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Why Macron Is Risking an Election

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PARIS – Contrary to expectations, the European elections this month did not bring major political changes to the continent. The political balance within the European Parliament remains more or less stable, notwithstanding a slight increase in seats held by the far right and, above all, by independents.

While fears of a far-right wave were overblown, the big exception is France, where President Emmanuel Macron's Renaissance party won only 14.6% of the vote, compared to 31.4% for Marine Le Pen's right-wing National Rally. Macron immediately responded with the shocking announcement that he is dissolving the National Assembly and calling a snap election.

Although the French constitution permits Macron to dissolve parliament if he determines that he no longer has a political mandate, French presidents have rarely taken this step. The only comparable precedent is Jacques Chirac's 1997 decision to dissolve parliament, and that backfired spectacularly. Thus, Macron's gambit is highly significant.

Why did he do it? From one point of view, his decision was perfectly logical, given that he has struggled to secure a stable parliamentary majority ever since the 2022 election. For two years, he has tried to create a coalition at the National Assembly by reaching an arrangement with the traditional right. But these efforts have been unsuccessful.

Coalitions are the rule in many European countries, but not in France. This is largely owing to the two-round voting system, which tends toward bipolarity, even though the broader political realm is tri-polar or even quadripolar (extreme right, right, center, and left). To come to power in the French system, you need to broaden your base to win at the second round. As long as National Rally was perceived as an extremist party, this was easily done. That is how Macron secured his victories in the 2017 and 2022 elections.

But over the past 20 years, National Rally (previously the National Front) has gradually grown at the expense of the traditional right, breaking through the ceiling that once limited its influence. And in the European elections, it came out on top in almost every voting district, with support in the 30-40% range in many cases. No longer can the party simply be bypassed by appealing to the center left and right. Moreover, Macron's own support has fallen in recent years, partly because of his policy positions, but largely because of his authoritarian personality, arrogance, and apparent inability to listen even to his own camp. He is brilliant, but unbearably so, especially in the eyes of the working class.

By surprising everyone with a snap election, Macron is hoping to shock the electorate out of its complacency about the far right and catch his opponents off guard. National Rally certainly did not expect such a quick decision, and nor did the conservative Republicans. Le Pen's party will need to win 201 additional seats to secure an absolute majority.

To avert that outcome, Macron must attract some share of voters from the traditional right and left. But this is going to be an uphill battle. Renaissance is not terribly attractive to these constituencies.

Moreover, there is a huge risk that, in the second round, it will be squeezed between National Rally and the left, both of which decided to present one unique candidate in each district. To reach the second round, a candidate needs to secure at least 12.5% of registered voters, which means at least 20% of the votes (after accounting for abstentions). Given that Macron's party secured only 14.6% of the votes on Sunday, it is easy to see how it could be toppled as the primary political force in the country.

Indeed, it is already looking like Macron's own party, which was never consulted, will lose at least 100 seats to either the Republicans or to the left. A rebellion within the ranks of Renaissance thus cannot be ruled out. Former Prime Minister Édouard Philippe, who aspires to succeed Macron, and who is upset by his decision to

call an election, will try to take the lead. He is now in open conflict with Macron, and refuses to let the president run the show. Philippe does not want to pay the political price for Macron's mistakes.

The elections most likely will result in a victory for National Rally, reaffirming the results from the European elections. Even if Le Pen cannot secure an absolute majority, she may form an alliance with some segment of the traditional right or various independents. The traditional right is already on the verge of an explosion. The right-wing faction of the Republicans is calling for an alliance with National Rally, while the rest of the party is upset by that choice. The French political scene is on the verge of chaos, and apart from National Rally, all forces are in serious trouble.

Macron has been unable to govern the country for two years, and his legitimacy has been considerably eroded. Feeling like he has nothing to lose, he is going "all in" with his current hand, as they say in poker. As in the past, he is confident that his personal involvement will allow him to regain lost ground. He has always had a very personalized vision of French politics, which he sees as organized wholly around himself.

Moreover, Macron is betting that if National Rally does come to power, voters will get a taste of what it truly represents before the 2027 French presidential elections. Burdened with the actual responsibilities of governance, the party will no longer enjoy the benefits of political virginity. Macron wants to do to National Rally what François Mitterrand did to the right in 1986. If Le Pen's bid for the presidency in 2027 fails, Macron can leave power with no regrets, claiming that he has done France a service. If he fails, his already damaged legacy will suffer another massive blow.

ZAKI LAÏDI

Zaki Laïdi is a professor at Sciences Po.