

ARGUMENT

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The New Meaning of France's Anti-Fascism

This week's elections show the country is doing more than simply replaying battles from its past.

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Founder of left-wing party La France Insoumise (LFI) Jean-Luc Melenchon following the first results of the second round of France's legislative election in Paris on July 7, 2024. SAMEER AL-DOUMY / AFP

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After a period of relative quiescence, everyone has started talking about fascism again. This is, in part, due to the threat of a second term for Donald Trump, which has reactivated a highly polemical “[fascism debate](#)” in the United States. But there are plenty of other actual or quasi-fascists elsewhere. The Italian

prime minister, Giorgia Meloni, is the leader of a genuine neo-fascist party. In Latin America, Argentina's Javier Milei has picked up where Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro left off. And, in India, Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party was reelected in June, albeit with a much-reduced majority.

By contrast, much less has been said about anti-fascism. Most commentators and journalists—and even many academics—seem to have accepted that anti-fascism belongs to the 20th century. Which is a little strange. If fascism is real, why not its opposite? And what happened to all of those historical memories of fighting fascism, above all in Europe, but also further afield?

Fortunately, we still have France, the only country that continues to talk about anti-fascism in a consistent and meaningful way across the political spectrum—and one of the few places where this talk translates into a hard electoral reality.

The explanation for this anomaly lies in the concept of the so-called *front républicain* (republican front). This refers to any coalition or alliance that is designed to keep the far-right from power.

In the late 1880s and 1890s, the *front républicain* included those who were opposed to the rise of Boulangism, a militarist far-right movement, and those who defended the cause of Alfred Dreyfus, whose false conviction was one of the great republican causes at the time. The clash between an insurgent far-right and the massed republican forces of the moderate right, the center, and the left was subsequently repeated time and again.

There were echoes of the *front républicain* in the 1936 Popular Front, although this was in a more obviously left-wing key. The same logic was invoked in the 1950s, at the time of Poujadism, and again in the 1980s, when Jean-Marie Le Pen's Front National began to make its first electoral breakthroughs.

By this time, the *front républicain* had taken on a clearly electoral dimension. The aim was to ensure that the best-placed candidates from “republican” parties would win in the second-round of an election. This involved strategic *désistements* (withdrawals) by weaker “republican” candidates, followed by tactical voting.

The most famous recent iteration of the *front républicain* is usually also considered to be its last hurrah. In 2002, Jean-Marie Le Pen squeezed past the socialist candidate, Lionel Jospin, in the first round of the

presidential election. This was the first time that any far-right candidate had come so close to power, and it was a profound shock.

In response, the entire political class called on the French to vote for the center-right candidate, Jacques Chirac, in the second round. It worked spectacularly: Chirac was elected with more than 82 percent of the vote on a turnout of almost 80 percent. Left-wing voters massively supported a right-wing candidate in order to save the French Republic.

But, as we now know, Jean-Marie Le Pen's success was only the beginning. Since then, his daughter Marine Le Pen has climbed ever higher in the polls. She qualified for the second round of the presidential elections in 2017 and 2022, when she received 41 percent of the vote. Le Pen's party, too, has gone from strength to strength. Now rebaptized as the Rassemblement National, it has gradually developed its local and regional presence—and, in 2022, it made a major breakthrough when it won 89 seats in the National Assembly.

For most analysts, the success of Marine Le Pen and the Rassemblement National was easily explained by the atrophy of the *front républicain*. After 2002, fewer and fewer left-wing voters felt inclined to block the far-right, and a significant minority of right-wing voters embraced it. With each new election, the remnants of a century-old French anti-fascist tradition seemed to fall away. Indeed, many of the most pessimistic result forecasts of the 2024 elections were based on the assumption that it was essentially dead.

Imagine the surprise, then, when the results of the second round were announced on Sunday night. Despite increasing its seats and vote share, the far-right flopped compared to the polls. It was soon clear that voters had done everything they could to stop the Rassemblement National from winning a majority.

All of a sudden, the *front républicain* was back, and the phrase was plastered across the French mainstream media. Commentators and pollsters scrambled to explain themselves. For those with long memories, it felt as if the spirit of 2002 had been resurrected from the grave.

The simplest way to explain this remarkable revival of anti-fascism is to invoke something that all historians of modern France will recognize: the fear of disorder and social collapse. Modern French history is littered with regime changes, protests, revolutions, and civil wars. The constitutional settlement of the Fifth Republic, born in 1958 during the Algerian War, was specifically designed to ensure stability, and it survived the momentous protests of 1968 and the economic crisis of deindustrialization unscathed.

Still today, voters are scared of the consequences of bringing a far-right party to national power. They fear that a victory for Marine Le Pen or her prime-minister-in-waiting, Jordan Bardella, would unleash

violence and instability across the country. On the three occasions when they have realistically faced this prospect—2017, 2022 and 2024—they have pulled back. Each time, they have invoked the *front républicain* as a defense mechanism.

But there was more to the 2024 elections than simply a kneejerk reaction to the threat of disorder. For the first time since the early 2000s, anti-fascism was imbued with a positive quality. People invested hope in the left-wing alliance, known as the Nouveau Front Populaire. They saw anti-fascism as the basis on which to build a fairer society, with more public spending, a higher minimum wage, a wealth tax, and a reversal of Macron's pension reforms.

This process was especially striking amongst young people, some of whom were not even born in 2002. Theirs is not the same anti-fascism as those aged 50 or older, who remember the rise of Jean-Marie Le Pen and the Front National. Young activists still talk about “fascism” and “racism,” just like the elders from whom they have learnt their history, but they are doing more than replaying the political battles of the past. They know that they are only one front in a global anti-fascist universe that stretches from the Trump trials to the smooth authoritarianism of Hungary's Viktor Orbán.

The campaigning of young anti-fascists has been made all the more intense by the fact that the Rassemblement National has succeeded in mobilizing a significant proportion of young people. The struggle to contain the far-right in France is not an intergenerational clash between youthful liberals and reactionary boomers. If anything, old people are the least likely to vote for Marine Le Pen and her acolytes. In fact, young people are fighting for the political soul of their own generation.

The most obvious symbol of this fight is Bardella himself. He is only 28 years old, and his meteoric rise has not passed unnoticed. Some voters in the 2024 elections even asked where the “Bardella” voting slip was when they arrived at the polling booth. They wanted to vote for him, even though he was not on the ballot.

Yet his youthful persona—and his facility with Tiktok—drew a committed response. During and after the elections, French social media was filled with a cascade of anti-fascist memes and counter-videos. Young people, often people of color, lampooned Bardella's campaign tactics and press conferences. They pilloried his party and the—sometimes very inexperienced—candidates who ran for election, calling them out for their racism, homophobia, bigotry, or plain stupidity.

It helps that some of the emerging figures on the French left are also young. Clémence Guetté, of La France Insoumise, is 33. Marine Tondelier, the current leader of the main Greens party, is 37. And Raphaël Glucksmann, who led the center-left to second place in the 2024 European elections, is 44. They are all politicians who have cut their teeth in a political landscape where the far-right is a fixture, not an anomaly.

It is impossible to say whether this youthful French anti-fascism has a future. In his “[letter to the French](#)” after the elections, Macron referred to the *front républicain*, but it is not clear that he or his allies intend to adhere to it. In particular, the proposal to form a governing coalition without some or all of the left—which several members of Macron’s party have endorsed—would run counter to the spirit of the election results. Meanwhile, the RN is waiting patiently for its next opportunity to show off its electoral strength.

Nevertheless, the recent electoral cycle in France is a reminder that today’s anti-fascism is no longer beholden to the 1930s or 1990s. It has a life of its own—and a whole new generation of foot soldiers ready to go to war against their oldest enemy.

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