

A Tipping Point for Far-Right Populism in France

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Abstract

he 2024 French European election took place against the backdrop of an economic and cost-of-living crisis in a context marked by global uncertainty arising from the war in Ukraine, social unrest and deep political discontent with President Emmanuel Macron. Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National (RN) emerged as the big winner with 31.4% of the vote, while Macron's Renaissance list trailed far behind at 14.6%. Meanwhile, Jean-Luc Mélenchon's left-wing populist La France Insoumise (LFI) won 9.9%, reflecting current internal dissent within the party and deep ideological divisions exposed by the Israel-Hamas war. National issues dominated the electoral agenda in June. Populist voting across both sides of the political spectrum was strongly fuelled by political discontent with Macron, making the 2024 European elections primarily a 'second-order' national election. A crucial test for Emmanuel Macron, the outcome of the European election led to the decision by the incumbent president to call a snap legislative election. The election confirmed the electoral strength of the RN; however, it showed the revitalization of the Republican Front against the far right, which blocked Le Pen's party from winning an absolute majority, delivering instead a hung parliament split into three blocks.

Keywords: European elections; populism; France; Le Pen; Zemmour; Mélenchon

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Background

The 2024 French European election took place against the backdrop of the economic and cost-of-living crisis in a context marked by global uncertainty arising from the war in Ukraine, social unrest and deep political discontent with President Emmanuel Macron.

The European election showed substantial gains by populist parties, particularly on the right of the political axis, with Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National (RN) emerging as the big winner at 31.4% of the vote. The outcome of the European election led to the decision by Emmanuel Macron to dissolve the National Assembly. The snap election that immediately followed confirmed the electoral strength of the RN; however, it showed the revitalization of the traditional Republican Front (Front Républicain) against the far right by both parties and voters, which had been significantly weakened in the 2022 legislative election. This revival blocked Le Pen's party from winning an absolute majority, delivering a hung parliament split into three blocks, which more generally reflected the shape and increasing polarization of the French party system since 2017.

This chapter examines the strategies and performances of populist parties and the array of economic, cultural and political factors behind the rise in support for populism in France, particularly on the right of the political spectrum. Based on survey data, the analysis suggests that the 2024 French European election was primarily a 'second-order' national election fought on domestic issues, in which voters on both sides of the populist spectrum essentially expressed their political dissatisfaction with the incumbent president.

A topography of populism in France

In Western Europe, populism is predominantly found in the radical left and radical right (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018). Reflecting such diversity, three main parties currently dominate the populist scene in France, namely Marine Le Pen's RN and Éric Zemmour's Reconquête on the right of the political spectrum, and Jean-Luc Mélenchon's La France Insoumise (LFI) on the left.

The RN exemplifies the typical radical right-wing variant of populism, operating on its core defining features of nativism and authoritarianism (Mudde, 2007; Pirro, 2022). The 2024 European campaign led by its popular young leader Jordan Bardella emphasized typical RN nativist policies calling for a 'stop to the immigration flood by controlling borders and expelling illegal immigrants' and for 'defence of the security and civilizational values of the French through zero tolerance and the deportation of foreign delinquents and Islamists'.

Under the leadership of Marine Le Pen, the RN has embraced 'social populism', namely, a mix of egalitarian social protection and economic nationalism (Ivaldi, 2023a) In the 2022 presidential election, this move allowed her to exploit the Russia–Ukraine War-related issues of energy and rising prices among working- and lower-middle-class voters most hit by the crisis (Ivaldi, 2023b). The cost of living was again a key issue in the RN's communication strategy in the 2024 European election, where the party pledged to 'lower electricity bills' and 'reject all European taxes on energy'. Meanwhile, the party continued its economic nationalist agenda, declaring it would 'prioritize French companies in public procurement'. Riding the wave of discontent among French farmers, the RN also pledged to 'put an end to punitive ecological policies and fight unfair competition' to protect farmers' interests.

Euroscepticism has been a central feature of the FN/RN in France since the mid-1990s (Hainsworth et al., 2004), tapping into a wide range of institutional, economic and cultural issues (Ivaldi, 2018a). Since 2017, the RN has moderated its positions and abandoned its previous policy of 'Frexit', adopting, however, a more ambiguous stance vis-à-vis the EU and de-emphasizing European issues to increase its appeal to moderate voters. The RN's 2024 campaign reiterated the call for 'a Europe of nations against Macron's Europe' while pledging to 'put an end to European Union enlargement' and preserve France's 'sovereignty and right of veto' so that 'no decisions could be made contrary to France's vital interests'.

Éric Zemmour's Reconquête shows a populist radical-right profile similar to the RN's (Ivaldi, 2023a). A well-known political commentator, columnist and author, Zemmour entered national politics at the 2022 presidential election, making nativism and anti-Muslim rhetoric a centrepiece of his presidential bid. In 2024, the Reconquête campaign led by Marion Maréchal, a former member of the RN and Marine Le Pen's niece, exhibited the central ideological tenets of nativism and authoritarianism alongside populism and Euroscepticism. The manifesto called for a halt to 'the Islamization of Europe' and pledged to erect a 'naval blockade against immigration in the Mediterranean' while explicitly endorsing the extreme rightwing idea of 'remigration' by promising to deport all illegal immigrants, criminals and 'foreign Islamists'. Reconquête's 2024 campaign was significantly hampered, A Tipping Point for Far-Right Populism in France Gilles Ivaldi - Sciences Po Paris-CNRS (CEVIPOF)

however, by growing disagreement between Zemmour and Maréchal over party strategy and a possible rapprochement with the RN.

On the other hand, Mélenchon's populist radical left LFI presents a universalistic profile, embracing a more socially inclusive notion of the people, which is essentially pitted against economic and political elites (Ivaldi, 2018b). LFI shows strong antiestablishment features, and its discourse and ideology illustrate radical left populist mobilization, which seeks to offer an alternative to the neoliberal hegemony. In June 2024, the campaign led by the party's young leader, Manon Aubry, strongly opposed austerity and advocated economic redistribution and public spending.

LFI's economic policies included higher taxes on capital, the expansion of public services, nationalizing the banking sector to fight speculation, raising the minimum wage and abolishing the 2023 pension reform to return the retirement age to 60. Additionally, the 2024 platform emphasized environmental issues and ecological transition policies, attesting to the more general 'greening' of the populist radical left in France since 2017. Like the RN, LFI has toned down its Euroscepticism in recent years, moving away from its previous call to leave the EU and that France should 'disobey' the European treaties to 'preserve the national sovereignty of the French people' (Ivaldi, 2018b).

LFI took a more radical course in the months before the election, however, reflecting Mélenchon's 'revolutionary' strategy and the controversial stances taken by the party's leadership concerning the Israel–Hamas war. Following the October 2023 attacks, Mélenchon came under fierce criticism for what was perceived as his ambiguous reaction to the events in Israel, declining to condemn Hamas as a terrorist group and adopting aggressive pro-Palestinian positions. Mélenchon and members of LFI were later accused of antisemitism and of fuelling political anger at Macron and the government while also targeting some of their allies in the newly formed left-wing alliance (New Ecological and Social People's Union, NUPES) in parliament. Mélenchon's strategy of radicalization caused enormous turmoil inside the party as prominent leaders such as François Ruffin openly expressed their criticism.

All three populist parties have made significant gains in recent national elections. The April 2022 presidential election saw a surge in electoral support for populism across the political spectrum (Perrineau, 2022). Le Pen won 23.2% of the presidential vote, coming in second place behind incumbent centrist President Emmanuel Macron (at 27.9%), progressing into the run-off where she received a

record high 41.5%. In the first round, Zemmour made a significant breakthrough at 7% of the total votes cast. Finally, Mélenchon came in third place with 22% of the vote, taking the lead on the left from the once-dominant Socialist Party (PS).

In the subsequent legislative election of June 2022, the RN received 18.7% of the vote and 89 seats, by far the best result ever achieved by the far right in France, making the RN the largest parliamentary opposition. Mélenchon's LFI was the dominant player within NUPES, which won a total of 26% of the vote and 157 seats, 75 of which were taken by the LFI.

The context of the 2024 EP elections in France

The 2024 French European election took place against the backdrop of the economic crisis and the rising cost of living in a context marked by global uncertainty arising from the war in Ukraine, social unrest and deep political discontent with President Emmanuel Macron.

Politically, the European elections were located halfway through Macron's second presidency since April 2022, which had been significantly weakened by the loss of its absolute majority in the 2022 legislative election. Between 2022 and 2024, minority governments led by Élisabeth Borne and Gabriel Attal struggled to find agreements to pass legislation in an increasingly ideologically polarized parliament dominated by LFI and the RN. The Borne government was strongly criticized for repeatedly using the provisions of Article 49(3) of the Constitution, which allows bills to be passed without a vote. Political unrest culminated in March 2023 after the government used Article 49(3) to pass a highly unpopular law raising the retirement age from 62 to 64. Both LFI and the RN opposed the reform, which was overwhelmingly rejected by the French, resulting in mass demonstrations and strikes.

The new Attal government and Emmanuel Macron entered the 2024 election with low popularity ratings: in June, less than a quarter (24%) of the French said they 'trusted the president to handle the country's biggest problems'; the comparable figure for Prime Minister Attal was 29% (Elabe, 2024). The European election campaigns of both the RN and LFI tried and capitalized on such political discontent by making the election a referendum for or against Emmanuel Macron and the government, essentially emphasizing domestic concerns over European issues.

Economic fears clearly dominated the campaign, creating a propitious context

for populist politics across the board. According to polls, no fewer than 54% of French voters said the cost of living and purchasing power would be important to their vote. Meanwhile, immigration emerged as a salient issue for another 44%, followed by law and order at 26% (CEVIPOF, 2024a). This salience reflected growing public concerns over Islamist terrorism and debates surrounding immigrant integration in France following the urban riots of summer 2023 throughout the country. In December 2023, a vote for a new restrictive immigration law marked a significant shift to the right by the government. The law was widely seen as emulating the nativist policies of the RN, some of which had been brought into the draft bill by the mainstream right, attesting to the radical right turn of the Républicains (LR) under the leadership of Éric Ciotti (Ivaldi, 2024).

Populist voting in the 2024 EP elections

The 2024 French European election saw a rise in electoral support for far-right populism. Turnout was 51.5%, representing a mere increase of about 1.4 points compared to five years earlier and very close to the European average (51.1%). Le Pen and Bardella's RN emerged as the big winner at 31.4% of the vote (up 8 percentage points compared to 2019), taking 30 of France's 81 seats in the European Parliament. Macron's Renaissance list came in a distant second at 14.6%. Meanwhile, Mélenchon's left-wing populist LFI won 9.9%, a gain of 3.6 percentage points on its previous result in the 2019 EP elections, which was, however, far lower than Mélenchon's performance in the 2022 presidential election. To the left, LFI was outperformed by the socialist list led by MEP Raphaël Glucksmann in alliance with his Place Publique movement, which came third with 13.8%. Finally, the Reconquête list led by Maréchal received 5.5% of the vote and five seats, making its first entry into the European Parliament.

Polling data confirm that the mix of economic insecurity, immigration fears, and political discontent with Macron may have created a 'perfect storm' for far-right populism in the 2024 French European election. Economic grievances and issues have been important factors in the electoral revitalization of far-right populism in France since the early 2010s. Support for the FN has been fuelled by feelings of economic alienation mediated by cultural concerns over immigration and strong anti-elite sentiments (Ivaldi, 2022). In the 2024 EP election, support for the RN was primarily motivated by immigration (77%), the cost of living (67%), and law and order (40%). Similarly, immigration (89%) and security issues (58%) were paramount to Reconquête voters, reflecting the typical far-right agenda. In contrast,

LFI voters said they were primarily concerned with the cost of living (61%), social inequalities (49%), and the environment (34%) (CEVIPOF, 2024a).

Polls indicate that the 2024 European election served as a referendum on Macron and the Attal government. Political protest and anti-incumbent sentiments were key to populist voting across the spectrum. While 39% of the French (36% in 2019) said they essentially voted to manifest their opposition to the president and the government, it was 53% among LFI voters, 54% in Reconquête, and no less than 68% among those who had turned to the RN (IPSOS, 2024a).

Finally, polls showed a different trade-off between domestic and European issues across voters. Overall, 45% of the electorate said they voted based on domestic concerns, a proportion like the one observed in 2019 (43%). To the left, LFI voters were like the national average at 45%. On the other hand, national issues clearly dominated the electoral agenda of far-right populist voters, with 62% of Reconquête voters and nearly three-quarters (73%) of RN voters saying these issues had been decisive at the ballot box. In contrast, European concerns were paramount to over 80% of Renaissance, socialist, and ecologist voters (IPSOS, 2024a).

Such differences were reflected in attitudes towards Europe, which varied significantly across parties. Overall, only 22% of the French said they opposed European integration, with a majority (57%) saying they supported Europe but would like it to take a different course. Opposition to the EU was substantially stronger among Reconquête (42%) and RN (43%) voters. On the other hand, LFI voters showed more positive views of Europe, with only 16% expressing opposition to further integration (CEVIPOF, 2024b).

With nearly a third of the vote, the RN list managed to attract voters across most socio-demographic groups. As in 2022, the RN closed the traditional radical-right gender gap (Durovic & Mayer, 2022), winning 32% and 30% of the vote among men and women, respectively. The Bardella list also did significantly better than the other parties among young voters under 25 years (25%). While consolidating its traditional working- and lower-middle-class constituencies – with no less than 54% of the vote among workers and 40% among white collars – the RN further widened its electoral base by making significant inroads in other occupational groups, winning 29% of the vote among technicians and associate professionals while also going neck-and-neck with the socialists among managers and professionals at 20% of the vote. Finally, the RN won no less than 29% of the vote among pensioners – up to 36%

among those from a lower social strata background – thus making significant gains in a group traditionally more resilient to far-right populism in France (IPSOS, 2024b).

To the left, the LFI list led by Manon Aubry essentially overperformed among young voters, receiving a third of the vote (33%) among those aged 18–24 years and 20% among those aged 25–34 years. This result may reflect the strong position taken by LFI on the war in Gaza, which emerged as one of the main concerns in those age groups (IPSOS, 2024b). The salience of the Israel–Hamas conflict was also confirmed by the extremely high level of support (64%) for LFI among the small group of self-declared Muslims in polls (CEVIPOF, 2024a), in line with Mélenchon's appeal to voters from an immigrant background. More generally, LFI voters showed higher average educational attainment than their RN counterparts, and Aubry's list achieved a higher level of support amongst voters with a university degree (15%).

The snap legislative election

The outcome of the European election led to the unexpected decision by Emmanuel Macron to dissolve the National Assembly and call a snap election within three weeks despite anticipations of an RN victory and forecasts of a far-right absolute majority. Macron's political gamble was seen as a strategic move to make parties and voters both face up to their own responsibilities in the event of an RN majority in parliament while also exposing the RN's unpreparedness for government. Macron called upon the 'silent majority of voters' against the 'disorder' caused by radical parties (AFP, 2024), hoping to form a new centrist majority by aggregating the centre-left and centre-right against the immediate and tangible threat of the far right gaining power.

Within the extremely short pre-election period, tactical alliances were built across both sides of the political spectrum. Most notably, despite diverging positions on Europe, Gaza and Ukraine, the major parties of the left agreed to form a broad coalition dubbed the Nouveau Front Populaire (NFP), bringing together LFI, the Communist Party, the Greens and the Socialists together with Glucksmann's Place Publique. While they had all competed individually in the European elections, the NFP member parties agreed to select single candidates (i.e., avoid running against one another) in almost all of France's 577 constituencies, and there were few dissident leftwing candidates. The breakdown of NFP candidates showed that LFI remained the dominant force (229 candidates), followed by the socialists (175) and the Greens (92).

At the centre, Macron's Renaissance movement rallied its previous allies in the

outgoing parliament inside his Ensemble coalition, i.e., François Bayrou's centrist Mouvement démocrate (MoDem) and Édouard Philippe's centre-right Horizons. Further to the right, the 2024 legislative election saw a notable reshuffling of the subparty system. Éric Ciotti, head of the Republicans, struck an electoral pact with the RN, eventually running a total of 62 candidates with the far right under the new À Droite (To the Right) banner. Other LR leaders vehemently opposed such a decision, including Laurent Wauquiez, a close ally of Ciotti and hardliner within the party. This resulted in bitter infighting and the attempt by LR to expel Ciotti, which was overturned by a Paris court before the election. The Republicans entered the legislative election significantly divided and weakened, running candidates in 305 constituencies.

The results of the first round of the June legislative election showed a surge in voter turnout (to 66.7%), a substantial increase (about 19 percentage points) from the previous 2022 election, reflecting both voter desire for change after seven years of Macron's presidency, and growing fears of the far right getting closer to power. On election night, the RN was again the big winner, receiving 29.3 % of the vote – its best performance ever in a legislative election – to which one must add the 4% received by Ciotti's À Droite candidates, giving a total of about a third of the total vote cast for the far right. RN candidates topped the polls in 297 out of 577 constituencies, and they could progress to nearly all the second-round run-offs. This result confirmed the geographical spread of the RN vote across all regions of France, which had already been observed in the European election.

Further to the right, the results of the snap election showed the electoral marginalization of Éric Zemmour's Reconquête, reflecting growing intra-party dissent and disagreement over party strategy between Zemmour and Maréchal. Ahead of the first round, Maréchal was expelled from the party together with two other vice presidents – Guillaume Peltier and Nicolas Bay – after she had initiated talks with the RN leadership and had publicly called for a union of the two far-right parties. Reconquête entered the election independently and fielded 330 candidates who collectively polled a mere 0.75 % of the vote in the first round, making Zemmour's party politically irrelevant. To the left, the newly formed NFP came second at 28.5% and took the lead in 159 constituencies. Macron's Ensemble coalition finished third with 21.8% of the vote cast, topping the polls in 70 constituencies, essentially in the western part of the country and the more bourgeois areas inside and around Paris.

Legislative run-offs were fought in the 501 constituencies where two or more candidates had surpassed the institutional threshold of 12.5% of registered voters

to be allowed to progress into the second round. Between the two rounds, the traditional Republican Front – that is, the ad hoc alliances of parties and voters across the spectrum that coalesce whenever the RN is likely to win a decisive round – was revitalized, resulting in 217 candidates withdrawing from three-way races in their constituencies to reduce the chances of an RN victory.

The second round attested to the mobilization of voters against the far right. At 66.6%, voter participation rose to the highest level since the 1997 legislative elections (up from 53.8% in 2022). Between the two rounds, mass protests against the RN were a strong sign of growing public concern about the far right getting into power in France. The second round delivered a hung parliament divided into three blocks. The left-wing NFP secured the most seats after the second round, winning a total of 180, falling short, however, of the 289 seats needed for an overall majority. LFI lost its predominance inside the broad left-wing coalition, taking 72 seats, as opposed to 66 for the socialists and 38 for the Greens. Macron's centrist Ensemble alliance came third with 163 seats, down 87 seats from the already relative majority it had secured in the 2022 election.

The 2024 legislative election came as a disappointment for the RN after its historical first-round performance and the presence of its candidates in most second-round run-offs. With a total of 143 seats (including Ciotti's À Droite MPs), Le Pen's party fell well short of the absolute majority needed to form a government, although this represented a substantial increase in the total number of RN seats compared with 89 in the 2022 elections. Because of the Republican Front put forward by mainstream parties, the number of three-way run-offs featuring the RN and two other parties was reduced from 306 to 89, significantly impacting the outcome for the far right: the RN lost no fewer than 154 constituencies where it had taken the lead in the first round.

Other factors contributing to the RN's electoral setback included the party's poor credentials for government and the extreme right-wing profile of its candidates. The campaign exposed the RN's unpreparedness for the government despite the Matignon Plan – essentially a list of candidates for all 577 constituencies in the National Assembly – put forward in haste by Bardella just before the first round. The election was punctuated with hesitations and U-turns on some of the party's key economic and immigration policies, such as lowering the retirement age back to 60 and restricting access to public jobs for people with dual citizenship. Meanwhile, the media revealed that many of the RN candidates hastily brought to the campaign from the party rank-and-file had repeatedly posted racist, homophobic,

pro-Putin, COVID-19 denial and anti-Semitic comments on social media, casting doubt about Le Pen's claim that she had detoxified her party. Additionally, some RN candidates had links with violent ultra-nationalist organizations in France, and one of them was found to have a criminal record for armed robbery.

Discussion and perspectives

The 2024 legislative election has left France in a political deadlock, delivering a hung parliament split into three blocks. The outcome of the 2024 European and legislative elections have more generally reflected the shape and increasing polarization of French politics since 2017; that is, a weakened yet still resilient centrist block squeezed between two radical alternatives on the left (LFI) and right (RN) of the party system. While parties of the left have managed to somewhat overcome their ideological and policy divergences, electoral support for the left remains relatively low, casting doubt about the possibility of a credible left-wing alternative while also attesting to the shift to the right that has taken place in French politics, a trend seen in many other European countries.

With an ever more fragmented parliament and no stable government in sight, the outcome of the 2024 elections will undoubtedly prolong uncertainty and political instability in a context marked by social unrest, growing economic anxiety and public debt and deficit. Such uncertainty will likely fuel electoral support for populism across the political spectrum in the forthcoming months, as economic and cultural fears will continue to top the political agenda. Macron and his centrist party face the challenge of building ad hoc alliances across ideologically diverse parties to pass legislation to address such concerns. Meanwhile, both LFI and the RN will need to work on their policy credibility, organization and membership to try and establish themselves as viable alternatives in the 2027 presidential election.

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