



**DOLLAR & SENSE: THE BROOKINGS TRADE PODCAST**

**“AFTER FRANCE’S PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS, CAN MACRON GOVERN  
AT HOME AND LEAD ABROAD?”**

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*Episode Summary:*

In France’s recent parliamentary elections, President Emmanuel Macron’s centrist party lost its National Assembly majority, while a leftist alliance of parties and Marine Le Pen’s far-right party made significant gains. Célia Belin, interim director of the Center on the United States and Europe at Brookings, discusses how these results happened after Macron’s victory in the presidential contest, what they mean for governance in France, and how they may impact President Macron’s pursuit of a multilateralist foreign policy.

**DOLLAR:** Hi, I'm David Dollar, host of the Brookings trade podcast Dollar and Sense. Today, my guest is Célia Belin, interim director of the Center on the U.S. and Europe at Brookings. We're going to talk about the French elections. Not long ago, Emmanuel Macron was reelected as president. But more recently, we've had French parliamentary elections with surprising results. So, welcome to the show, Célia.

**BELIN:** Thank you, David. Very happy to be here.

**DOLLAR:** Yeah. So let's start with your general reaction to the parliamentary results.

**BELIN:** Well, you know, it's a, it's an unprecedented situation. We are having a situation that was never expected. Emmanuel Macron was just reelected president in April after competition in particular against the far right Marine Le Pen, which he won by a large margin, even if this margin is smaller than five years ago. But just, you know, a month and a half later, we have a parliamentary election that everybody was expecting to go in Macron's way. And actually the results are a very spectacular. Macron has lost his majority. So the majorities would stand at 289 member of Parliament, and Macron and his coalition called Ensemble, "Together," just got 246 seats. What it means concretely is that he will have to find a solution to, for his legislative agenda to be able to go through.

In losing this majority, it's also major MPs from the Macron camp that have lost. For example, the president of the Assembly Nationale, so the main personality at the head of the National Assembly, Richard Ferrand, a strong Macron ally, a political ally, just lost his seat, as well as the the head of his political group, Christophe Castaner, former minister of the interior. So, it's really a blow to Macron and Macron's camp in a very big way.

The other two big elements that we need to realize after this election is that, first, the leftist alliance made an unexpected show of force and really got a big chunk of the vote and ended up with 142 MPs. This is unexpected because only, you know, six months ago the left was in total disarray, divided between the Socialists, the Greens, and the far left France Insoumise. All of these parties were unable to reach the second round of the presidential election. None of them was expected to do very well. But many, many voters rallied behind Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the head of La France Insoumise, who was able then to translate this show of force of the presidential election into a coalition and made a very, very strong case for the legislative election.

And the third element that is probably the most striking of the three is that the far right, Marine Le Pen's party, the National Rally, is at the highest point it's ever been. It got 89 seats. It is ten times more than in 2017. So only five years ago, the far right got eight seats. So, 89 seats is really a record. It is also, you know, three times higher than its, the highest point it had ever been in the past, back in the '80s when Jean-Marie Le Pen, then Marine's father, was the head of the National Front. So really this is a show of force for the far right. And it doesn't bode very well for for Macron's capacity to to govern for the next five years.

**DOLLAR:** Okay. So we'll come back to the far right in a couple of moments, because those are the most shocking results. But first, I wanted to ask you a little bit more about the left, since the left alliance is going to be the main opposition group in Parliament now. But as you said, not long ago, they were in disarray. So, is it really just better organization among this pretty large number of parties that the left comprises? Or has there been a real shift in sentiment of French people towards the kind of issues, often bread and butter issues, that the

left candidates run on? I know that's a hard question to answer, but I wonder what your impression is.

**BELIN:** So it's clearly a combination of politics and policy. Politics-wise, you know, in 2017, when Macron came in and running on the centrist platform, he was able to really split the left and get the center-left voters to vote for him. And that was the strength of his coalition at the time. He was himself an adviser, a top, second person in the Elysee Palace to Francois Hollande. So he was coming from that camp anyway and had brought with him many other leftist politicians, socialists in particular.

Five years down the road, Macron has ruled and governed with a center-right orientation, or at least he has given very little thought to sort of trying to attract and retain the center-left voters. He has been disappointing for many people on the environmental side, has not defended many ecological priorities. In terms on the social side, it's really the increase of inequalities. To be fair, obviously we've had, you know, the challenge of COVID, the challenge of the war in Ukraine now, many different reasons for which, you know, the social situation in France might be difficult. But in any case, Macron has not given that much thought in cultivating the left, and the left has rebelled.

But only, you know, a year to six months ago, all these sort of anti-Macron sentiment, or at least a longing for something else, were not translating into any group in particular because everybody was looking for a unity candidate. But the divisions between the Socialists, the Greens, France Insoumise all seemed so strong that they were impossible to overcome.

What's happened is that in the first round of the presidential election, the third man of the election, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, came 1.1 percentage points away from Marine Le Pen. So, he almost made it to the second round and he didn't. The reason he almost made it is that there was, little by little, the feeling that unity for the left was the way to go. And so out of this frustration of not pushing Jean-Luc Mélenchon to the second round, he was able to call for a larger coalition, create that coalition with the Socialists and the Greens and the Communists, and present candidates all over France in unity candidates, meaning that a very often voters would go to the poll and have the choice between one or two far right candidate, two maybe right wing candidate, plus the Macron candidate, but just one unity leftist candidate. And so that reinforced very, very much their capacity to attract votes. And so apart from a few dissidents here and there, you have seen political unity, which does not necessarily mean alignment in policies and we shall see that down the road. But this political unity has really paid off.

**DOLLAR:** And so what about the far right now? As you mentioned, Marine Le Pen, she did quite a bit better in the presidential election than she had done five years before. And then there was this explosive growth in parliamentary seats. What is the attraction there? Why is the right getting this support?

**BELIN:** That's the really striking element. For the longest time, we've been used to having Marine Le Pen creeping up during presidential election, sometimes getting a high percentage of the polls or vote intentions, either on her name for presidential election or, you know, in a regional, local election, sometimes European elections as well. But as far as the parliamentary elections were concerned, because this is a system of two rounds, and because in the second round, even if the far right makes it to the second round, you've seen a

unity of all other parties against the far right. The far right was always unable to translate the appetite of maybe 30% of the population into actual seats.

This has profoundly changed. Under the leadership of Marine Le Pen, you've had several transformations. One of them is the normalization of the National Rally. Marine Le Pen and her camp now refuse to be called far right or extreme right. They want to say that they are just a hard right and that they are a nationalist party, a patriotic party I should I should say. That is pushing for a, you know, general idea on how to defend the French. And doing so, she has watered down some parts of her program, mostly on the surface, mostly on on providing an image that would be an image of responsibility. You know, claiming she's ready to be in power, claiming that she wouldn't shake the system too much. She has watered down her anti-European positions and and other positions that were the most striking. Even though, I must say the program remains really radical. But this normalization process has allowed her to really expand her base.

Secondly, in the meantime, you've had an even more radical far right led by Éric Zemmour, who's this TV pundit, very, very extreme, who has launched a new party called Reconquête, "Reconquest," which is really immigration obsessed and fully, you know, racist and xenophobic. So his party has also allowed the National Rally to pretend that they are less radical. And so it has allowed them also to be to be normalized even more.

And so all this process of normalization for for the National Rally has translated very nicely for them in the second round of these parliamentary election, where there was close to little to no republican front, meaning very little coalition, anti-National Rally coalition against them in the second round. And in particular, one of the most striking decision has been the decision of the Macron camp to equate the leftist alliance, because it was conducted and led by Jean-Luc Mélenchon and his hard left coalition, he has equated this this hard left coalition with National Rally saying they're both terrible and we're not going to choose between them. And there was more than 60 occasions where the second round—so a National Rally far-right candidate opposed a Nupes candidate, a leftist alliance candidate—when this happened, in the vast majority of the case, the Macron camp decided not to support the leftist alliance against the far right. They just said, well, we should never vote for far right. But they did not fully endorse the leftist alliance. And so half of these duels ended up in the in the camp of the far right. And this this is how the far right made enormous gains as well, in the fact that there is no more coalition to really push back on them.

**DOLLAR:** So, these broad groupings we're talking about—the far right, the center, the Macron group in the center, the left—they have very different views on a range of domestic political issues, policy issues like retirement age, minimum wage, climate policy. And then, as you say, Célia, within the left, there are quite a few different parties, they have different views. So, my my next question is, is this a recipe for paralysis? Or, you know, to make an analogy to the United States where the system is quite different, but still, we've had cases where a sitting president has had to face a pretty hostile Congress, and often the result of that has been practical compromises that are hard to get through when one party is in control. So any chance this will there will be kind of a silver lining and we'll get some things done? Or are we really looking at paralysis on the domestic agenda?

**BELIN:** So, the most obvious answer to your question is that paralysis is around the corner. It's the most obvious output because there's very, very little that these parties can agree on. And in particular, as far as the far left, far right and even the leftist alliance are concerned,

they have very little appetite for working with Emmanuel Macron, which they have tended to also demonize and reject during their own campaign.

But I must say, we are in a very different situation than the United States, because this is not a polarized game. This is a very extended array of choices going from all the way to the most, you know, populist left, going through a center left, a center, center right, a hard right wing, traditional right conservative, to a hard populist nationalist right, down to the potentially the xenophobic far right, even though they did not make it into the Parliament. So this large array of voices means also that it's less of a zero sum game, and Macron should be smart in not trying to put himself in this situation, because that has led to his defeat in these elections, where it's him against everybody else.

He should instead, and it's probably a real opportunity for Macron, he should embrace what he's been preaching for the past five years, which is to overcome the left-right divide, to overcome sort of the paralysis of partisanship and try and offer ad hoc coalitions on the type of legislation he wants to see through.

One of the difficulties of that is that it requires a lot of politicking, a lot of working with the National Assembly, a lot of understanding every locally elected MP's priorities or the general priority of their political group, et cetera. So, really working the legislative process. But if they were able to do that, it's not actually impossible for Macron to govern. He will just have to focus on the National Assembly in a way he's never done before.

And so one of the big questions is that who is going to be able to do that for him, and with him? There is a question on the capacity of the prime minister, Élisabeth Borne, who's more of a technician, who is very much in tune with Emmanuel Macron, but is just freshly elected to the National Assembly. Is she in a capacity to do that? That's that's a big question.

And if he is unable to do that, to find ad hoc coalition for every one of his priorities, obviously, including some of the priorities of the opposing party, we might then face a total blockade and paralysis. In which case one of the options maybe within a year, and it has been rumored already, is that the president can decide on the dissolution of Parliament, which will launch the Parliament into a new election within a month. In that case, Macron can make the case that, you know, whatever voters have voted a year prior is not working, he needs a majority. But this is also unlikely to be successful. So, there is a real opportunity and probably interest in Macron in trying to make this work partly. It would reduce political tension, it would allow for some form of national unity, but it's still a far reach at this point.

**DOLLAR:** So let's shift gears, Célia, and talk a little bit about foreign policy. As I see it, France and President Macron have been pretty strong supporters of the Ukraine, of sanctions against Russia, of the Western coalition essentially trying to, in a sense, overturn this Russian invasion of Ukraine. Do these parliamentary results affect his ability to operate in the foreign policy realm? How do these different groups, the far right versus this coalition on the left, how do they see the whole struggle around the Ukraine war?

**BELIN:** That's a very good question. I think you have sort of two answers to that. One will be Macron's attitude. As I said, you know, if he wants to have a legislative agenda, it's going to require a lot of domestic political game that he needs to focus on that would probably take his priority. He will he will have to focus on this very strongly if he wants this to happen.

But the president also has the option to take care mostly of foreign policy, and that's very much into Macron's DNA. You know, he wants to reshape Europe. He wants to take care of foreign policy. He's interested in multilateralism, in strategy. Not as much into, you know, what happens locally or what happens at the National Assembly. So if he's able to get a prime minister to do that job or a few strong political leaders that can focus on this, maybe he'll be able to continue what he was hoping to be his legacy, which is transforming Europe, pushing for European sovereignty.

And there he has more leeway probably than in other in in in other Western democracies that if he doesn't need the legislation, he can make the speeches, make a series of recommendation, take decisions at his level that don't necessarily need the approval of parliament.

One of the sticking point, of course, will be continuing French support for sanctions. At this point, the vast majority of the French political class agrees on sanctions and is actually very supportive of Ukraine, agrees that not only are they a necessary to punish Russia after what's happened, but that they should proceed with it, that it's a matter of investing in the freedom of Europe by, you know, drawing a line in the sand on this conflict.

But, it all depends on how much impact should it have on households and in particular, who should pay for the impact. The leftist coalition is pushing for some form of bump up in minimum wage, some for blocking the prices of produce of necessity. There's a series of very leftist ideas that are trying to protect the working class and the middle class from the effect of these sanctions. The far right is really focused on, and Marine Le Pen in particular, on the energy crisis and on trying to reduce the price of gas at the pump and other sort of consideration on that front. But basically, all of them are worried on the impact of sanctions on households, the impact of inflation, which is one of the opportunity—but it's going to be it's going to be a difficult conversation—an early opportunity for this government to discuss with the new Parliament on the opportunity of a law purchasing power, on cost of living, which was a bill that had been in preparation prior to the election that the Macron government, or the Élisabeth Borne government, was hoping to pass in the summer. He will need, they will need to get some support from the left and from the right to pass this legislation.

**DOLLAR:** Célia, the last question I want to ask you concerns France's relations with the U.S., but also global issues like China. The United States is essentially viewing the world as a contest between democracies and authoritarians. And I'm just wondering how that's playing out in France in general and whether there are clear differences among these political blocs we've been discussing in terms of receptivity to this idea.

**BELIN:** Well, thank you, David. That's a very fascinating question, because partly this idea and the relationship of all of these parties to democracy has been an ongoing theme of these elections, in particular because within the leftist alliance, the leftist alliance has been coalescing around the party of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, France Insoumise, coalescing with Socialists and Greens, et cetera, that have deep contradictions within the movement on the relationship to Western democracies basically versus the rest of the world. And Jean-Luc Mélenchon himself and some of the France Insoumise supporters have had ambiguities, to say the least, in their relationships with Russia, with some of the socialist authoritarians around the world—Cuba, Venezuela, and other types of countries for which they have some sort of romantic attachment, including even sometimes all the way to, you know, ambiguities

on Syria and Assad and other types of regimes. Ambiguities for which, you know, some on the center left have been really turned off and really in disagreement.

So, now that there's a show of force of this leftist alliance, these deep contradictions will come to the fore again. And there's a need for the leftist alliance to really clarify its position on authoritarians, in particular former communist blocs authoritarians for which they have these ambiguities.

But more generally, France is continuously and systematically in the camp of democracies against authoritarian countries, but it doesn't like to say so. This is not official French foreign policy, because fundamentally French foreign policy and France believe in multilateralism, in the creation of a rules-based order, not a value-based order. And that's a big difference with the United States. What Macron has tried to push, and his predecessors before that, is a result-oriented multilateralism, a multilateral system that could work for anybody regardless of the nature of the regime of the country in question as long as you respect the rules, as long as you contribute to international law, as long as you respect, you know, all sorts of rules as set together by international organizations—this is France's priority. It's also a way for France to relate to other countries that are not either the big Western democracies or the big authoritarian competitors. But it's a way for France to relate to African partners, to Asian partners, to many other countries around the world.

And so, this is widely shared in a French context. And these elections will not change that. It will continue to be the priority. However, in the face of the Russian aggression of Ukraine, in the face of Ukraine who wants to join the EU and the sort of a feeling of aggression against European democracies, recently France has been very, very strongly on the side of democracies. And even if it's not trumpeting it in a democracy versus authoritarian type of frame, it is very much present in everybody's mind. And the solidarity on that front will continue.

**DOLLAR:** That's really fascinating. Thank you, Célia. I'm David Dollar and I've been talking to my colleague Célia Belin about the French elections and the complicated politics in this important country, how it affects France's domestic policies, but also foreign policy issues, relations with the United States, et cetera. So, thank you very much, Célia, for walking us through the import of these elections.

**BELIN:** Thank you, David. It was a pleasure.

**DOLLAR:** Thank you all for listening. We release new episodes of Dollar and Sense every other week. So if you haven't already, follow us wherever you get your podcasts and stay tuned. It's made possible by support from producer Fred Dews, audio engineer Colin Cruickshank and other Brookings colleagues. If you have questions about the show or episode suggestions, you can email us at [podcasts@Brookings.edu](mailto:podcasts@Brookings.edu).

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Until next time, I'm David Dollar and this has been Dollar and Sense.