pre-arranged ministerial appointments, or in 1997, when a new coalition was formed in four days, the present scenario is unanticipated.

July 2024

- **The results force a recalibration of power between the president and the National Assembly.** “The center of gravity will be more than ever in the hands of parliament,” stated Prime Minister Gabriel Attal. Macron must now form a government without a legislative majority. This could signal the end to the “French exception” in European politics. The country may have to adapt to a coalition-led governance model. The responsibility to appoint the prime minister would then rest with the coalition or, in essence, parliament.

The resilience of French institutions hinges on effective functioning of the parliament, but French political culture does not incentivize coalition-building. It is difficult to see how a divided legislature could produce a stable majority for a government to rule. Historically, the Fifth Republic has favored a strong executive branch backed by a substantial parliamentary majority. This explains French resistance to coalitions, especially those comprising divergent political factions.

In this situation, three scenarios are possible.

- A **hung parliament**, as GMF has anticipated, suggests France may face prolonged political instability. This could manifest itself in a weak prime minister incapable of passing significant legislation, a potentially untenable situation. Such a scenario might lead to the dissolution of the National Assembly within a year or trigger another presidential election. Policy stagnation would complicate France’s position on the European and global stages. Macron will preserve his foreign policy prerogatives, but movement on the budget or on new initiatives in defense, trade, or technology—parliamentary domains—could be obstructed.
- Macron appoints a **“rainbow coalition” government** by naming a prime minister who builds a coalition with the support of a parliamentary majority. This could happen by bringing together Macronists with moderates on the left and the right. The center-right Les Républicains, with approximately 48 seats, could exert significant influence in this scenario. Incorporating the LFI, however, could split Macron’s own centrist alliance given economic and foreign policy differences. It is, therefore, unlikely to happen.
- A **technical government** is formed, led by a prime minister from civil society who is chosen by consensus. This arrangement, often referred to as a “ministry of affairs”, would govern temporarily until parliament is again dissolved, which is constitutionally prohibited from happening twice within one year. This scenario is the most worrisome for political science experts and constitutional lawyers. They fear that it makes governing impossible. But it is the preferred option in economic and financial circles since it essentially prohibits legislation unfavorable to businesses and markets.

Regardless of the political reconfiguration that emerges, France’s new government will face challenging economic and social circumstances. Downwardly revised growth projections for 2024, and a pension system deficit that exists despite recent reform, will constrain any incoming policymakers. The innovative solutions to steer the nation through its impending difficulties will require widespread support, which is exactly what the current situation makes improbable.