‘States and Migration in Europe’ Podcast
Episode #18 ‘Elections in France: A Country’s Fragmentation’
With Julien Navarro

Enhanced transcript

By Emmanuel Comte

Abstract: In this episode, we sit down with political expert Julien Navarro to dissect the recent French elections and delve into French politics. We explore the turning point of 9 June, when President Macron called for early elections, analysing the dynamics between La France Insoumise (France Unbowed, LFI) and the Rassemblement National (National Rally, RN). We assess the risks and challenges facing France after the elections. Julien Navarro’s article in *European Union Politics* is accessible here: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/14651165241257779.

Introduction

Emmanuel Comte: Welcome to another episode of ‘States and Migration in Europe.’ Today, we are diving into the recent French elections, a topic with significant implications not only for France but also for the European Union at large. Joining me today is Julien Navarro, a distinguished political scientist and professor at Lille Catholic University. He has just published an article on European Parliament elections in the journal *European Union Politics*.

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Do (too many) elections depress participation? How the position, frequency and nature of domestic ballots affect turnout in European Parliament elections

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Abstract

In Europe, the multiplication of elections makes the election calendar a decisive issue given the decreasing participatory trend. Turnout is expected to be higher in simultaneous elections, while it lessens if several elections are held over a short period. The saliency of the preceding ballot may also affect participation in the next one. In this article, we argue that these temporal effects are crucial for European Parliament elections due to their second-order nature. We analyse how the position, frequency and nature of domestic ballots affect European Parliament elections turnout since 1979. Our results indicate that the participation level is less affected by the timing of elections than by their overall frequency. The type of preceding election also matters, although not the second-order nature per se.

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In this episode, we will explore what has happened in France since the European elections on 9 June. One month ago, President Macron called for early elections for the National Assembly.

We will analyse the reasons behind this decision and examine the recent legislative elections, their results, and the possible prospects for the country. So, Julien, welcome and congratulations on your article. Thank you very much for sharing your thoughts on the recent political developments in France.

Julien Navarro: Thank you for having me on your programme, Emmanuel.

The Turning Point of 9 June

Emmanuel Comte: Let's start immediately with what has happened in the last month in France. We had the European Parliament elections on 9 June. As you write in your recently published article, the big characteristic of European elections is that they are secondary in nature; they are not central to the national political debate. The European Parliament was elected by universal suffrage primarily because European policymakers, particularly German policymakers, wanted to strengthen the European level and give it an identity among national voters. However, this vote does not imply major political competencies for the European Parliament. Interestingly, as you studied in your article, European elections interact with other kinds of elections, especially national elections, which affects participation. Here we have a unique case where a European Parliament election led to major changes in French political life. President Macron decided on the evening of the vote on 9 June to call for early legislative elections due to the very poor performance of his party and the very high score of Marine Le Pen's and Jordan Bardella' s National Rally, which garnered almost 32% of the vote. The first question we will discuss is why President Macron took this decision. Many commentators, even today after the results of the legislative elections, say this was a big mistake – one of the biggest mistakes of the Fifth Republic in France. He had a respectable group in the National Assembly, even though he did not have a majority, and he torpedoed his own political family with no prospect of having a better score than he had in 2022. This kind of analysis is common.

You will tell us Julien what you think about this. Let me introduce my own hypothesis. I do not know exactly what happened in Emmanuel Macron's mind on 9 June, and probably in the weeks or even months before, but something is striking. If you look at the National Rally, or National Front as it used to be called, they tend to have very important electoral breakthroughs in European Parliament elections. We can trace the history of the rise of this party through three important European elections. First, in the 1984 elections, we saw the party gaining nearly 11% of the vote. Until then, it was a 1 to 2% party, and they moved to 11% around the European elections of 1984. Admittedly these elections followed the municipal elections of 1983 with highly publicised cases, like in Dreux, where the National Front made a significant impact. However, it was really with the European elections of 1984 that the party became a major force in French politics at the national level. It then remained in that range, between 11 and 17%, for the following 30 years due to various developments. In the 2014 European Parliament elections, the party broke through its previous limitations and received about 24% of the vote. After that, Marine Le Pen declared that her party was the first party of France. This shift started with the European elections of 2014. Now, with the latest European elections in 2024, her party and its closely related parties, like Éric Zemmour's party and others, collectively reach nearly 40%. This is close to the score Marine Le Pen had in the second round of the 2022 presidential election, but this is just the first round in the European elections, which is a significant breakthrough. In parallel, Emmanuel Macron's candidate made only about 14% of the vote, a real defeat. This result is one reason why Macron decided to dissolve the National Assembly.

If we analyse why voters support the National Rally in European elections, it might be because these elections are considered second-order votes. Many voters use them to express protest without trusting the National Rally to govern seriously. The European Parliament is perceived as distant and without major political power, so voters feel they can safely express discontent. The party then capitalises on these results and maintains this level of support later on. One possible explanation is that Macron decided to call for more significant elections immediately to break this dynamic and prevent the National Rally from capitalising on the European election results. Do you think this is a plausible explanation for his actions?

Julien Navarro: Certainly, what the recent European elections and legislative elections show is the extent to which these different levels of government have become intertwined. Going back to the theory of second-order elections, which you reminded us of, the basic assumption is that European elections are closely connected to what is happening at the national level. This is why they are called second-order national elections. So, what happens at the European level is closely connected to what happens at the national level, and to some extent, the reverse is also true. What happens at the European level can impact what happens at the national level. There are well-established reasons why parties such as the National Rally, formerly the National Front, have more success at the European level than at the national level. This primarily concerns France's electoral system, which is completely different. That is something that should not be underestimated.

Emmanuel Comte: I agree with that. Nevertheless, their scores always go a step further in European elections – 11%, 24%, 32%. These scores lead to specific results because of the proportional system, but they also take a step further in these types of elections.

Julien Navarro: Of course. There is a dynamic at play. There are two things: a context that enables the National Rally to be present and successful in the elections, and a trend connected to many factors. Populist parties have been growing in different countries in Europe, so that is one factor that needs to be explained. Additionally, there is a strategy by the National Rally to appear as a normal party, capable of governing, to get rid of its most negative image. Thirdly, the strategies of other parties regarding the National Rally also play a role.

Emmanuel Comte: Yes, the overall trend of their progression is clear. The reason they make significant gains in European elections is that voters want to protest. However, as we saw with the final results of the legislative elections, many voters still do not believe they are fit to govern the country. It is a way to protest without fully committing to them as a governing party. Emmanuel Macron probably called out this bluff, recognising that many voters wanted to protest, but not enough to give the National Rally an absolute majority in the final round of the legislative elections. So, Macron's decision to dissolve the National Assembly might have aimed to break the dynamic of the National Rally after the European elections.

Some say it was a mistake, but we need to understand the situation he was in. Following French politics from abroad, I observed that the way the pension reform was passed last year was heavily discussed, especially the use of the constitutional instrument, Article 49-3, which allows substantial changes in law without a vote in the National Assembly. Macron was increasingly cornered with very narrow room for manoeuvre in this system. It's not just that you have a relative majority in the lower house. Politics is more complex than that. If there is a clear majority in the country against you, you will face many problems. Not only did he not have an absolute majority in the lower house, but he also had a majority of French people against him, especially regarding the pension reform. During the pension reform discussions, I

remember demonstrators openly aiming to take over the Élysée Palace. This required a massive deployment of police forces in the centre of Paris to prevent that. It was not just about having an absolute or relative majority in the house and governing as he wanted. He was increasingly in a tense situation and could not continue like that, especially when his candidate received only 14% of the vote compared to the National Rally's 34%.

Furthermore, there were two significant issues ahead. One was the upcoming budget discussion. France is heavily in debt, so the budget had to be an austerity budget, and he did not have the political strength to push it through. The other issue, perhaps less important but still notable, was the upcoming Olympic Games. Many commentators were saying that organising the Games would be a huge challenge, especially from a security perspective. He faced two major challenges that required strength, and he did not have that strength. So, he felt obliged to look for another government or renew his legitimacy. Do you think this calendar and Macron's weakness played a role in his decision to dissolve the National Assembly?

Julien Navarro: The first thing to keep in mind is that the president in the French political system has a very particular role compared to presidents in other European countries, even those where the president is directly elected. This dynamic might change in the next weeks and months due to the legislative election outcomes. However, in recent years, he has been the dominant figure, and the decision to call for early elections was really his decision. Not only because he formally has the authority, but also because it came as a total surprise. There was no prior discussion about the possibility of a snap election, even ahead of the European elections. It seems that even the minimal consultations the president is supposed to conduct before calling for early elections were done in a very superficial way. So, it is challenging to answer your question because no one really knows what went on in his mind when making the decision. We can only speculate about the constraints he was facing and how he was anticipating the future. As you mentioned, the outcome of the European Parliament elections likely made it clear that governing in the coming months would be very difficult.

What seems quite clear is based on what we know from before. In 2022, two years ago, there was a presidential election. Macron was re-elected. There were also legislative elections, and the outcome was that there was no absolute majority for Macron's party or the coalition – since it involves multiple parties. He decided to go for a minority government without fully acknowledging it was a minority government. They put themselves in a difficult situation by acting as if they had the majority when they did not. This explains the difficulty in passing important reforms such as the pension reform.

Yes, by using the procedure allowed by the Constitution for situations without a clear majority, they passed a law without a parliamentary vote. The only way for parliament to stop the law was by voting a motion against the government, which was not possible before this weekend because the left in parliament did not want to unite with the extreme right.

Another important point in understanding the political dynamics in France is the change of government following the very difficult pension reform. Macron decided to appoint a new prime minister, hoping to create a positive dynamic and perform better in the European Parliament elections. However, this did not happen. After the European Parliament elections, he could not change the government again, which would normally happen when the dominant party faces a midterm election defeat.

Emmanuel Comte: Yes, he was cornered. It became increasingly difficult for him to garner support for his reforms. This brings us to the broader context, which includes a budget crisis in France. France has experienced a regular increase in its public deficit year after year, with the debt reaching alarming levels. Additionally, there is also a security crisis in the country. There were riots last year that were a repeat of the major riots of 2005 in the suburbs. However, these recent riots were much more widespread than those in 2005; they even affected the very centre of Paris, unlike the 2005 events. Major stores were looted, and there was a significant collapse in public order. People have been anxious about the potential for similar disruptions during the Olympic Games, which would be disastrous for the country's image abroad. I believe many of the issues we are facing this month have their roots in last year's events, such as the pension reform protests in the spring and the significant riots in June. These events weakened Macron and are part of the overall predicament the country is currently facing.

The Election Results: LFI vs. RN

Emmanuel Comte: So, let's now turn to the results of these elections. We see that the big winners include the National Rally. Although they did not gain as many members of Parliament as they had hoped, they still emerged as a major force. Additionally, the far-left party, La France Insoumise, has also become a significant force in the National Assembly and has positioned itself as a central player in the left-wing coalition. Both parties are radical and oppose the policies of President Macron and previous governments. Do you share the assumption that we are witnessing a period of very unstable political life, which is rooted in the unique predicament the country faces, from both a budgetary and security perspective?

Julien Navarro: If we look at opinion polls, the French people's primary concern is inflation – the diminishing purchasing power of citizens, which has affected most European countries, especially due to rising energy prices. When we examine the polls, this concern clearly tops the list of issues for citizens. Following this, there are also high levels of concern about inequalities, which is usually the third or fourth most pressing issue after crime and security.

Emmanuel Comte: How do you think this context has influenced the rise of the extreme right, particularly the National Rally, and the far left La France Insoumise?

Julien Navarro: The National Rally has been able to capitalise on these feelings and has cleverly shifted its discourse to highlight these problems as a central issue. Similarly, the far-left parties have opportunistically seized on these concerns for their platforms. It's up to everyone to evaluate the relevance and potential effectiveness of each party's proposals.

I would argue that La France Insoumise has not emerged as the winner of the recent elections. Their performance in the European Parliament elections was actually surprising as they finished only fourth, behind Ensemble, the presidential majority, and the Socialist Party. This result reversed the outcomes of the previous European Parliament elections. Additionally, La France Insoumise now appears to be very divided at the national level following the recent legislative elections. In fact, this electoral sequence has benefited the moderate left more than the far left represented by La France Insoumise.

Emmanuel Comte: It did not prevent Jean-Luc Mélenchon from going on stage on Sunday night and claiming the title of Prime Minister – if not directly for himself, at least for his coalition and probably for his party. He made a speech on Sunday night, indicating that he was about to implement all the reforms they had in mind. So, he claimed victory, but you consider

that he may not be as victorious as he suggests. You are probably less pessimistic than I am about the situation in the country because the worse the situation, the more people vote for radical parties like his or Marine Le Pen's party. Do you think voters have nevertheless backed traditional parties, which would slightly weaken the idea of a major crisis in the country?

Julien Navarro: We certainly see in France now a kind of polarisation of political life. If I look at the National Assembly and the French parliamentary delegation to the European Parliament, there is a clear polarisation. This is not new, but it is reinforced.

Emmanuel Comte: Do you think this campaign has been more violent than others?

Julien Navarro: I don't know, but I would say it is almost a different issue. I am just looking at the votes and the parties for which people have voted. The outcome is rather clear. As you mentioned earlier, the National Rally is doing better than ever. This means there is a polarisation.

Emmanuel Comte: Polarisation generally goes hand in hand with more political violence. The fewer shared ideas and political opinions, the more aggressive people may be towards one another.

Julien Navarro: This also makes it very difficult to build a coalition and govern together. Yesterday, Jean-Luc Mélenchon was on stage saying LFI wants to govern, claiming it is their programme and only their programme. This is a bit unrealistic because even the coalition he represents, not only LFI but the whole left, received 28% of the votes in the first round of these legislative elections. It is barely more than a quarter of voters, and to pretend that they could decide on their own without negotiating with other parties is unrealistic. Here comes the type of voting we mentioned earlier in the country. Even with a low score, you can have a high number of members of parliament due to the electoral system.

Unlike most European countries, France, except for the UK, has a majoritarian electoral system. It's a two-round system, and historically, there have been two main arguments in favour of it. One argument was that it ensured a clear majority, providing the capacity to govern and stability. The other argument against shifting to a proportional system, as seen in other European countries, was the concern that parties like the National Front, which might receive 15-20% of the vote, would end up with a corresponding share of seats in the National Assembly. This was viewed negatively by many. Since the 2022 election, we have seen that even a majoritarian system does not guarantee a clear majority. Additionally, the National Front, now rebranded, has significantly risen in influence, even potentially gaining an absolute majority in Parliament. This is a new development for France. Paradoxically, our current National Assembly, while not exactly proportional, is closer to proportionality than in the past. Parties now have to navigate this new reality. Today, the left coalition is far from having a majority in the House.

Emmanuel Comte: The only option for the left to govern would then be a scenario where instruments in the Constitution allow governing without a majority. However, I don't think Macron will give this opportunity to Mélenchon or the left to nominate one of them as Prime Minister and use these instruments. Macron has some room for manoeuvre. He is not obliged to call Mélenchon or someone else from the left to create a government. So, he retains some power and will prevent this scenario of governing without a majority, especially not from his party but from another party.

Julien Navarro: It is not just Macron's decision, considering that they could also face a motion in the Assembly.

Emmanuel Comte: We have analysed the possible causes behind these anticipated elections, considering the unique status of European Parliament elections and the choices by President Macron. We also examined the election outcomes and the winners, if any. You suggest the moderate left is benefiting from the situation, but there is no clear victor. This result nevertheless heralds, according to me, a political crisis in the country, with many voters shifting towards parties with more radical platforms.

Prospects

Emmanuel Comte: Looking ahead, we must consider the possible prospects for France following these elections. While we have the results, they are not complete. The exact nature of the next government remains uncertain due to the composition of the National Assembly. There is some flexibility within the institutions to move in various directions, but we can discuss potential consequences. One heavily discussed possibility in June was France becoming a turbulent member of the European Union or even breaking away. However, the likelihood of such a scenario seems diminished under the current political conditions. The National Rally no longer includes EU exit in its platform, though many of their proposals, such as restoring internal border controls, are incompatible with EU policies. Therefore, the prospect of a 'Frexit' appears unlikely in the foreseeable future.

The result may also be the best possible for the EU. There is no clear winner, which means there might be no political government. Instead, there could be a government just handling current affairs, without attempting sweeping changes in French politics. Given the platforms of all parties, this might be beneficial. The platforms of the left, the National Rally, and even Mr Macron were full of promises without financial backing. They all proposed lowering taxes or increasing spending without having the funds to do so. Therefore, the lack of a majority might be better for the country's budget and the stability of the Eurozone and the European Union. It is uncertain if we have a government from one of the three major groups, probably the left, governing without a majority. But if we stick to the scenario where no government is implementing a full platform, it might be the best for the EU. At least for the foreseeable future, we are far from a political shift. It may happen later, but not now. What do you think about this prospect? Do you think it is a good outcome for the EU or not?

Julien Navarro: Maybe one thing I should remind listeners who are not familiar with French institutions is that there is a peculiar rule in the Constitution. The president can call for an early election, but once it has been done, he cannot do it again for one year. This is one certainty in French politics. I am always cautious in predicting the future, but at least we can be sure there will be no snap election within the next year. This constraint forces the actors to consider this when forming a government. Another important point is that constitutionally, the president nominates the Prime Minister and can choose whoever he wants. However, the government needs the support of the National Assembly. It is impossible to have a government without this support. These two realities must align because of the motion against the government. If there is a majority in the house against the government, the government must present its resignation.

If we look at the composition of the National Assembly, it is clear that no party or coalition has a majority. Another factor we can take for granted is that no party will form a coalition with the

National Rally, limiting the possibilities. There might be a coalition between centrist parties and part of the left, or perhaps, as you mentioned, a minority government from the left. However, it is going to be very difficult. They might face a motion and have to go, which would be a big problem for Macron. If he chooses a prime minister and the majority votes against this prime minister, his credibility will be diminished. He must ensure that this doesn't happen. It hasn't happened in recent history or ever in the French Fifth Republic. A third possibility would be more like a technocratic government, like those in Italy or Belgium.

Emmanuel Comte: So, is the current outcome good for the EU or bad, comparing it to what could have happened?

Julien Navarro: From the perspective of the EU, what we see from experiences across Europe is that it can accommodate a lot of different situations. Look at the current government of Italy; we might have thought it would be a great problem for the EU, but the EU is resilient.

Emmanuel Comte: Many of the National Rally's propositions are incompatible with the EU. It doesn't mean they would exit straightaway if they came to power, but there would be an increase in clashes. As for the left, some of its proposals would increase the public deficit, and France is already under a procedure from the European Commission about its excessive deficit. So, if we had a victory of one of the two, we would have a major problem with the EU. I was checking the French spread with German bonds on 10-year bonds. It increased rapidly in June after Macron called for European national elections, primarily due to the fear that the National Rally could have a majority. It stabilised between the two rounds of the legislative elections because it became increasingly difficult for the National Rally to have a majority. After the final results, it declined again, showing that investors consider there is a lower risk now with French debt. I think the explanation is that if we have a technocratic government that avoids making political moves or fulfilling unbudgeted electoral promises, the fiscal position of the country will not deteriorate more. In that sense, what happened may have been the least bad outcome. The actors will determine how it evolves, but if we stay with a technocratic government, it may be a good outcome for the EU until the next elections. The fiscal crisis will not get better. But if we stay with a purely technocratic government, it may not get much worse. There is also a security crisis in the country, with riots, violence, and increasing difficulty in enforcing law and order. That's the feedback I receive from the country. I think that also explains a significant part of the success of the National Rally. I don't think it will get any better. You seem to consider there is no real security crisis in the country.

Julien Navarro: Well, there is insecurity, that's for sure, but I don't know if there is a crisis in the sense of a significant change. Insecurity exists in all countries, with crime, robberies, and criminals. I am not sure the figures show a stark increase in recent years. What we have, as you mentioned, are limited events like riots. These are very shocking but do not reflect the daily reality for many people.

The difficulty here is to correctly assess both the perception and the reality of the situation. Perception is important and has effects. When people feel unsafe, it is a concern that political parties need to address, especially those aiming to counter the National Rally. They must be careful to address the concerns of those voters. Currently, at least one-third of voters in France regularly support the extreme right, which cannot be ignored after the election.

Emmanuel Comte: Do you think the country is getting worse or better until the next elections?

Julien Navarro: I am optimistic, generally speaking, regardless of the election. For me, the important point is the question of proportionality. A particular problem in France's political system is not only the disproportionality of the electoral system, which exists elsewhere, but also that political elites tend to ignore this disproportionality after elections. They act as if they received more than 50% of the votes when they did not. This is a significant problem.

Now, they are forced to see the reality that no party has the support of more than 50% of the voters, not even 40%. This situation reflects the electorate's reality for many decades.

Emmanuel Comte: Yes, we saw that last night. The left and left-leaning media were celebrating as if it were 1981 and the left had returned to power. But in reality, they had less than 30% of the vote in the first round, much less than the National Rally.

Julien Navarro: They received 28%.

Emmanuel Comte: In the second round, they did not manage to get an absolute majority, and it is uncertain if they will form a government. If they do, it would be extremely fragile.

Julien Navarro: 28% is not so bad. If you compare it to two years ago, the last majority was at 25% in the first round.

Emmanuel Comte: Yes, but we are here talking about a coalition of parties, which also have many internal disagreements. Those 25% you mentioned were for a single bloc.

Julien Navarro: True, but it doesn't change the fact that with 25% of the voters, you cannot claim to be the absolute majority. The political scientist Arend Lijphart says there are two conceptions of democracy. The government is of the people, and the people is either 50% plus one of the voters or a more encompassing majority that includes almost all the population. From this, he derives two models of democracy: majoritarian and consensus democracy.

But in France, we are not even close to this majoritarian conception of democracy, which is 50% of the population. We claim to have a majority with 25 or 28% of the voters.

Conclusion

Emmanuel Comte: Indeed. To conclude this episode, my take is that we see a polarisation that demonstrates an increasingly tense political life. This polarisation derives in turn from the increasingly difficult situation of the country, at least from a budgetary and socio-economic point of view. The situation in France is becoming more challenging. The country is not on a good path. This has repercussions in political life, leading to polarisation and the traditional government parties being increasingly reduced. Now, they would have to ally from the Socialists to the Gaullists just to have a majority, which is unprecedented.

So, the first conclusion is an increasingly tense political life. As for the future, I think, to some extent, it is the least bad outcome that could have happened. At least no party will be able to govern alone. This is a different conclusion than most commentators who say it is terrible there could be no government in France. I think the opposite. Given what was proposed, a government that is not going to increase spending and will simply manage technical affairs is less bad than the other options. The worst option was the National Rally because of the hatred in this party, and they lost because of that. We haven't discussed this aspect much, but the

National Rally plays on its ambiguity. They appeal to people with racist perspectives but pretend not to be racist. At some point, the two clash, and this became visible during the last stages of the campaign when several candidates from that party were caught with racist behaviours or declarations. This would obviously have been the worst outcome for the country due to the violence it would trigger. From an economic point of view, however, the other options were not much better than the National Rally.

So, if we go for a pause in governing in France for the next months or even years, that may be beneficial. However, later on, the National Rally may succeed. They were quite close in the last election. According to an important member of the National Rally, in 100 MP elections, they were only two percentage points away from a majority. If the budgetary and security crises worsen, they could secure a majority within three years. But I will leave you with the final word.

Julien Navarro: We are entering a zone of uncertainty. Regarding the National Rally, I checked some figures, but the way the elections are organised in France varies; not all constituencies hold elections simultaneously since some MPs are elected in the first round, depending on the candidates. It seems the National Rally received 37% of the votes yesterday, increasing their score from the first round and coming first in terms of vote share in the second round after performing well in the first round. This needs verification, but it aligns with what we know about the current mood in France.

This election does not solve everything, far from it. The National Rally could benefit from any scenario post-election. If there's a coalition between the moderate left and the moderate centre-right, the National Rally could argue that the political elite is united against them, disregarding the people's voice. Conversely, if there is no stable government, they could claim that people's preferences are being ignored. This makes the French political system very challenging in the coming years. The big lesson here is unpredictability; no one predicted this snap election in 2024. We don't know what might happen in one or two years, let alone 2027, which is the next presidential election.

Emmanuel Comte: Thank you. Julien, where can people follow your work and comments?

Julien Navarro: Yes, thanks for the invitation. I am on Twitter. The best way is to follow me there. I am also on Blue Sky, an alternative to Twitter that developed after Twitter became X. My handle on Twitter is @NavarroJulien4.