

A High-Stakes Game

Giovanni Capoccia

2024-06-10T13:22:33

So it has happened: Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National (RN) received more than twice the votes of Macron's Renaissance list in the European elections (31.4% vs. 14.6%). Jordan Bardella, head of the RN list, did not see his poll advantage significantly affected by his blunders in televised debates. Prime Minister Gabriel Attal and Macron intervened to no avail, trying to mitigate the crushing defeat predicted by the polls. Attal debated Bardella in a much-commented televised debate. Macron invited Marine Le Pen herself to a similar debate, but in vain.

Macron warned of the risks following a victory for anti-EU radical right parties in France and across the continent in an official televised interview after the D-Day commemoration. These were risky moves: further legitimizing the RN and its leaders, making the 28-year-old Bardella look like a plausible candidate for Prime Minister; turning the election into a referendum on Macron's shaky popularity since 2022 rather than focusing on the EU; and not compensating for the shortcomings of a competent but uncharismatic *tête de liste* like Valerie Hayer. The protagonists were aware of the risks. These were desperate moves to turn around a difficult situation. They likely made little difference to the final result.

The risk of these campaign moves, however, pales in comparison to Macron's decision to dissolve parliament and call an early election. He announced his intentions the evening of the vote count, when the first projections made clear the extent of his list's defeat, in a short, somber televised speech. He signed the decree for the early dissolution of the National Assembly that evening; elections are scheduled for June 30 and July 7. Judging by the immediate reactions on social media, Macron's announcement shocked several commentators and the public.

Yet, from the perspective of the 2027 presidential elections, the reasoning may not be as reckless as it seems. Macron's calculation is based on the consideration that three more years of the current situation would make a Le Pen presidency highly likely in 2027. She would then dissolve the National Assembly and call new parliamentary elections where the RN would likely get an absolute majority to back the new president, as has happened before in the history of the 5th Republic. By contrast, even the worst outcome from snap elections may make a full RN victory less likely.

The Current Situation

After the 2022 legislative elections, Macron's two successive Prime Ministers (Elizabeth Borne, and now Gabriel Attal) have been sitting ducks in a National Assembly where they lack a majority, and where large parts of the right and left oppositions take extreme positions. Even the more mainstream opposition parties, such as *Les Républicains* (LR), have repeatedly refused to form a coalition with

the centrist parties supporting the President. Borne, and later Attal, had only a narrow path to legislating, often closed off completely by the disruptive initiatives of the *Insoumis* (LFI) and the tactics of the RN and LR. Policy could only be passed through difficult compromises with the right, generating loud accusations of connivance from the left, and vice versa.

The government's resort to constitutional rules devised by the architects of the 5th Republic to break a parliamentary impasse, such as Article 49.3 (known as the "guillotine," which allows the government to pass a law without a vote, leaving the opposition with the sole option of calling a subsequent vote of no confidence), led to loud accusations of acting undemocratically from both the right and the left, as seen during the recent pension reform. Le Pen and her party have adopted an image and language of "respectability," setting them apart from the other main opposition actor (LFI, the largest opposition party on the left), and aiming to present the RN as a serious option for governing the country. This situation resulted in a decrease in Macron's popularity and a steady rise in Marine Le Pen's, now considered a likely winner of the 2027 presidential election in many polls.

The Possible Outcomes of the Snap Elections

By calling early elections, Macron is forcing the RN into a real confrontation, in an election where turnout will be higher and the stakes much greater than in the European elections. He will likely frame the campaign as a "call to arms" against the RN, hoping to consolidate the vote of all anti-RN electors. A similar consolidation may also occur on the far right, with the RN likely to attract votes from smaller far-right parties. However, Macron is highly unlikely to win this election.

The two most likely scenarios are an absolute majority for the RN or, more likely, a relative majority for the RN in a hung Parliament. In either case, Macron would appoint Jordan Bardella Prime Minister (Marine Le Pen has repeatedly stated that she will not be Prime Minister and that her candidate is Bardella). An absolute majority of seats for the RN would result in a three-year cohabitation between Macron and Bardella. Macron's calculation is that this will damage the RN's electoral fortunes. The inconsistency of most of the RN's policy proposals and the incompetence of Bardella and his circles have not damaged the party in the European election campaign, but they are more likely to do so if the RN has government responsibilities. Macron will remain President and likely plans to approach cohabitation with a belligerent attitude, reminiscent of the Mitterrand-Chirac cohabitation from 1986-1988.

If the RN instead gains only a relative majority, the parties supporting Macron will likely sabotage Bardella's government at every turn, making it ineffective. Even though it is too early to say what form the French left will take in the new parliament, a minority RN government hobbled by the Macronists is unlikely to find help there.

A High-Risk, But Probably Long-Planned Move

Thus, a high-risk move by Macron: many things could go wrong, and three years is a long time in politics. Still, this is probably a move dictated by the intention to fight the RN in 2027 under different, more favorable conditions than those in the current parliament. But where is Europe and the EU in all this? These were, after all, European elections. And yet, the EU is central in this story. The process of European integration would not survive a Le Pen presidency. Of course, France would not exit the EU. Brexit prompted a change of tactic for all continental Eurosceptics: rather than trying to break up the EU, they now aim to hollow it out from the inside, turning it into a 27-member intergovernmental institution, easily paralyzed by vetoes. Perhaps the strongest testament to the importance of the EU is that domestic and supranational politics are increasingly intertwined.

