

Dissolution of the National Assembly and early general elections: Emmanuel Macron's gamble

A thunderbolt crossed the skies of France on the evening of 9 June when, an hour after polling stations closed for the European elections - and as initial results (later confirmed) announced a clear victory for the list of the populist Rassemblement National (RN) party led by party president Jordan Bardella - the head of state Emmanuel Macron (Renaissance, RE) announced the dissolution of the National Assembly, the lower house of the French Parliament, and the organisation of snap general elections on 30 June and 7 July. The President of the Republic's party, Renaissance (RE), garnered 14.6% of the vote on 9 June; it was beaten by the RN, the populist right-wing party of his opponent in the two previous presidential elections in 2017 and 2022, Marine Le Pen, which secured 31.37%.

In an unusual radio and television address at the end of a European election, the head of state acknowledged the results and declared: *"I have decided to give you back the choice of our parliamentary future through the vote"*, referring to *"a serious, weighty decision"* and *"an act of confidence"*. Emmanuel Macron spoke of *"choosing history rather than enduring it"*.

The dissolution of the National Assembly following the defeat of his own side at the polls is a first in the country's history.

The parliamentary elections, initially scheduled for June 2027, have therefore been brought forward by 3 years. Article 12 of the French Constitution stipulates that after a dissolution, elections must be held within 20 to 40 days.

According to Marie-Anne Cohendet, professor of constitutional law at the University of Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne, Emmanuel Macron is seeking to *"recreate a direct link between himself and the people over and above the parties in an attempt to combat the divisions and impotence of parliament"*. Dissolution is in fact a means available to the President of the Republic to resolve an institutional crisis in France, particularly when the presidential team does not have an absolute parliamentary majority, which has been the case since 2022. The President may only resort to this procedure once a year.

4,011 people are standing for election on 30 June and 7 July, a third fewer than for the previous general elections on 12 and 19 June 2022.

THE PRESIDENT UPSETS THE APPLE CART

The RN's victory in the European elections had been predicted for weeks by all the opinion polls, so this was no surprise. Furthermore, it is astonishing that Emmanuel Macron, the most European President of the Republic since Valéry Giscard d'Estaing (1974-1981), should use the European elections, which were largely a vote against him, to draw national policy conclusions, when he had indicated during the election campaign that the European elections would not necessarily have any impact on the national scene.

The Head of State is clearly seeking to establish himself as master of the game and is trying to catch his opponents off guard by deciding on a lightning election campaign. He hopes that the next three weeks will be too short for the radical political forces, on both

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the left and the right, to get their act together for the legislative elections, overcome their differences and come together. The voting system in force for the parliamentary elections (a 2-ballot first-past-the-post system) means that each camp has to unite with a view to winning the highest number of seats. Emmanuel Macron undoubtedly gambled on the impossibility of reaching agreement on a programme, particularly among the forces on the left that had been divided by the European elections - on the one hand, the list of social democrats led by Raphaël Glucksmann (Place Publique) and, on the other, the list of radicals from France Insoumise (LFI) led by Manon Aubry. Ultimately, he hopes to position Renaissance as a recourse against the RN, to make it the only possible barrage vote against the radical right.

The Head of State even took his own camp by surprise. During his address, he declared that France needed *"a clear majority to act with serenity and harmony"*. Some observers point out that he did have other options available to him to continue governing the country. Some of them mentioned forming an alliance with Les Républicains (LR), ignoring the fact that the latter have always been opposed to this. Others spoke of a coalition around a project, a *"government pact"*, a hypothesis to which the opposition forces, both left and right, were very reticent, not to say hostile. The Head of State could have waited for the -possible- vote of no-confidence before dissolving the government.

The President of the Republic is once again highlighting the rift between himself and the radical forces on the right (RN) and left (LFI). He presented himself as a progressive, an advocate of openness, a supporter of the European Union and a pro-European reformer, particularly in the face of the RN, which he described as populist, favouring national withdrawal, rejecting Europe and rejecting immigration. The Head of State presents himself as the only possible option for France and calls for a coalition of all the forces in the "republican field", i.e. excluding the RN and LFI. He said he wanted to *"build consensus, weave compromises into a government agreement (...) with all those who unambiguously defend the values of the Republic"*.

Emmanuel Macron denounced the *"unnatural alliances of the two extremes, the tinkering of structures and shop-floor agreements, which could never constitute a governing majority"*. *"Two extreme blocs have chosen economic programmes that do not reflect an ethic of responsibility and that promise people unfunded gifts"*, he lamented. He also described the ideological divisions between the parties making up the New Popular Front (bringing together the forces of the left) as a *"spectacle of great incoherence"*. *"Everyone thinks the opposite of everyone else (...) it's not serious"*, he stressed.

"Re-establish a fully armed sovereign state within 3 to 5 years, repair our school and healthcare system by 2030 and decarbonise our economy by 2050", these are the objectives set by the President of the Republic for the next legislature. Emmanuel Macron said he was open to discussing the *"modalities"* of the unemployment benefits reform currently under consideration. He promised to keep retirement pensions indexed to inflation, to cut the price of electricity bills by 15% from next winter, to exempt first-time buyers from notary fees for the purchase of a property under €250,000, and to increase the *"Macron bonus"* paid to employees by companies (6 million employees last year) to €10,000 free of charge or tax. *"If the French put their trust in us again, then things cannot go back to the way they were before. We will have to be even more open about the substance of the measures and the way we govern"*, he declared.

The campaign of the presidential camp (Renaissance, Horizons, a party led by Édouard Philippe, former Prime Minister (2017-2020) and François Bayrou's Mouvement démocrate (MoDem)), is competing under the name *Ensemble pour la République*, led by Gabriel Attal Prime Minister since January 2024. *"On 9 January, the President of the Republic appointed me. On 30 June, I would like the French people to choose me"*, said the head of government.

ON THE RIGHT, CONFUSION REIGNS

The RN, winner of the European elections, is the favourite for the legislative ballot. However, the further the campaign progresses, the more hesitant and confused it appears to be about its programme. For

example, it already seems to be postponing a number of measures, such as abolishing VAT on 100 essential products, exempting people under the age of 30 from income tax, raising the minimum wage, granting greater exemption from inheritance tax and returning the retirement age to 60. On the other hand, the cut in VAT to 5.5% on gas, heating oil and motor fuels would be maintained. The RN warns that it may have to postpone or even abandon certain measures because of the cohabitation or the state of the country, which could prevent it from implementing certain elements of its programme. *"The economic situation we are going to inherit is complicated. I will have to make choices. I will do so within the constraints of the budget"*, said Jordan Bardella. *"I will restore order to the streets and to the State's accounts"* promised the RN president. *"I am the only one capable of standing in the way of Jean-Luc Mélenchon (founder of LFI) and the far left (...) The choice is very simple: it is the leap into chaos with the far left or the reasonable and responsible break that I am leading"* he said. The populist party is proposing the suspension of family allowances paid to parents of re-offending minors, and the passing of an emergency law on immigration including not only reform of state medical aid (AME) but also the abolition of the right to legal residence. He intends to *"systematically deport illegal immigrants, delinquents and foreign criminals"*. To do this, however, the French Constitution would have to be amended, which the RN will not be able to do without a majority in the Senate, or a referendum organised on the subject, which is impossible because only the President of the Republic has the prerogative to call a referendum.

But it is within the Republicans (LR), a party that has not won an election since the 2009 European elections, that the greatest confusion reigns. The party's president, *Éric Ciotti*, caused a rift within LR by announcing his alliance with the RN for the legislative elections, thereby breaking the republican blockade, the line hitherto followed by the party, the *"cordon sanitaire"* that has always prevented any rapprochement and a fortiori any alliance with the radical right. *Éric Ciotti* accuses certain Republicans of having negotiated an alliance with Renaissance. *"Those who are accusing me (...) are the ones who led*

us into this impasse", he declared, adding *"If they had followed me, we wouldn't be where we are today. I have taken my responsibilities. I accept them"*.

After his own move to join the RN, the Republicans tried to remove him from the party presidency, accusing him of breaching the party's articles of association, which required him to consult the party's governing bodies before taking this kind of decision. To date they have been unsuccessful. *"I want to bring people together to put our political family back on its feet. Without any sectarianism or rancour, everyone is and will be welcome, whatever their attitudes and positions. My only red line will be compromise with Macronism and with the left,"* he said, adding, *"Our alliance with Jordan Bardella and the RN marks the renewal of a genuine popular alliance, at a critical moment when it is still possible to save the country from decline. France could disappear under a far-left authoritarian regime"*. His alliance classified as a far-right union (UXD) is putting forward candidates (including 2 incumbents) in 62 of the 577 constituencies.

The Republicans, mainly opposed to *Éric Ciotti's* decision, are putting forward 400 candidates, including 59 incumbent MPs. They have drawn up a list of 10 *"concrete and responsible"* proposals to get France back on its feet: Re-industrialising for prosperity and purchasing power, bringing uncontrolled immigration under control, introducing a genuine housing policy, revising penal policy, supporting assimilation and combating Islamism, fighting bureaucracy to liberate the French and supporting farmers and businesses, promoting an ecology based on progress and respectful of the rural way of life, putting public accounts in order and correcting the excesses of the French social model, favouring families and carrying out in-depth reforms of education and health.

Further to the right, *Marion Maréchal*, *Marine Le Pen's* niece, who was elected MEP on 9 June on the list she led for Reconquête! (REC!), did her utmost to persuade voters in the party chaired by *Éric Zemmour* to vote for the radical right in the legislative elections. But to no avail. *Éric Zemmour* refused to follow her lead and expelled her from the party, along with 3 other MEPs, out of 5 elected. Reconquête has candidates in 330 constituencies.

THE UNION OF LEFT-WING FORCES

Surprised like everyone else by the announcement of the dissolution, the forces on the left, including LFI, the Parti Socialiste (PS), the Parti Communiste (PCF), Les Écologistes, the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (NPa), Place Publique (PP), the Parti Ouvrier Indépendant (POI), have chosen to join forces for the legislative ballot within a Nouveau Front Populaire, a term that recalls the political coalition of forces on the left that led to their victory in the legislative elections ... in 1936. The Left is putting forward single candidates in each of the 577 constituencies: LFI in 229 constituencies; the Socialists in 175; the Ecologists in 92 and the Communists in 50. The combined results of these forces in the European elections were 32.76%.

The programme of the New Popular Front proposes 20 acts of change *"in response to the social emergency, the climate challenge, the repair of public services, and a path of appeasement in France and around the world"*. These measures include an energy-climate law to lay the foundations for ecological planning, a return to retirement at 60 (*"The pension reform will be repealed within 15 days"* said Marine Tondelier, national secretary of the Ecologists); an increase in the minimum wage to €1,600 net (it is currently €1,400); the cancellation of the 10% hike in electricity prices last February and the 11.7% rise in gas prices on 1 July; the freezing of prices for basic necessities in food, energy and fuel; the repeal of the asylum and immigration laws passed under President of the Republic Emmanuel Macron; the regularisation of workers, students, parents of foreign children attending school and the creation of a status for climate displaced persons. Finally, he promised that 4 August, the anniversary of the abolition of privileges in 1789, would be the day for the adoption of a bill re-establishing a solidarity tax on wealth (ISF) with a climate component.

On foreign policy, a subject of division between LFI and the PS, the New Popular Front promises unwavering defence of the sovereignty and freedom of the Ukrainian people and the integrity of the country's borders, including through the supply of arms; the cancellation of Ukraine's debt and the seizure of the assets of Russian oligarchs. The parties in this alliance are calling for *"immediate"* recognition of a

State of Palestine, compliance with the order of the International Court of Justice, which refers to the risk of genocide in Gaza, and a break *"with the French government's culpable support for the government (...) of Israeli Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu"*. Finally, at European level, they are calling for an end to the *"austerity constraints"* imposed by the Stability and Growth Pact and an end to free trade agreements.

The latest opinion poll carried out between 18 and 20 June by the IFOP institute gives the RN and its UXD Allies, a third of the vote (34%), the New Popular Front 28%. Ensemble 22%, and Les Républicains 6%.

In 2017, Emmanuel Macron shook up the left/right divide to the point of rendering it obsolete. The forthcoming legislative elections could well revive this bipolarisation of French political life - this time dominated in each camp by the extremes - if the forces at the centre that Renaissance represents see their results at the ballot box shrink as opinion polls predict. Indeed, can the result of a legislative election, despite the different voting systems in force, be very different from a European election held less than a month earlier? Isn't there a huge risk that voters will seize the opportunity to punish the current government?

"I did not do this (dissolve) lightly. It's one of the most difficult decisions I've taken in seven years", said Emmanuel Macron. The President of the Republic is nevertheless taking the risk of allowing the radical right to come to power. Does he think that the radical right will demonstrate its inability to govern the country and that, ultimately, its failure and inability to solve the problems of the French people will prevent Marine Le Pen from taking office in the next presidential election in the spring of 2017?

Following the legislative elections, a new government is expected to be formed fairly quickly, given that the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games takes place on 26 July, 19 days after the 2nd round of voting. If the RN or the Nouveau Front Populaire were to come to power on 7 July, this would mark a new cohabitation, the fourth under the Fifth Republic, and perhaps the first with a party that is not part of the Republican spectrum.

THE FRENCH POLITICAL SYSTEM

The French parliament is bicameral. It comprises the National Assembly, the lower house, with 577 deputies elected by direct universal suffrage for a 5-year term, and the Senate, the upper house, with 348 members appointed by indirect universal suffrage for a 6-year term.

Deputies are elected by a 2-ballot uninominal majority system in 577 constituencies (556 for metropolitan France, 10 for overseas departments and territorial communities and 11 for French nationals living outside France). To be nominated in the 1st round of voting, a candidate must win an absolute majority of the votes cast and this figure must correspond to at least a quarter of registered voters. If no candidate is elected in the 1st round, a 2nd round is organised a week later. All candidates who obtained at least 12.5% of the registered voters in the constituency in the 1st round may stand in the 2nd round. If only one candidate meets this condition, the candidate with the 2nd highest number of votes in the 1st round is allowed to stand. The higher the turnout, the greater the chances of a triangular tie in the 2nd round. There was just one in the June 2017 general election and fewer than ten in 2022. Polarisation should limit the chances of a number of "centrist" candidates qualifying for the 2nd round.

In France, political parties receive state aid allocated in proportion to the number of votes obtained by each of them in the legislative elections for any candidate obtaining a minimum of 1% of the vote in at least 50 constituencies (or in all those in which the party's candidates were present in the case of overseas France). On average, each vote earns €1.64 a year for 5 years, and an elected candidate earns €37,400 for his or her party. Campaign expenses are capped at €28,000 per candidate, plus €0.15 per inhabitant of the constituency in which the candidate is running. The average expenditure is around €70,000.

Under electoral law, political parties are obliged to field at least 50% (give or take 2%) of female candidates in legislative elections. Parties that fail to do so have their state funding reduced by a percentage equal to half the difference between the number of candidates of each sex and the total number of candidates.

2 coalitions and 3 political parties won seats in the parliamentary elections of 12 and 19 June 2022:

- Ensemble, a coalition whose main party is La République en marche (LREM) (now Renaissance (RE), the party of the President of the Republic, chaired by Sylvain Maillard, has 245 MPs;
- the Nouvelle Union populaire écologique et sociale (Nupes), a left-wing coalition whose main party is La France insoumise (LFI) led by Manuel Bompard, has 131 seats ;
- the Rassemblement National (RN), a radical right-wing party chaired by Jordan Bardella, has 89 seats;
- Les Républicains (LR), a right-wing party whose disputed "president" is Eric Ciotti, has 61 seats;
- the Union des démocrates et des indépendants (UDI), a centrist party led by Hervé Marseille, has 3 MPs.

The National Assembly has 22 MPs from the various right-wing parties, 10 from the various left-wing parties, 4 from the various centre-wing parties, 10 regionalist and 1 representative of the sovereignist right.

The Senate was renewed in September 2023 and is chaired by Gérard Larcher (LR).

The French elect their President of the Republic by direct universal suffrage. Emmanuel Macron (La République en marche, LREM) won his second five-year term on 24 April 2022 with 58.5% of the vote, ahead of Marine le Pen (RN), who received 41.4%. Seven out of ten French people went to the polls for this 2nd round of voting (71.9%).

Results of the legislative elections of 12 and 19 June 2022 in France

Turnout: 47.5 % (1st round) and 46.2 % (2nd round)

Political Parties	1st round			2nd round			Total seats
	N° of votes	% of votes	Seats	N° of votes	% of votes	Seats	
Ensemble ! (Together !)	5 857 364	25.75	1	8 002 407	38.57	244	245
Nouvelle Union populaire écologique et sociale (Nupes) (New People's Ecological and Social Union)	5 836 079	25.66	4	6 555 984	31.60	127	131
Rassemblement national (RN) (National Rally)	4 248 537	18.68	0	3 589 269	17.30	89	89
Les Républicains (LR) (The Republicans)	2 370 440	10.42	0	1 447 877	6.98	61	61
Reconquête (REC!) (Reconquer !)	964 775	4.24	0				0
Various leftists	713 574	3.14	0	443 274	2.14	22	22
Ecologists	608 314	2.67	0				0
Various right-wing	530 782	2.33	0	231 073	1.11	10	10
Regionalists	291 384	1.28	0	264 802	1.28	10	10
Various centre	283 612	1.25	0	99 122	0.48	4	4
Various far left	266 412	1.17	0	11 229	0.05	0	0
Sovereignist right	249 603	1.10	0	19 306	0.9	1	1
Union des démocrates et indépendants (UDI) (Union of Democrats and Independents)	198 062	0.87	0	64 444	0.31	3	3
Various	192 624	0.85	0	18 296	0.09	1	1
Parti radical de gauche (RDG) (Radical Left Party)	126 689	0.56	0		0		0
Various extreme right	6 457	0.03	0		0		0

Source : <https://www.archives-resultats-elections.interieur.gouv.fr/resultats/legislatives-2022/FE.php>

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