

After elections, battle for soul of France begins



By John Lichfield
Journalist,
editor

OPINION

Stripped of the noise and confusion of the campaign, today's second round of voting will in many places be a straight choice between a candidate of the Far Right and a candidate of the anti-Far Right 'republican front' — writes John Lichfield. It will show whether French voters do truly want a Le Pen government — and will kick-start a long and chaotic battle over the future of France.

President Emmanuel Macron has finally got his way. For months he has been attempting to engineer a referendum on the Far Right. French voters insisted on making the European elections and the first round of parliamentary elections a referendum on him.

In Round Two on Sunday, Macron's question can no longer be avoided. In more than 300 of the 501 constituencies still in play, there will be a straight fight between the Rassemblement National (RN) and a candidate of the so-called "Republican Front", the makeshift anti-Far Right alliance between former sworn enemies of Left and Centre.

Over 200 of these constituencies were potential three-way battles after Round One. Scores of third-placed candidates of the Left alliance and the Macron centrist alliance have now withdrawn, willingly or under duress, to allow their better-placed former rivals a clear run against the populist-nationalist Right.

Stripped of all the noise and confusion of the campaign, Sunday's vote is therefore a simple affair. Does France want to be governed by the anti-European, pro-Russian, still fundamentally racist Rassemblement National?

Does it want to be led by a 28-year-old Prime Minister, Jordan Bardella, who is an impressive purveyor of sound-bites and a darling of Tik-Tok but has never run anything but his mouth?

An avalanche of polls and seat projections in the last two days suggests that the answer will be "no".

All polls still say that the Far Right and their Centre-Right quisling allies will form the largest single bloc in the new National Assembly on Sunday. All now agree that Marine Le Pen and Jordan Bardella will fall far short of the 289 seats needed for an overall majority and well shy of the 260 or so seats which might, with difficulty, form the basis of a governing coalition.

On Monday, when I forecast that the RN would NOT form the next French government, I defied the ambient mood of much of the national and foreign media. The conventional wisdom has shifted in my direction.

That makes me uneasy. Hundreds of candidates have stood aside. The pollsters have polled. But the voters have yet to vote.

Many of the key battleground constituencies will be very close on Sunday night. Polls suggest that as many as half the first-round voters of the Left and Centre are unwilling to vote tactically for their former enemies of the Centre and the Left.

The transfer of less than half of the third-placed votes should be enough to defeat the Far Right in many constituencies. It will be insufficient or produce a coin's toss result in others. One of the most pivotal Republican Front v Far Right constituencies is my own in southwestern Calvados. In Round One, the sitting Macronist deputy, the former Prime Minister, Elisabeth Borne, was pushed into second place by a relatively unknown candidate of the Rassemblement National, Nicolas Calbrix.

The young man who came third, Noé Gauchard, candidate for the hard-Left La France Insoumise, withdrew immediately without waiting for national pacts or fronts or instructions. "It's hard for me to withdraw for Elisabeth Borne, the woman who manipulated through the pension reform," he said.

"But that does not compare with fascism."

In Round One, the RN candidate took 36.26 percent of the vote, Borne 28.93 percent, and Guichard 23.16 percent. Most of the rest went to other Far Right candidates (three percent) and a Centre-Right candidate (seven percent). Borne therefore needs around 40 percent of the Left vote to win in Round Two.

She should win. It will be very close. I spoke to one of the few people who live in the constituency who is not white.

I will call him Ahmed. "If I was not a Muslim, I would probably vote for Bardella," he said. "People are very angry. There are some I know who can only afford to eat one meal a day. The Far-Right message — no one cares about you but us — may be false but it strikes home.

"I voted for the Left in Round One and I will vote for Borne, with no pleasure, in Round Two but only because I am a French-born Muslim and I know what damage Le Pen and Bardella can do to my country. Many other people here don't care about all that." The Rassemblement National mocks the Republican Front as the last stand of the "elite" — an alliance "against nature," which stretches from the

anti-capitalist, Mélenchon Left to the Globalist Macronist Centre. Some voters of the Left, and not just the Left, secretly agree with them.

Others, like Noé Guichard and Ahmed, will see Sunday's vote as a moral stand against a destructive, mendacious, and incompetent Far Right.

Marine Le Pen also argues that the Republican Front is a denial of democracy. Her party topped the poll last Sunday with an unprecedented 33.3 percent of the vote. She and Bardella therefore have the right to govern, she says.

But France is not Britain. In a first-past-the-post, one-round system, we would be facing the first Far-Right government in France since 1944. Keir Starmer won a landslide for Labour on Thursday night with only slightly more of the popular vote (about 35 percent) than the RN won last weekend.

The French two-round system may be laborious and arcane, but it does give voters a chance to correct blunders and avoid calamities. The political establishment may have "conspired" to create the Republican Front, but no one can force voters to support it on Sunday night.

Despite my misgivings, I believe they will. That will not be a "denial" of democracy. It will be the healthy reaction of the two-thirds or so of the French electorate that does NOT want a government by mendacious, incompetent, and frequently racist charlatans.

France will plunge instead into at least 12 months and possibly three years of confusion and disarray before the next Presidential election. Whatever government can be concocted from Sunday's results will struggle to respond to the genuine distress of part of the electorate.

In 12 months or three years' time, Le Pen and Bardella will blame once again a conspiracy of the establishment — not their rejection by a majority of voters — for their failure to bring their destructive and incoherent ideas into government.

I believe that they will be defeated on Sunday but that will be just the beginning of a long and crippling battle over the future, and the soul, of France.

The article first appeared on The Local France.

French elections: End of Macron era will redefine EU politics



The illustration shows German Chancellor Olaf Scholz (L), leader of the French Far-Right National Rally party Marine Le Pen (C), and her protégé, Jordan Bardella.
● ESTHER SNIPPE/EURACTIV



By Anne-Laure Duféal
Journalist

PERSPECTIVE

As French President Emmanuel Macron's party faces a likely defeat in the snap legislative elections, and the Hard-Right and Left-wing opposition forces inch closer to power, the implications for European Union politics are profound.

Brussels is nervous about post-election results and possible coalition scenarios. Should the Left or the hard-Right gain power, France could be on the path to a form of "Frexit". Macron, who since 2017 positioned himself as a hero of the EU, may now be seen as responsible for the impending crisis.



French Far-Right leader Marine Le Pen gestures at a campaign rally in March.
● JEAN CHRISTOPHE VERHAEGEN/AFP

A National Rally (RN) or a Left victory could also mean open conflicts between France and the EU on various issues: budgetary policies, defence projects, Schengen agreements, and the Ukraine war among them.

Jordan Bardella, President of the RN and gunning for the position of Prime Minister, said his party would "strive to obtain a reduction of the French contribution to the budget of the European Union" if it won the elections.

The Left, on the other hand, opposes EU-imposed austerity measures, vowing to reject such constraints. Further tensions may rise after the European Commission launched an excessive deficit procedure against France and six other Member States. The RN's proposed reforms concerning Schengen, prioritising European nationals and increasing immigration controls directly challenge EU principles. The party even suggested a referendum putting French law above EU law, which would be in direct conflict with the European treaties.

On Ukraine, both the RN and the Left, particularly driven by La France Insoumise (LFI), oppose sending

troops to Ukraine.

Their stance on Ukraine represented a major shift in France's military aid to Kyiv.

These statements diverge from Macron's commitments to support Ukraine militarily, including potential troop deployments, calls for European military training for Ukrainian forces, and authorising strikes from Western weapons in mainland Russia.

A victory for the RN would also shift the EU's power dynamics and likely solidify a bloc's shift to the Right.

The possible political transformation has particularly spooked Berlin. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz expressed concern at the possible outcome of the French elections at the summer party of the Social Democratic on July 3 in Berlin.

Scholz highlighted the importance of the ballot for the "Franco-German couple" and the future of Europe. "Let's do everything we can together to protect our great and beautiful Europe and not let Far-Right populists dominate it," he said.

The article first appeared on Brussels Signal.



A dirty French flag is seen during the demonstration against the new pension reform plan in Paris, France, on January 31, 2023.
● TELMO PINTO/SOPA IMAGES