

How will the re-elected French President Govern?

A discussion with Nidra Poller.



by Jerry Gordon

Reelected in April for a second term, French President Emmanuel Macron did not win an outright majority in the subsequent parliamentary elections (June 12 and 19). With 246 of the 555 seats, the president will have to contend with two Populist opposition parties: Marine Le Pen's National Assembly, with 89 deputies, and the. Nupes coalition of Greens, Socialists and Communists, dominated by Jean-Luc Mélenchon's France Insoumise, with 131 seats. This coalition

is already unraveling as the Assemblée begins its session.

From our vantage point, it would seem that these results reflect low voter turnout, domestic concerns over rising inflation, caused in part by energy complications from the Russian invasion of the Ukraine, immigration issues, indifference to Macron's economic reforms, and hostility to EU and NATO membership, manifested by both populist parties. Both parties have ambiguous relations with Putin's Russia.

Macron has been heavily engaged in EU and NATO concerns over the brutal Russian invasion of Ukraine. Between the first and second rounds of the Parliamentary elections, he joined his German, Italian, and Romanian counterparts in meetings in Moldavia and with embattled Ukrainian President Zelensky in Kyiv. Acceptance of Ukraine's bid for EU membership (the beginning of a long process that could take more than a decade) followed this show of support from these major European leaders. Following the fractious results of the French Parliamentary elections, Macron was off to expanded G7 and NATO meetings in Germany and Spain with US President Biden, Japanese Prime Minister Kishida, and Australian PM Anthony Albanese discussing new Russian sanctions, military and economic aid to Ukraine, as well as threats from China in the Indo-Pacific region, notably to Taiwan.

Some French Jews are concerned by the far-left and far-right surge in the parliamentary elections, as illustrated by comments from Yonatan Arfi, the newly elected head of the CRIF (Jewish Community umbrella organization). Arfi found consolation for the unprecedented rise of extreme Populists in the election of a Jewish woman, Yael Braun-Pivet, as president of the Assemblée.

Prior to the legislative l elections, Macron had appointed as Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne, the daughter of a Polish Jewish immigrant, who honored France as a WW2 résistant. The question is, will Borne's government stand up to the shocks

and blows of a tumultuous parliament?

Against this background, we held a discussion with our colleague American expat in Paris, Nidra Poller who has reported on these political developments in France.

What were the significant takeaways from the Second round of the French Parliamentary elections?

[See my [Iconclast](#) blog on the first and second rounds of the legislative elections]

Contrary to the United States, the reelection of an outgoing president is rare: it has only happened twice before in the Fifth Republic and, in both cases, was preceded by a period of cohabitation. Contrary to what voters reportedly desired, a rematch between Marine Le Pen and Emmanuel Macron was the ultimate presidential choice offered. Macron won a respectable victory. Almost without exception, voters subsequently give the president an absolute majority in the Assemblée.

This was not to be. Again, according to polls, they wanted the reelected president to struggle with parliamentary opposition. *Ensemble*, the coalition of *Renaissance* (formerly *La République en Marche*), *Modem*, and *Horizons* has a relative majority of 245 seats. The opposition is divided between Marine le Pen's *Rassemblement National*, with a surprising crop of 89 deputies, and *Nupes*, the coalition cobbled together by Jean-Luc Mélenchon in the immediate aftermath of the presidential election, with 131 deputies. Mélenchon attempted an OPA on the government, promising to be "elected" prime minister by an overwhelming surge of votes for NUPES.

In fact, Mélenchon's party, *La France Insoumise*, has only 72 deputies. The smattering of other left-wing parties gathered under his wing for the elections, will act independently in the parliament, leaving the *Rassemblement National* as the major opposition party. The two radical populist parties, *LFI* and *RN*, will be constantly vying for power. They will probably

prefer to disagree, even on the few issues on which they actually concur.

You may read here and there that France will be ungovernable. Let me reassure you. France is always ungovernable. But we manage somehow to accomplish some things.

The combined opposition does not have enough votes to bring down the government. And the RN has no intention of supporting such a motion. The government, on the other hand, can dissolve the parliament and call for new elections. Currently, no one wants to face the risks involved.

What do you view as the causes of the high abstention rate in these election results?

High abstention rates are the trend in France. The legislative elections were no exception. The explanation is both simple and complicated. It is usually analyzed as a lack of faith in democracy, voter discontent with politicians, feelings of alienation between voters and elected officials, etc. I have another, perhaps additional, explanation: I think it is a side effect of excessive individualism and disinterest in the general welfare. Each voter individually would like to have a deputy tailored to order. He wants his concerns to be uppermost. And he wants hard and fast promises to satisfy his personal demands. For the lack of this satisfaction guaranteed, he loses interest in the whole process.

What were the domestic issues that drove the Parliamentary election results?

Somehow, during the two-week period of legislative elections, cost-of-living became the overriding issue. Pie in the sky promises drove the opposition vote. Since Macron had been president for five years, any economic improvements he might have claimed were overshadowed by the extravagant, undeliverable promises of *Nupes* and the *RN*. Further, the Macron government had to bear responsibility for inflation

caused, first, by the Covid-19 pandemic and, currently, by the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Why did Mélenchon's far left Nupes alliance fail?

Because only a minority of voters support Nupes candidates and programs. And a significant number of those supporters gave up on Mélenchon when he came in a close third but failed to win the presidential election. *LFI* is a significant minority that has to be reckoned with. But it doesn't give the clout they hoped for within the government.

LFI will undoubtedly promote a two-step program: jockeying for power within the legislature, and fighting the government in the streets.

How did Marine Le Pen's National Rally become the opposition party in the new French Parliament?

Marine Le Pen's dream has almost come true: she has been determined for decades to crush the governing Right, today's *Républicains*, and replace it as the major opposition party. Nevertheless, the victory of 89 *RN* delegates caught her by surprise. She had run a lackluster legislative campaign, apparently exhausted by her third and final presidential bid. Ironically, Eric Zemmour functioned, against his will, as a step ladder for Le Pen. Seizing on hot issues like immigration, security, Islamism and national identity, he allowed Le Pen to come across as a moderate while she actually siphoned off the voters concerned by these issues. She let Zemmour burn himself with radical discourse and political missteps, while she hummed along on the cost-of-living issue, posing as the Mother of the People that would protect them from the meanies that deprived them of a decent living and cozy retirement at the age of 60. Zemmour was literally absent on economic issues, and unconvincing on free market capitalism.

President Macron's Ensemble failed to achieve a parliamentary

majority. Does that jeopardize his domestic reforms and EU and NATO commitments?

Ensemble, the coalition of Renaissance, Modem and Horizons, is a solid alliance that, despite individual power plays, will not fall apart within the parliament. The government's relative majority is well ahead of the opposition. On many issues, the two populist parties will cancel each other out.

Les Républicains have refused subtle or outright invitations to form a coalition with the majority. They will vote bill by bill, issue by issue. Because LR will often be in favor of the government's position, their votes will be crucial to passing legislation. It is expected that this will give the Right more power than in the previous legislature, where Macron's majority could vote down their proposed amendments and ignore their priorities.

Foreign policy is the prerogative of the executive. The fractured opposition will not be able to seriously interfere in the NATO alliance and relations with the EU.

What alliance possibilities does Macron have in this new Parliament to achieve his program?

On certain issues, the populist Left and/or Right might vote with the majority. LFI will be boisterous, RN seems determined to look moderate and serious.

Whatever the bill, all three opposition parties will propose amendments, trying to align bills with their own programs. We will watch that play out in the coming months.

On the cusp of the Second Round, Macron joined with leaders of Germany, Italy, and Rumania to meet with President Zelensky to promote EU membership for embattled Ukraine. Why wasn't support for Ukraine an issue in the Parliamentary elections?

As so often happens, when voters come down to the wire, they

put their personal interests ahead of other priorities. That doesn't mean that the choice of voters was not influenced or determined by the major European foreign policy issue since the end of WW2: the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Some will have chosen *RN* or *Nupes* because they oppose unequivocal support for Ukraine and strong ties to NATO, the EU, and the United States. But the issue fell into the background during the legislative campaign.

What military and other support is France providing Ukraine?

France has opted for a low-key discourse on its very significant support for Ukraine. Is this because the total budget of military and humanitarian aid is a bit too modest compared to the UK and the US? Are there other reasons? The fact is, the French have given high tech material and training (e.g. Caesar canons), strong moral support, and open arms to refugees. Ukraine has a good press in France. There are nuances, we can discuss that in a future conversation.

Why is Macron pushing eventual negotiations between Ukraine and Russia?

President Macron has finally abandoned this posture. Or at least postponed it, in admitting frankly that this is not the time for negotiations. On a broader scale, France's default diplomatic position is negotiation: Everything should be settled by negotiation, and we are the Negotiators-in-chief. Despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, it seems the French can't bear to give up these pretensions.

They tried repeatedly to negotiate an Israeli-Palestinian peace plan. They tried to midwife the creation of a democratic government for Lebanon. We could mention other embarrassments of the kind, including the Normandy agreement that was supposed to shore up the Minsk 1 and 2 agreements, and make peace between an endangered Ukraine and a predatory Russia.

Fortunately, France has not exerted pressure on Ukraine to

make concessions.

The joke in all this is that the French, that see themselves as superb negotiators, are slightly freaked out by the prospect of disparate parties forced to negotiate within the halls of the Assemblée!

What has been reaction of the French Jewish community to the election results given their support for Macron?

French Jews do not want to be seen as an ethnic voting bloc. They protest vehemently when any Jewish institution tries to warn them against the extremes. Ethnic statistics are prohibited in France. I can't tell you how Jewish citizens voted. But I know that they shun the extreme populist parties. *LFI* is linked to various forms of antisemitism, *RN* has old ties and enduring hidden connections to its original far-Right form of antisemitism.

There were the brutal deaths of another elderly Jew and a non-Jew by Muslim perpetrators. Did those attacks factor into parliamentary voting?

This, like many other serious problems, was pushed into the background during the campaign. They will all rush to the forefront in the coming weeks and months.

Given the fall of the Israeli Ruling coalition after a fractious year resulting in the Fifth election in three years scheduled for early November, how is that perceived in terms of EU, Russian and Iran issues?

We shouldn't expect an immediate outright reaction to this upheaval in Israeli politics. The close cooperation between Israel, the EU, and the US on Russian and Iranian issues will be maintained because it is essential and it deals with implacable realities. The opposing positions are clearly drawn. Despite certain shaky tactical case-by-case agreements with Russia in Syria, Israel is clearly aligned with the

forces of freedom and democracy.