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## **The French political paradox**

Macron's rise had the same cause as his failure now

by NORBERT F. TOFALL

### Abstract

Macron warned of a civil war. Now he is leaning towards electoral agreements with the "left-wing civil war party". If a majority were to view the left-wing civil war party as more problematic than the right, Macron's calculations would have failed completely.

### Zusammenfassung

Macron warnte vor einem Bürgerkrieg. Jetzt neigt er zu Wahlabsprachen mit der „linken Bürgerkriegspartei“. Sollte eine Mehrheit die linke Bürgerkriegspartei als problematischer ansehen als die rechte, dann wären Macrons Kalküle vollends gescheitert.



## I.

In the first round of the new French National Assembly election on 30 June 2024, the *Rassemblement national* party achieved 33.2% of the total votes cast according to current projections, the left-wing *Front populaire* 28.1%, President Emmanuel Macron's *Ensemble* 21% and *Les Républicains* 10%, while the other parties are negligible (as of 30 June 2024 at 10.30 pm).<sup>1</sup> However, the number of seats in the National Assembly is still open. In a first-past-the-post system, however, the share of votes in favour of the *Rassemblement national* may be sufficient for an absolute majority of seats.

Members of the French National Assembly are directly elected in 577 constituencies in two rounds of voting according to the first-past-the-post system. If a candidate receives an absolute majority in the first round of voting, i.e. more than half of the valid votes, and thus reaches at least 25 per cent of the number of eligible voters in a constituency, then this candidate is already elected as a member of the National Assembly for this constituency in the first round of voting. A second ballot is then no longer held in this constituency. A relative majority is sufficient in the second round of voting for constituencies that are still open. In any case, the two first-placed candidates from the first ballot may run in the second ballot, as well as all other candidates who received at least 12.5 per cent of the votes of all eligible voters in this constituency in the first ballot. This means that at least two people are running against each other in the second ballot.

The high voter turnout in the first round of voting for the French National Assembly on 30 June 2024 is likely to have led to more than two people running against each other in the second round of voting on 7 July 2024 in significantly more constituencies than in previous elections. For this reason, negotiations are being held on whether third and fourth-placed candidates should withdraw their candidature in order to increase the chances of one of the two first-placed candidates being elected.

On the evening of the European elections on 9 June 2024, President Emmanuel Macron surprisingly called for new elections to the National Assembly and warned of a "civil war" if the French were to vote on 30 June 2024 in the same way as in the European elections. This is exactly what the French have now done - contrary to the presidential warnings. This is why Macron now seems to be leaning towards making electoral agreements with the "left-wing civil war party" in order to reduce the chances of the "right-wing civil war party". If this calculation fails in the same way as his calculation to re-elect the National Assembly, because French centrist voters on 7 July 2024 see the "left-wing civil war party" as more problematic than the

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.francetvinfo.fr/elections/resultats/#>



"right-wing civil war party", then Emmanuel Macron would have succeeded - contrary to his own objective - in further promoting the "right-wing civil war party".

In Germany, Angela Merkel achieved such a feat by revitalising the AfD, which had been on the verge of self-destruction since 2015, with her refugee policy and winning a seat in the German Bundestag in 2017. The consequences of Macron's failed calculations could be much greater for France and the European Union.

The main issue driving political and social polarisation in both Europe and the US is still the migration problem. But beyond this, Emmanuel Macron has become entangled in the paradox of French political culture, particularly with regard to his thoroughly successful economic reform policy.

## II.

The result of the first round of voting for the French National Assembly on 30 June 2024 is clear: Emmanuel Macron has failed. He failed even though he was not even standing for election and can still be President of France until 2027. And even if many will now judge that Macron has failed because, in a fit of foolhardiness, he called new elections to the French National Assembly on the evening of the European Parliament elections on 9 June 2024, the deeper cause of his failure lies on another, much more serious level. His call for new elections was a desperate and ultimately ineffectual attempt to free himself from the logic of the paradox of French political culture and thus from the logic that he himself had masterfully and successfully utilised when he founded his movement party *En Marche* in 2016 and when he was elected President of France in 2017.

In France, a political culture has developed over generations in which there is a tendency towards aggressive mass protests and militant resistance to government reform plans. Vested interests coupled with a high degree of mobilisation often drive French governments onto the defensive. In addition, political strikes are permitted in France. On the other hand, the primacy of politics over the economy and society is recognised in France across all party boundaries and in all sections of the population, and the central state is called upon to assume universal responsibility.

The constructivist leadership and steering role of the state leads to a broken relationship with the market economy. The decentralised solution of problems and the decentralised evolutionary change of the economy and society are hardly given a chance. The overburdening of the state is therefore systematically pre-programmed. The state is supposed to fix it. But if it wants to fix it and break up incrustations and vested interests, militant protests and even political strikes will drive it onto the defensive. The result is polarisation through procrastination.



In France, many have recognised for years that France needs structural reforms.<sup>2</sup> For this reason, the socialist Francois Hollande initiated a change in supply-side policy following his election as president in 2012. In March 2014, Hollande confirmed his course by appointing the reformer Manuel Valls as Prime Minister. In August 2014, a left-wing critic of this economic policy line, Arnaud Montebourg, was replaced as Minister of the Economy by the staunch reformer and current President Emmanuel Macron.

As Minister of the Economy, Emmanuel Macron introduced the law on "Growth, economic activity and equal opportunities", which liberalised some liberal professions, reformed the right to dismiss and relaxed shop opening hours on Sundays. Even this law could only be enforced by applying Article 49-3 of the French constitution. Article 49-3 allows the Prime Minister to bring a law into force without a vote in Parliament by linking it to a vote of confidence.

The "Law on work, modernisation of social dialogue and securing professional careers", which had provoked massive protests and sometimes violent actions by the population, could only be enacted in 2016 by applying Article 49-3. By this time, Emmanuel Macron had already resigned from his position as Minister of the Economy and founded the *En Marche* movement to take up the fight for the office of President in spring 2016.

In spring 2017, current President Emmanuel Macron presented an election programme that contained more consistent reforms than those of Manuel Valls, but avoided specifying how these could be implemented and at what cost. Macron thus consistently aligned his election campaign strategy with the political and cultural paradox of France outlined above.

On the one hand, Macron and his new *En Marche* movement have gathered many dissatisfied voters since spring 2016, spreading a mood of change and optimism and radiating a new will to lead and shape the state. On the other hand, Macron gave the impression during the 2017 election campaign that he did not want to change anything in the comfort zone of state welfare and the welfare state that could really hurt.

Emmanuel Macron was elected as the new President of France on 7 May 2017. And in the parliamentary elections in June 2017, his electoral alliance won an absolute majority of seats. His election campaign strategy, which was consistently geared towards the paradox of French political culture, worked.

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<sup>2</sup> For the following paragraphs, see NORBERT F. TOFALL: *Was folgt nach den Wahlen in Frankreich?* Commentary on economics and politics by the FLOSSBACH VON STORCH RESEARCH INSTITUTE, 7 April 2017, pp. 2-4, online: <https://www.flossbachvonstorch-researchinstitute.com/de/studien/was-folgt-nach-den-wahlen-in-frankreich/>



However, Emmanuel Macron's campaign strategy, which was consistently geared towards the paradox of French political culture, also laid the seeds for his unpopularity during his first term in office from 2017 to 2022 and during his second term so far. Either Macron would refrain from implementing the promised reforms and hurt no one, or it would become increasingly clear to the French over time that the reforms promised by Macron would come at an unpleasant cost. The latter was the case. And that is why Macron was only able to defend his presidency in April 2022 despite his reforms, not because of them. In terms of foreign policy, a majority of French people favoured the staunch European Macron over the then Putin apologist Marine Le Pen in the turning point triggered by the war in Ukraine. In the last two years, however, Marine Le Pen has abandoned her closeness to Putin and sided with Ukraine. It remains to be seen whether this primarily tactical turnaround will be permanent and resilient.

But let's stay with the election campaign of 2022 for a moment. Before the election to the National Assembly in June 2022, Marine Le Pen on the right and Jean-Luc Mélenchon on the left successfully played on the paradox of French political culture by focusing on the issue of inflation but remaining silent about effective measures to combat inflation. Both remained silent because the programmes of right-wing and left-wing populists are generally unsuitable for combating the causes of both asset price inflation and consumer price inflation. This is because the spending programmes propagated and financed by new government debt for the electorate being courted fuel the causes of inflation.

However, Macron was unable to credibly refute this fundamental contradiction in the positions on inflation of Marine Le Pen and Jean-Luc Mélenchon in 2022, and even less so today. *Firstly, during* Emmanuel Macron's term in office, France's public debt has risen to over 110 per cent of GDP. If Macron were to propose a programme to consolidate public debt to 60 per cent of GDP, as required by the European stability criteria, which would involve far-reaching cuts to the French state budget, then the populists on the right and left would have gained even more support.

*Secondly,* Macron cannot credibly defend this demand, as his entire European policy over the last seven years has been geared towards undermining and undermining the stability criteria of the European treaties and establishing new sovereign debt pools at European level. This means that Emmanuel Macron would only be able to counter Marine Le Pen and Jean-Luc Mélenchon on the issue of inflation if he corrected his own European policy. However, Macron was not and is not prepared to do this, nor will he be in the future. On the contrary: at European level, Macron is likely to continue to pursue a policy that is conducive to inflation. Two years ago, we therefore stated: "For France, this could mean that Macron will drive more voters into the arms of the right-wing populists and left-wing populists... The result could be further polarisation due to procrastination."



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*Publisher* Flossbach von Storch AG, Research Institute, Ottoplatz 1, 50679 Cologne, Telephone +49. 221. 33 88-291, [research@fvsag.com](mailto:research@fvsag.com); *Management Board* Dr Bert Flossbach, Dr Tobias Schafföner, Dr Till Schmidt, Marcus Stollenwerk, Kurt von Storch; VAT ID DE 200 075 205; Commercial Register HRB 30 768 (Cologne Local Court); Responsible supervisory authority Till Schmidt, Marcus Stollenwerk, Kurt von Storch; VAT ID DE 200 075 205; *Commercial Register* HRB 30 768 (Cologne Local Court); *Responsible supervisory authority* Federal Financial Supervisory Authority, Marie-Curie-Straße 24 - 28, 60439 Frankfurt / Graurheindorfer Str. 108, 53117 Bonn, [www.bafin.de](http://www.bafin.de); *Author* Norbert F. Tofall *Copy deadline* 01 July 2024