2024 Parliament elections: France in limbo (continued)

Emiliano Grossman
17th July 2024



The second round of the French parliamentary elections on 7th July 2024 did not produce the result predicted by most forecasts: the *Rassemblement National* (RN) was predicted to win, but finished 3rd in terms of number of seats. This demonstrates the existence and importance of a "Republican Front" in France, although the formation of a government is highly uncertain. Emiliano Grossman argues that what is at stake is as much political as cultural, and that the way out of the crisis requires a fundamental rethinking of the way political competition works in France.

the "republican front" is alive and well

The "republican front", the alliance of all the "republican" parties against the *Front*, and then the *Rassemblement National* (RN), weighed heavily on 7th July, reducing the number of RN seats to 143, a hundred fewer than the low range predicted the day after the first round. Beyond the disappointment in Marine Le Pen's camp, this result shows that a large proportion of voters, regardless of attempts to "de-demonise" or "normalise" the RN, still see it as a party apart.

On the evening of the first round, several leaders of the *Nouveau Front Populaire* (NFP) called for the systematic withdrawal of candidates who came third in constituencies where a far-right candidate had a chance of winning. In all, 129 left-wing union candidates in a position to qualify for the second round withdrew almost systematically, in a total of 306 "triangular" and 5 "quadrangular" constituencies. In the presidential camp, the candidates were more hesitant: 81 withdrew and 14 remained in the race. Others, such as

the *Les Républicains* (LR) MPs, refused to give any voting instructions.

As a result, the massive carryover of votes changed the order of finish, with the NFP in the lead, followed by the presidential camp and the RN only in third place. The fact remains that the election produced the most divided parliament in the history of the 5th Republic, with three poles very much opposed to each other and therefore with no prospect of a clear majority.

Figure 1. National Assembly 2024 by party

Figure : Alix d'Agostino, DeFacto · Data: French Ministry of Interior

A political, yet 'cultural' crisis

The discussions and debates that have taken place since the results were confirmed show above all the "cultural" difficulty that French elected representatives have in dealing with the absence of a clear majority and appreciating the consequences. Leaders of *La France Insoumise*, led by Jean-Luc Mélenchon, are repeating that the NFP won the elections and that implementing the programme is an electoral obligation. Having plunged the country into crisis by resorting to dissolution, Emmanuel Macron, in a "letter to the French" published on 10th July, is now setting himself up as the guardian of the constitution, arrogating to himself the right to designate the winner or, in this case, to assert that there is none.

The interpretation of election results is of course regularly the subject of a media or expert battle after the election (see in particular the work of Gattermann et al., 2021), but in the context of majoritarian electoral systems, this debate is more often than not settled clearly and definitively.

The presidential camp had already failed to win a legislative majority in 2022. However, it benefited from the absence of a clear majority *against* it, with the LR group supporting the government in the event of a vote of no confidence. In addition, the French constitution gives the executive powerful tools for coercing its majority, particularly when it is fragile. Article 49.3 allows the government to be held responsible for a bill: if no vote of no confidence is passed within 48 hours, the bill is deemed adopted. Elisabeth Borne's government has used this mechanism 23 times in 20 months.

But this is not an option as things stand. With none of the three poles having a majority to implement "its programme", the idea of finding compromises with groups outside the electoral alliance is seen by many as a betrayal of the electorate. On the left, in particular, there is also a spirit of revenge after seven years of Emmanuel Macron's presidency, marked by the undermining of many social gains.

The fact that France is rooted in a majority culture explains the varying degrees of incomprehension from the top of government to the electorate. With little prospect of a return to "normality", it is imperative that we change our way of thinking. It is up to the political elites to set an example and defend a more consensual vision of politics. In the long term, this change could even have a calming effect on French political life, allowing for

calmer debates on much-needed issues such as climate change, social justice and the future of education and health. This learning process is underway, but we will undoubtedly have to rely on the younger generations of politicians.

Figure 2. National Assembly 2024 by alliance

Figure : Alix d'Agostino, De Facto · Data: French Ministry of Interior

What are the possible scenarios?

That leaves the question on the lips of every observer of France these days: what kind of government will emerge from these general elections? The options seem limited.

A minority government with a Prime Minister appointed by the NFP is not realistic. It would quickly fall with the other two blocs clearly opposed, too weak to take advantage of institutional protections such as the "49.3".

Former Prime Minister Edouard Philippe has proposed a government with the support of the centre and the right. This government would occupy the centre of the political spectrum, but it too would be too weak in seats, with both ends of the spectrum too powerful and united in their opposition to Emmanuel Macron for this scenario to be realistic in the medium term.

Consequently, only a rethink of the three blocs can enable a governing majority to emerge. Before the elections, *Les Républicains* seemed to be weakened by the alliance between their president, Eric Ciotti, and the RN, but the party held out better than expected and this alliance would not be enough in terms of the number of MPs.

On the left, several figures from *La France Insoumise* have announced that they do not wish to sit with this group, but this seems to be a marginal phenomenon at this stage. In the centre, a number of executives from the President's camp seem to be asking questions about the future of the Macronist movement. In a strong symbol, former Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne has reportedly asked to sit with the *MoDem* group, rather than with *Renaissance*, the presidential party. Gabriel Attal and Edouard Philippe, two of Emmanuel Macron's other Prime Ministers, have publicly distanced themselves from the president. To further complicate the equation, many of the *Renaissance* MPs are former members of the Socialist Party, a member of the left-wing alliance. Other reconfigurations therefore seem possible and even probable.

In any case, the Republican front – in party strategies and at the ballot box – seems to rule out an alliance with the RN. The most likely scenario is that of a government stretching from the centre-right to the left. Its precise contours will depend on how quickly the new leaders learn from the culture of compromise of the leaders of the different formations.

Picture: Wikimedia Commons