
From Apathy *to* Action

How France beat back the threat of the authoritarian far-right (for now) and what the US can learn from a crisis averted



More in
Common

About More in Common

This report was written by More in Common US, part of a non-partisan, international initiative aimed at building societies and communities that are stronger, more united and more resilient to the increasing threats of polarization and social division. We work in partnership with a wide range of civil society groups, as well as philanthropy, business, faith, education, media and government in order to connect people across lines of division.

More in Common

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Just the facts

French Politics 101

- On June 9th 2024, seeking a moment of “clarification”, French President Emmanuel Macron **called for snap parliamentary elections**. He announced his decision on live television just as news came in of a decisive victory by the authoritarian far-right National Rally (RN), the party of Marine Le Pen, in European elections.
- The snap election was held on 30 June and 7 July 2024, **leaving parties and candidates just three weeks to campaign**. President Macron’s decision caught everyone off guard and caused a national shock, plunging France into its **most serious political crisis in decades** as the possibility of an outright victory by the RN became clear.
- Parliamentary elections are held in **two rounds in France**. In the first round, any candidate can run. In the second round, only candidates with more than 12.5% of registered voters can run (not people casting votes). Typically, that means a run-off between the top two candidates but there can also be three or more candidates in the second round (if they all meet the 12.5% cut-off criteria).
- The **French parliament has 577 seats**. To win an outright majority, a party or group needs 289 seats. The Prime Minister is generally appointed by the President from the majority or, in the case of a hung parliament, from the largest group or party.
- Polls ahead of the first round of voting projected **240 to 270 seats for the far-right** (RN) led by Jordan Bardella and Marine Le Pen, way ahead of any other party - putting a majority of 289 within reach.
- Ahead of the first round, two major political developments occurred. **Parties on the left** including the far-left party of Jean Luc Mélenchon (*La France Insoumise*), the Communist party, the Greens and the center-left Socialists forged an alliance under

a unified banner called the **New Popular Front** (NPF).¹ The NPF agreed on a shared name, program and logo within four days of the elections being called. **On the right**, the leader of the main party *Les Républicains* entered into an alliance with the far-right RN, **prompting the rest of the party leaders to secede** and eventually create a new party of ‘never Le Peners’ (akin to never Trumpers) on the moderate right.

- **What happened in the first round?** Turnout was particularly high (66%). The far-right came out on top with 33% thanks to its highest ever number of votes (a staggering 10.7 million votes went to the RN, out of 33 million votes cast in total).
- After the first round there were **306 ‘triangular’ elections** (second round elections with three candidates) – an unprecedented number, up from just eight in the last elections. Those were to prove key to the final outcome as more than 200 candidates eventually withdrew, answering calls to block any possible victory by the far-right, in what is referred to as the **‘Republican front.’**²
- Seat projections between the two rounds of voting still had the far right ahead with 175-205 seats. **But the final result saw the far-right win only 143 seats – well below all expectations.** Equally surprising was the score of the united left, under the New Popular Front, which came out first (with 182 seats). Macron’s centrist bloc came in second (with 168 seats). All this amounted to a result no one predicted.
- **The result means that the far-right will not be in a position to form a government**, for now at least. This is a story of a disaster averted for the French pro-democracy camp rather than an outright victory for anyone. In the weeks following the election, a hung parliament has been unable to agree on anything, including who should be asked to form a government.

¹ The New Popular Front is a reference to the Popular Front of 1936, led by Léon Blum.

² In the French, not the US, sense of the word Republican – as in pertaining to the French Republic.



Foreword

Thomas Chatterton Williams, author and staff writer, The Atlantic and
Mathieu Lefevre, CEO and co-founder of More in Common.

In a recent article in The Atlantic, Thomas wrote that “one of the major differences between France and America, it seems, is that the French have not been beaten into a state of learned helplessness by the possibility of right-wing extremism.” Only time will tell if President Biden’s decision not to seek re-election and the anointment of Kamala Harris will breathe durable new life into the campaign ahead of November’s election.

What is certain is that, on the other side of the Atlantic, faced with the imminent threat of a right-wing takeover of government, the French people managed to organize themselves within a matter of weeks to deny it – for now at least.

What lessons might be gleaned as the United States approaches its own date with history on November 5th?

On his travels across the United States in 1831, Alexis de Toqueville observed that “the moral authority of the majority is partly based upon the notion that there is more intelligence and wisdom in a number of men united than in a single individual.” As you will see in this report, a great number of men – and women! – from a variety of political outlooks managed to shape efficient alliances through a big tent approach that kept a common enemy, the authoritarian far-right National Rally, at bay.

What explains such a sudden awakening? Who were these men and women? What lessons might be gleaned as the United States approaches its own date with history this November? Those questions prompted More in Common, an organization working in both countries with the mission to unite divided societies, to look for ways to learn from the French example.

In this short report, you’ll read first person accounts from politicians, activists and business leaders who stood up to the far-right. We’ve assembled voices

from across the political spectrum, from the progressive left to centrists and the right, to reflect the extraordinary heterogeneity of this victorious pop-up political movement. Energized by a sense of immense urgency, united by a collective menace, this impressive coalition of communists and conservatives, moderates and greens, athletes and influencers, came together to achieve a result no pollster had predicted.

The two of us are longtime observers of American and French political life. We have both lived in the two societies under consideration, and we are both raising Franco-American families between them. As such, we have both learned not to put either country on a pedestal. French politics in the 2020s is not necessarily a model to follow. This time, France managed a lucky escape, a narrow miss. But make no mistake, the threat from the far-right will soon return—unless, of course, the next wave comes from the authoritarian left. That illiberal force, though not yet as potent or organized as the opposite extreme, has been strengthened this summer at the National Rally's expense.

France and the United States, the two “universal” societies and the oldest of allies, nonetheless have quite distinct cultures, histories and political traditions. What makes this comparison relevant is not that one is better than the other. On the contrary, their politics are both among the most chaotic, polarized and unstable among Western democracies—which is all the more reason to compare notes.

And so it seemed to us a healthy exercise of democratic preparedness to distill for the next election whatever lessons could be found in the last. If the insights assembled here can make even a small difference come November, the effort will have been worth it.

From struggle to victory: the role of civil society

Sarah Durieux is a feminist activist and organizer, Director of the Multitudes Foundation.

Few expected these results, but I wasn't surprised. It's not the first time this year that we've achieved a seemingly impossible victory. Who thought France would get abortion enshrined into the constitution, which happened in March this year? Once again, over the last few weeks, we succeeded because we put into practice what we've learned, campaign after campaign, over the last few years.

Converging movements, accelerated by a sense of urgency

By calling for snap elections, President Emmanuel Macron created the most effective fuel for mobilization: a sense of urgency. Three weeks to campaign was both worrying and energizing. Having led repeated mobilizations in recent months (on pension reform, on immigration), French activists felt exhausted. But for many of us on the activist left, the clear, time-bound objective of preventing the far-right coming to power at all costs provided us with boundless resolve, energy and efficiency. This sense of urgency – the key ingredient of this campaign – only bore fruit because it could be channeled through pre-existing solidarity networks waiting to be activated around a clear rallying call.

Over the past 15 years, the arrival of digital technology in the activist space has disrupted the way people mobilize globally and in France. That technology brought with it incredible possibilities but also led to further fragmentation. People and movements, equipped with new tools, are able to effectively campaign for specific causes practically on their own – outside of unions or established organizations and campaign coalitions. Much has been written about the immense benefits of technology for campaigning, but in France that also led to the loss of vital ties between causes, issue areas, spaces for collective action and between the people who power those movements. In some ways, tech weakened our capacities.

Seeing these gaps emerging in France, civil society initiatives tried to rebuild links between these spaces, for example in the run up to the 2022 presidential elections. In 2020, I took part in this “convergence of struggles” with the creation of the Rencontre des Justices (literally a “Meeting of the Justices”) which brought together climate, feminist and anti-racist collectives to discuss their respective fights, the singularity of their struggle and where they can come together, in particular ahead of the 2022 presidential election.

Links were created particularly among the climate movement and the movement against police brutality (for example, between organizations like Alternatiba and Justice pour Adama). On the eve of the 2022 presidential election which eventually saw Macron beat Marine Le Pen for the Presidency, a massive ‘Justice March’ was organized by climate, antiracist and feminist movements. More recent movements on pension reform or immigration have seen this trend towards common marches and movements reinforced. Climate activists chanted “Pensions and climate are the same fight” while dancing together on labor union floats. In a similar way, feminist organizations have increasingly included race and class concerns, ableism and the right of LGBTQIA+ people in their demands.

In addition, there’s been a collective realization of the importance of exerting greater electoral influence than ever before. To an American audience, this might seem obvious but French civil society has traditionally kept a distance towards partisan or political battles in order to preserve its independence. But many of us, activists of more recent generations, have realized that we can no longer leave politics to parties as these have been weakened by the electoral turbulence of recent years (as new parties emerged and old parties disappeared), and deserted by citizens who have turned to the internet, the street or civil society as better places to mobilize.

Why did all this play a role in beating the far-right in June and July 2024? Personal bonds of trust were forged over many years between different organizations. It was these bonds, combined with a new focus on politics, that enabled and powered the mobilization of the last few weeks. A popular slogan over the last few weeks was “On s’engueulera après!” meaning “we’ll argue later!”. Beyond rivalries and disagreements, the bonds forged over the past years proved strong enough to mobilize a force that proved essential to the success of the New Popular Front and to the defeat of the far-right.

A unifying slogan, against hatred and for a better life.

The urgency provided by President Macron’s unpredictable decision to dissolve parliament and the need for a united front on the Left, beyond our disagreement, allowed us to go straight to what mattered most and simplify

our slogans, making it easier to connect with people beyond our activist circles. The clear danger of the far-right and our newfound ability to say what we are for - not just what we were fighting against - were particularly mobilizing. We quickly focused our messaging and narrative work on three ideas:

1. We are better united than alone in the face of hatred. That enabled us to speak to progressive voters reluctant to support certain parties in the New Popular Front coalition.
2. Voting means choosing a better life: breathing better (climate), eating better (climate, food, cost of living) and a better future for our children (to speak to the undecided)
3. Voting means not letting anyone else choose for you (that was aimed at those tempted by abstention).

We drew on studies in cognitive linguistics, which have shown that the simplicity of the messages and the link with people's everyday lives accelerates the take-up of far-right discourse. Urgency enabled the progressive camp to be much more direct and engaging in its narrative. We worked on a common guide about these key messages that was distributed to all campaign teams and to content creators on the Internet, who independently used them and adapted them to their contexts.

Collective but decentralized mobilization

The announcement of the dissolution of parliament came on the heels of a previous campaign for the European elections. That proved helpful. The WhatsApp group we'd set up to discuss the European campaign never went quiet. "We've got to talk": within 30 minutes of Macron's announcement to call new elections, we were all on a Zoom call. We went from a group of 20 people to 50 people from various organization that evening.

Those interpersonal links, the solidarity and shared trust that we'd patiently built got activated in less than an hour. At that first meeting, we discussed priority objectives on which we all agree: we need to press for left-wing unity among parties, we need to activate a massive mobilization of civil society, decentralized and led by grassroots organizations in an autonomous way, to complement the work of political parties.

Our WhatsApp group grew to over 130 members organized around a dozen thematic exchange groups. What's special about this space is that it brought together campaign managers with experiences of different themes, audiences and tactics. The way we structured this groups and explained its purpose was

clear: this was a space to share insights, offer and ask for help. It was explicitly not a command and control, vertical organization where one group decides for all the members who have to apply them.

We shared polling, memos and ideas. Partnerships on specific tactics were built within hours between some members. We organized trainings on door-to-door campaigning and how to use TikTok, for example. We talked strategy but there was no expectation that we would all agree. We encouraged each other to move fast and test ideas through shared tools. Spontaneous links were forged: some people made the connection with other digital organization spaces including grassroots movements in rural areas or working-class neighborhoods, for example.

The key learning from this campaign is this: there's no need for a centralized organization encompassing all militant spaces but there is a need for an informal decentralized space where everyone can find support, resources and partners. Each of these organizations already has the connections and confidence to do its own work. There is no need to centralize our actions excessively (for example on our calls to Get Out the Vote). The medium is the message: decentralizing the messengers increases their legitimacy with the target audiences.

Great initiatives were born on our group. For example, the “Call of the 18th of June” (a reference to a famous speech by General De Gaulle from London on 18 June 1940). Spearheaded by several organizations in our group, we made 18,000 phone calls to encourage people to vote. This is the largest initiative of its kind ever carried out in France. We launched “5 days to win,” an open group on the messaging app Telegram proposing simple mobilization actions and tips every day. The group grew to be 30,000-strong and focused on priority seats identified by shared data analysis. It allowed the deployment of thousands of volunteers through “victory convoys” in real life, boosted by social media influencers.

You don't need control to win. That is the lesson I draw from this campaign and one I will take forward to the next electoral battle. The strength and commitment of civil society organizations can make a big difference in an election. But for that to happen, movements need to be connected, to trust each other, and to have the means to pool their efforts around clear, self-defined and understandable slogans.

We won't protect our democracy by saving the day at every election, but by building and sustaining the militant infrastructure across the country that made this victory possible. That work has only just begun.

The Right emerges stronger from these elections

Ferréol Delmas has advised numerous political campaigns on the right including those of former Prime Minister François Fillon and Michel Barnier. He was also the President of the young conservative group at the Sorbonne University. Today, he is the managing director of the 'Ecologie responsable' think tank, which advocates for a right-wing, liberal vision of environmental issues.

In 2002, faced with a surge from the far-right party of Jean Marie Le Pen, President Jacques Chirac created a new party, the Union for a Popular Movement, with a view to bring together the various components of the Right (including liberals, Gaullists, sovereignists). In the years since, there have been successes for the right but the last few years have seen numerous electoral defeats as it faced the double challenge posed by Macron's party to its left and the far-right to its right.

Even as polls suggested that France had never been so conservative: 60% of the French consider themselves to be right-wing and as the media has taken a decisive turn to the right¹, the traditional right has fragmented. While remaining very strong locally, the right is fading nationally, scoring under 5% in the last presidential election and just 7% in the European elections of June 2024.

Faced with a serious political crisis posed by the President's dissolution of Parliament in June 2024, the Right was pre-occupied with its own drama as the President of the main conservative party, Eric Ciotti, quickly opted to ally himself with the far-right National Rally. That prompted a clash between Ciotti and the rest of the party leadership and, after a dramatic showdown, Ciotti was voted out of the *Républicains* party.

Ciotti then went off to create a new party, allied with Le Pen and the *Républicains* mainstay refused his alliance with the far-right and rebranded themselves as "The Republican Right". All in all, President Macron had called for a moment of 'clarification' in dissolving parliament. It is not clear that he got this for his own party (or for France overall) but, within the Right at least, that clarification seems to have happened between those who are in favor of an alliance with the National Rally and those who stand firmly against it.

In the end, the (anti-RN) right obtained a better than expected 50 seats, to which must be added the thirty or so seats of Horizons (a center right party). Eric Ciotti's party managed to win only 16 seats, partly thanks to the *Républicains* brand.

President Macron's political project, starting in 2017, had hoped to overcome the right-left divide: today it is coming back stronger than ever. We are returning to a healthy democratic debate in which different visions of society can be confronted, as was also the case until recently in the United States.

The Right has emerged stronger from this crisis. With at least 80 seats in Parliament for the traditional right and center-right and a large number of local municipalities held by the Right (a majority of medium-sized French towns such as Metz, Toulouse, Nice, Cannes, Nîmes, Saint-Etienne, Pau, Limoges, Orléans, Amiens, Aix-en-Provence, etc.) – the Right is back.

The Right is strongest when it allows a plurality of opinions and sensibilities to live within a 'big tent'. As in the case of the American Republicans and the British Conservatives, a variety of currents must peacefully co-exist to form a real project to win back power to govern France.

To succeed, the moderate right must break from its paradox. The French have confidence in the Right at the local and regional level, but they are turning their backs on it at national level where the center (President Macron's party) or the far right (Marine le Pen's party) have built winning electoral machines. Part of the problem is that the French Right is, in its essence, Bonapartist. It has a cult of the leader. It must therefore rapidly identify a charismatic leader if it is to continue to exist, building on the burst of life of the last few weeks. It also has to face up to the aging of its base and reinvent itself on a number of issues: the environment (and in particular the question of 'eco-anxiety' of young people), health or disability in order to win back voters and reach the highest offices of the State.

In the run-up to the next presidential elections in 2027, the Right is unavoidable. In a fragmented National Assembly, where the united Left, the Center and the far-right are the dominant blocs, the right of the *Républicains* are the pivotal party. Nothing can be decided without it. No law can be passed without its assent. The 'Les *Républicains*' parliamentarians are in a position to topple a government or allow it to stay in power. This has already allowed the party to gain power within the Parliament (by having two vice presidents of the Parliament elected from its ranks, for example). These are eminently strategic positions that demonstrate the institutional strength of the Right despite its national discredit.

Faced with political deadlock, the strategy adopted by the Right is now one of support without participation in government. Right-wing members of parliament will vote in

favor of legislation that goes in what they see as the right direction (on immigration, debt, the economy, re-industrialization, energy for example) while blocking legislation that goes in the wrong direction (on cultural – “woke” issues, for example). The nuance is that they will not be taking part in the government as ministers, a comfortable position from which to avoid being blamed for Emmanuel Macron’s failure and to give themselves the chance to bounce back in 2027 against the left. In French, the position of the Republicans could be summed up through the French saying “to have both the butter and money from the sale of the butter” (the equivalent of ‘to have your cake and eat it too’, *avoir le beurre et l’argent du beurre*).

That positive position should not hide a perilous political situation overall which needs to be taken seriously. Fractures exist given Eric Ciotti’s support for Marine Le Pen. While no other major national leader of the party has jumped ship yet, a number of lower-level party officials have joined Le Pen including mayors of several small and medium sized towns, the leaders of the young conservatives and the director of the party’s newspaper.

One of the challenges to be met will also be that of youth and communication. Only 2% of 18–25 year-olds voted for the right wing candidate in the 2022 presidential election. On the far right, the figure of the far-right leader Jordan Bardella, who is very young at 28 and a skilled communicator (for example through TikTok), should not be underestimated, nor should his appeal to young right-wingers in search of a leader with conservative values. The right therefore needs to learn how to use these new digital tools to reaffirm its ideas and keep its competitors further to the right and center at bay.

Overall, the right reacted well to the challenge posed by this snap election. The Right stands firm on its values and is the only government capable of containing the extremes, based on its in-depth knowledge of the region and the challenges it faces.

The courage the leaders on the moderate right showed by standing up to the far-right paid off and the party now finds itself in a favorable position to rebuild. But that remains a sizeable project in the years to come and we know the next crisis is probably not far off.

¹ With the arrival of CNEWS and Le Journal du Dimanche and the strong presence of Le Figaro and Le Point.

How French CEOs mobilized and what this can teach us about the role of business in politics

Mayada Boulos is the co-CEO of the communications agency Havas Paris and was the head of communications for the former French Prime Minister, Jean Castex, at the time was a Republican.

Every election is a precious opportunity to express one's convictions individually through voting, but also collectively through the democratic debate that precedes it. This debate involves political parties, of course, but also civil society, such as trade unions. On the other hand, while major French companies have begun to adopt a socially committed discourse in recent years, the more political culture that has taken root in the American business community is not yet a reality in France. French companies don't yet speak the language of politics.

Nevertheless, in recent weeks, as France faced an acute political crisis, a small group of employers' organizations, companies and individual CEOs spoke out explicitly and publicly against the threat of the extreme right. How can we explain what is still, admittedly, a nascent but promising phenomenon? And above all, what lessons can we draw from this initial mobilization?

Everyone recognizes that these elections were special: they created an unprecedented risk that France would be governed by forces on the far-right that aspire to radical transformations of our country, in the direction of withdrawal, confrontation and division. For the first time since the Second World War, France ran the risk of being governed by the extreme right.

History will tell us whether the companies that chose to make this commitment will reap benefits beyond the macro-economic stability they were seeking. But we can assume that their word carried weight, not least because their mobilization met three major conditions.

Firstly, the mobilization of CEOs took place against a backdrop of high expectations of companies. Three out of four French people recognize that companies play a “*more important role than the State in creating a better future*”, and 81% of them believe that companies can “*change society for the better while performing well*”³. At a time when politics and institutions are being demonetized and losing credibility, business players are being called upon - and this is a new development in France - to address the challenges facing society.

For the first time since the Second World War, France ran the risk of being governed by the extreme right.

Secondly, executives who spoke out in recent weeks did so in the name of their company. They were careful not to **act as spokespersons for employers or the private sector in general**, i.e. for an elite perceived as being out of touch with the difficulties experienced by French society. This negative perception of the elite is reflected in our elections: candidates from both the far right and the radical left systematically point the finger to the “powerful” and the “oligarchy”. The phrase “*My enemy is finance*” in former President François Hollande’s speech before his election in 2012 has remained a cult favorite. Research has shown that candidates who mobilized this rhetoric in the first round of presidential elections between 2012 and 2022 won a steadily rising number of votes: from 33% in 2012 to over 61% in 2022. This anti-elite rhetoric is now mainstream and risked CEOs speaking out appearing out of touch.

Finally, the various public expressions of recent weeks succeeded in **moving beyond a purely moral or even moralizing stance** (and therefore potentially perceived as contemptuous), **to a field in which they are solidly legitimate: pointing to the concrete consequences for the economy.** For example, companies reiterated the importance of attracting foreign investment for reindustrialization, and of reassuring people about our country’s borrowing capacity to finance our unique social model – while also talking about the pressing problem of the cost of living crisis.

They pointed out that the budgetary stalemate that could result from these elections would first and foremost harm the most disadvantaged. They showed

³ Les Marques dans la Cité study, Havas Paris

the direct consequences on the cost of access to housing of higher interest rates. They pointed out that our ability to breathe new life into the French and European agriculture sector (a highly symbolic issue) and the energy sector (at a time when public opinion is still deeply affected by the rise in energy costs linked to the war in Ukraine) would be severely jeopardized. Finally, they spoke about the impact on job creation.

It is undoubtedly because these three conditions were met that the word of these business leaders has been heard. The challenge now is to ensure that it continues to be heard.

Researchers have shown that while the far-right vote is traditionally associated with anti-immigration sentiment and a sense of social decline, it now also has other motives, including a loss of belonging and meaning in the workplace and deteriorating conditions at work. This is all the more true among blue-collar workers, nearly half of whom voted for the RN in the first round of the legislative elections. Beyond the economy and employment, the challenge for companies from now on will certainly be to put the question of work and the meaning of work back at the heart of the public debate, so that the malaise in the workplace no longer morphs into social malaise and therefore into a potential reserve of votes for the extremes. The forthcoming presidential election campaign in 2027 will have to illustrate this. And companies will have to shoulder their share of responsibility, because the French people's support for our democratic model depends on it.

The other campaign:

what can this successful new movement, powered by volunteers and activists, teach us ahead of the next crisis?

Elliot Lepers is a French activist and strategist who has been involved in campaigns on the political left, including with the Green party.

At 9:01pm on Sunday June 9th, Emmanuel Macron uttered the word we'd all been fearing: *"I am dissolving the National Assembly."* It had been on everyone's lips for the past halfhour, like a rumor that sounds like a challenge. Dozens of notifications flood my phone, and WhatsApp loops come to life, as we start to grasp the magnitude of the political earthquake that has just hit us.

At 10:30 p.m., we make a date for a Zoom meeting with fifty civil society leaders, to share our impressions and set priorities for the days ahead. At the same time, party headquarters are ramping up crisis meetings, reflecting on the four short weeks ahead: two parallel campaigns. The official one, carried out in institutions and on TV, and the activist one, carried out discreetly by spontaneous groups and NGOs. A month later, many in France still haven't heard of this 'other campaign'. Here is how it came about.

Offering shared power

How do you run a three-week campaign across 577 constituencies from one day to the next? And how do you know where to put the most effort? The answer lies in one word: decentralize! Decentralize the analysis, initiative, decision-making and commitment, by creating power that anyone can access and wield.

For instance, in just a few hours, we were able to launch a shared map listing all the New Popular Front candidates, with their social media accounts and, above all, the link to the WhatsApp or Telegram groups to join their campaign. A team of around ten volunteers took on the task of collecting data and updating the map in real time, as candidates were appointed.

The next challenge was to find out where the far-right RN could build its majority, so as to concentrate our efforts in key constituencies and avoid sending our resources to the wrong place. When you consider that in the end 15% of seats were eventually decided by less than a 5 % margin, that quick prioritization proved important.

In the first round, based on the trend analysis of previous election results for each constituency, we were able to post a **threat and winnability score**, which proved accurate 95% of the time. For the second round, we created a data team made up of independent data-scientists who had spontaneously mobilized in the first round, and developed an analysis model that would enable us to identify priority constituencies as soon as the results were confirmed, on the night following the first round results. By 8am on Monday morning, just a few hours after the first round results came in, the new map was online, ready for the last few days of campaigning ahead of the second round.

Crafting a Victory Narrative

Since the election of Emmanuel Macron in 2017, no left-wing force has been able to reclaim power in France, failing election after election to qualify for the second round, or simply to embody any kind of credible alternative. Against this backdrop, the priority for mass mobilization, particularly of the tens of thousands of people who had never been involved in any kind of activism before, was to **give these elections a hopeful outlet**. We were able to show that the vast majority of outgoing MPs would be re-elected. We were also able to show all the areas where victory was possible, to map out a path to a majority. And in the period between the two elections, **the message became “5 days to win”**.

Throughout the campaign, volunteer artists and designers created dozens of visuals based on the program of the New Popular Front or the threat of the National Rally, using playful and engaging imagery (see below). These visuals found their way onto city walls, transformed into placards at demonstrations, enabling the emergence of a common, festive and ambitious visual language.



Images Courtesy: <https://24x36.art/>

But we also had to be alert to counter-narratives aimed at discrediting the New Popular Front. These included the conspicuous presence of Palestinian

flags at rallies on the main square in Paris, Place de la République, in contrast to the absence of French flags, at a time when the challenge was to reassure moderate voters. In response, we arranged for several dozen tricolored flags to be delivered to the last rally of the campaign and distributed them freely among the crowd. In the end, the national flag was present in every image, and prominent rappers and entertainers took to the stage carrying a flag before improvising a poignant speech on the urgent need not to abandon the symbols of the republic to the far right.

Mobilization tools

With over 400,000 hits on campaign maps, and tens of thousands of activists mobilized in various activist collectives, NGOs, spontaneous telegram loops or e-mail databases, the next step was to deploy the right tactics in a short space of time.

These included:

- The *Victoires Populaires* collective organized massive phone-banking sessions aimed at thousands of hesitant voters.
- Streetpress media conducted investigative journalism to show the true face of the far-right candidates.
- After the first round, thousands of messages were sent to candidates, urging them to withdraw and avoid triangular arrangements that would have enabled the National Rally to win dozens of additional constituencies.
- More than 50,000 activists were trained online in giant Zoom webinars on election strategy, door-to-door canvassing and leafleting.
- The *Convois de la Victoire* and *Circos Pivots* enabled several hundred activists to be deployed to campaign where candidates needed most help.
- Finally, hundreds of social media influencers spoke out for the first time to their communities, calling on them to vote, educating them about the danger of the National Rally, and raising their awareness of the role of parliament. Influential personalities from the worlds of culture and sport got involved by finding the right words, backed up by extensive message testing.

This time, our mobilization paid off. We avoided the worst possible outcome and bought ourselves a few months of respite, and we showed a whole new generation of activists that leading a joyful and tireless electoral campaign could result in victory. Everyone feared a far right victory which was avoided. No one expected the alliance of the Left to come out first, and it did. But everything remains to be done. The National Rally has never gathered so many votes (close to 11 million), progressive forces are scattered, and the next elections are coming very soon. We on the left showed what we are capable of, and now we must turn that example into an unsurpassable force. The next step is to not stop campaigning for a single week, to regain a majority vote by vote.

Three lessons, as seen from the Green party.

Emmanuel Bodinier is the director for the party program of Les Écologistes, the French Green party.

What can we take away from this short campaign? How was the New Popular Front forged among the Left and particularly between the social democratic Socialists (who emerged ahead in the June 2024 European elections), and the far-left bloc of Jean Luc Mélenchon (*La France Insoumise*), who were the pre-eminent force on the Left coming out of the 2022 Presidential elections?

Part of the answer lies in the mediation of the two smaller players: my own party, the Greens and the Communists. Beyond our sensibility on environmental issues, we acted as the glue and the 'hyphen' in this improbable union. But was it just a traditional electoral alliance or were there novel ingredients in this experiment that we can learn from for the future?

I draw three major conclusions from the historic events of the last three weeks.

1. Even in a crisis, the **political leadership of the different components of the New Popular Front took time to agree not just on a purely electoral strategy for an emergency election (who gets which seats) but on a broader governmental program and a strategy and a vision for the country.**

We focused on a "legislative contract" for the next five years, not just the next three weeks. Negotiations lasted three days and two full nights. They were challenging and sometimes acrimonious. We had to strike a balance between staying true to our values and addressing the pressing question of growing inequalities while presenting a program with enough economic credibility to win the trust of voters beyond our camp.

- We learned the lesson of legibility. In 2022, the program of the united left presented a cacophony of 600 non-prioritized measures taken from our various party programs and merged together. This

time, our agreement took the form of a precise [program](#) detailing a few immediate and concrete measures to create a breakthrough immediately, in the very short term, followed by four major changes of directions (we called them “bifurcations”) to be adopted by Parliament over the next 3-6 months (on the cost of living, health, education and the environment) and then listing priorities to be carried out in coming years.

The part of our shared program concerning the fight against racism, Islamophobia and antisemitism (a particularly tense debate in this campaign) was the subject of lengthy discussions before arriving at a truly shared position.

Everyone was able to rise above the rancor accumulated during previous campaigns. The challenge was never to trick our partners, but to try to address real problems faced by the French people. This has made us strong and united and aware of our historic responsibility.

This political agreement made it possible to clearly define what is at stake in this election: a choice between the racist and nationalist violence of the far-right National Rally, or a new wind of solidarity and justice from the New Popular Front. We believe that clear choice provided the entire campaign – not just on the Left – with new energy and resolve.

2. Political parties in France are largely discredited. Only 16% of French people trust them. Yet this campaign, because of its urgency and the clear and present threat of the far-right provided an opportunity to unite far beyond the militant left and ecologist base. I think we, as political parties, played our part effectively. We negotiated an agreement and a common program when no one expected us to be able to do this. We ran our own campaigns, selected and trained candidates, adopted a common logo and organized our media presence.

While we as political parties played our part, we could never have achieved the result we did on our own. Numerous trade unions and associations and civil society groups got involved by directly supporting the New Popular Front, whereas they are usually far removed from partisan politics. Tens of thousands of citizens realized that the extreme right must not be allowed to gain access to power. They got involved locally.

Mobilization was rapidly organized by new movements that were able to provide simple tools (maps, arguments, messages, insights) to people who had never campaigned before. Crucially, we as parties did not seek to supervise this campaign, which developed in complete autonomy. Everyone played their part. This was reflected at the ballot box, with voter

turnout at its highest level since 1997. This effective coordination with civil society is the result of years of upstream dialogue to create bonds of trust, notably between our party, The Ecologists, and civil society leaders. We trusted them and shared the necessary information widely. We lent them our offices for telephone campaigns and put candidates in touch with citizens ready to get involved. This openness and fluidity of exchanges between formal parties and civil society was unprecedented.

3. Last but not least, **the campaign was conducted with a humble, sincere and determined mindset.** There are many obstacles to overcome in a society polarized by an increasingly activist far-right media spreading lies and accusations. But with the help of investigative media, our campaign showed just how racist and post-fascist the National Rally remains. Its candidates wore Nazi costumes, made anti-Semitic remarks and had even been convicted of hostage-taking and harassment

Our determination to remove one obstacle after another was essential. Emmanuel Macron thought he had thrown us into disarray (he spoke of lobbing “*a grenade between our legs*” in a media interview). He bet that our divisions on the Left would be too big to overcome but instead, we united and came together. He gambled on a short campaign and we mobilized. He gambled on leadership squabbles and we teamed up. Disagreements and differences of strategy were overcome through dialogue and consensus-building. We could have given up a hundred times. But we persevered and in the end, we achieved a result few could have imagined.

In our own party, the Greens, we have been sincere and straightforward. Inside the negotiation rooms and in front of journalists. **We didn't hide our emotions.** Anger and tears have their place in a campaign too. It is OK to accept that. This posture of truth and sincerity created a surprise effect, but also reassured us. Political leaders are not robots. They are human beings like any others. Almost unknown before the election, our leader Marine Tondelier is now a widely admired and respected figure across the general public.

In the second round, **we showed that we'd rather lose votes than lose our soul:** we asked every one of our candidates, without exception, to withdraw in the event of a three-way tie where the RN came out on top. We sometimes had to do this by letting our political opponents on the right, whose policies we have been fighting for years, win seats that could have come to us. But hatred and violence have no place in a democracy. Problems must be resolved through dialogue and conscious decision-making.

The New Popular Front came out on top, albeit without an absolute majority. But we succeeded in blocking the path of the far-right, which would have had dramatic consequences in France, Europe and the world.

We offered hope to millions of French people who were calling for greater social and environmental justice, who can no longer make ends meet and who fear for the future.

This victory didn't come out of nowhere. It is the result of a strategy of unity on the substance of a program, of openness and cooperation with the forces of civil society, and of a sincere and determined state of mind. These are the first lessons we can draw from what we have just experienced. It's up to us to continue this movement in years to come.

Where to now?

The French political situation after the June 9 dissolution: initial lessons and a plea for a new way beyond.

Philippe Grangeon *is one of the co-founders of and was the Director of En Marche, President Macron's party. He also previously served as Special Advisor to the President.*

While the constitution under Fifth Republic has made the possibility to dissolve Parliament a powerful prerogative of the President to resolve political crises, it must meet three conditions to be effective. The first is that it must be audible – people must be listening to the President's voice. The second is that the motivations for the decision must be deemed convincing (if not sincere) by the general public. And third, the political party or coalition behind the President must be convinced of the legitimacy of the decision and of its chances of success.

The first lessons drawn from the latest parliamentary elections show that, in the absence of these three conditions, the dissolution of Parliament decided by the President failed to achieve its stated objective. The outcome of the 2024 elections did not improve the relative majority on which the President had been able to rely since the last elections in 2022. On the contrary, and while the threat of the far-right was averted for now, it has worsened a situation of parliamentary instability.

The country's three main political forces are being reordered in favor of the Left, which, drawing on its powerful mythology of unity in the face of peril, has symbolically “stolen” the moral victory of triumph against the National Rally in these elections from the centrist bloc of the former presidential majority. Despite its programmatic divergences, the New Popular Front on the Left paradoxically appeared more united than my own political family, the presidential camp, which emerged weakened from the vote and flaunted its hesitations and divisions on important issues such as the policy of the “*ni-ni*” (neither the far left, nor the far-right).

In the end, the strategy of the ‘Republican Front’ (uniting against the far-right) worked once again. But because no majority has emerged from these elections, French voters are sending more or less the same message they sent in 2022: they are asking their political leaders to work together in government and in

parliament. And now the far-right will return to a familiar role, standing ready to ambush France once again at the next opportunity, having failed again to win an outright majority.

To be sure, **France has set an example which may be useful in the United States and elsewhere about what is needed to power an electoral surge big enough to beat the odds and an authoritarian far-right menace.**

From a state of acute political stress, with the possibility of a far-right victory we have gone to a state of profound relief thanks to the success of the Republican Front. But what comes now? After fear and relief, the uncertainty that characterizes the current situation is now creating new anxiety and high expectations. **The French may have set an example but, to avoid a deadlock, the parties and movements that powered the ‘Republican front’ should be capable of a similar surge in order to show they can govern.** With these results, what are the French saying to us? In their own way, they are asking the political forces to agree to form a government of national concord. In other words, in the face of stalemate, they are calling for a new form of governing, beyond party lines.

With war taking hold on the European continent, and on the eve of a decisive election in the United States of America, what are the conditions for such an awakening of government to follow the electoral surge in France? The leaders of the political parties who have implemented the ‘Republican Front’ strategy undoubtedly have a major role to play. But they must be responsible and put aside their own history and convictions and foster a new culture of compromise that is not rooted in our political traditions of opposition, in a context where the 2027 presidential race is exacerbating ambitions and where the threat of the far-right will again loom large very soon.

Faced with a new situation, never seen before under the current Fifth Republic, there is no model we can draw on to get out of the current crisis. As co-founder of the *En Marche* party and a former coordinator of our movement, which made overcoming old political divisions its trademark in the early days, I would offer a few suggestions to find this difficult path.

First, **we need to give parties time to find their feet and organize themselves, as they are doing elsewhere in Europe, in the search for governing coalitions.** Initially, it will undoubtedly be up to party leaders and the heads of parliamentary groups to find a way out.

Concord is also a matter of temperament: the main players must share the desire to find a collective way out of this stalemate. To achieve this, political leaders must respect each other and listen to each other, without dictating or making outrageous statements, in order to create the conditions for trust to emerge and be maintained, without which nothing is possible. Contrary to our usual ways, the government agreement to which the French aspire should be less about people and leaders than about the few common priorities and programmatic measures to be implemented over the coming months. In the current situation, the **program is more important** than the people. Lastly, this unprecedented crisis also requires the President of the Republic to invent a new art of presiding, one that favors pedagogy, rallying and uniting the country as opposed to always 'leading from the front.'

The worst possible outcome was avoided on the evening of the 7th of July 2024, but if we fail to invent a new path out of the situation that has emerged and if all political parties committed to common values of the Republic fail to find common ground that the French people so clearly aspire to, the worst will come back at a gallop.

Conclusion

Jason A. Mangone, *Executive Director of More in Common US*

The numbers are astonishing: of 577 seats in France's Parliament, the National Rally was meant to have won between 240 and 270, and ended up with only 143; instead of coasting to a plurality in Parliament and a Prime Ministership, the far right remains in the political woods, reorganizing itself after finishing third in the snap election. The facts don't themselves convey the depth of the surprise: the feeling evokes the shock of the Brexit vote or the gob-smacked reactions of many Americans the day President Trump defeated Hillary Clinton in 2016.

This collection of essays is remarkable in that it provides tactical examples of how people and organizations manufactured the French surprise. And so rather than searching for deeper meaning between very different political systems, it seemed fitting to simply distill a handful of tactical lessons from the what you've read above:

- **The focusing power of urgency.** While it's remarkable that so much happened in three weeks, it's difficult to imagine that it could've happened over the course of as many months. It rings inauthentic to create false urgency, but it may be useful for US activists to organize around weeks-long rather than months or years-long goals.
- **The Big Tent.** In part because the window to achieve anything was so small, French activists widened their tent—the cost of admission to the tent was solely a desire to beat back the far right. The Republican Front took an approach that said: we may be progressives, Greens, Socialists, communists, libertarians, moderates, conservatives, Christians, and secular. We disagree on a lot but we can articulate in 5 bullet points what we do agree on and place those priorities ahead of all of our other beliefs in the context of one election.
- **More democracy isn't always a solution.** The story in France is one of an upswell of democratic activity in support of a non-democratic decision. The far right was defeated because the Republican Front persuaded more than 200 candidates to remove themselves from ballots. In pursuit of a greater good, this decision disenfranchised the citizens who voted for these 200 candidates in the first round, and who would have voted for them in the second round. The pressure campaign to persuade Joe Biden to remove himself from the ballot has obvious parallels, and it's worth grappling with the extent to which US political parties have moved away from their institutional purpose as they've become more directly democratic.

Smoke-filled rooms aren't a bad thing (and I suspect in France they may have indeed been smoke-filled).

- **Get tactical. Really tactical.** A lot of what worked here boiled down to things like lending office space so people could coordinate.
- **Have cell phone numbers.** WhatsApp and Telegram loops were the media of communication. These large text threads were in place before the snap election and added names along the way. The intimacy and transparency of such threads are more useful than email lists or social media. Within these networks, certain organizations (my friends at More in Common France among them) were the common cell phone numbers between groups of threads.
- **Own your patriotism.** To this reader, the most affecting vignette in this collection was the distribution of French flags at a rally where they were conspicuously absent. It's frustrating that some US activists—especially those on the progressive left—refuse to acknowledge how much they love their country, or perhaps find expressing that love unfashionable. National symbols are for everyone, and it's nonsensical that patriotic Americans don't see these symbols across our political spectrum.
- **Broaden access to candidates.** It's striking how much energy was placed into what in the US would be considered down-ballot races. Of course, "down-ballot" races carry more national meaning in a parliamentary system. But the US would be well-served if citizens felt like they knew their own Members of Congress better than they knew the President. It's a hopeful wish to be sure, but our system of government will never function as it's meant unless Congress reasserts its role as the first among equals. At the very least, Americans should feel as though their own Members of Congress are more accessible than their President. In France, it seems as though many of those standing for election to Parliament were getting WhatsApp messages from their potential constituents, perhaps asking them to drop out of races.
- **Shorten agendas and share slogans.** Activists very quickly aligned on a name for their coalition and a common set of slogans. And rather than hashing out a diluted, hundreds-page long governing agenda, they agreed on a few key themes.



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