

ARGUMENT

An expert's point of view on a current event.

Macron Is Destroying His Democracy to Save It

Why France's president has decided to embrace electoral chaos.

By [Emile Chabal](#), Professor of Contemporary History at the University of Edinburgh.



French President Emmanuel Macron delivers a speech during a working meeting 500 days ahead of the Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games, seen at the Ile-de-France Prefecture in Paris on March 14, 2023. LUDOVIC MARIN/POOL/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

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The French Revolution may have been one of the world's first experiments in mass democracy, but those governing France have long had a problem with the idea.

Throughout the 19th century, successive rulers tried to curtail democratic rights or did away with them altogether. Even the advent of universal male suffrage in 1848 did little to deflect this skepticism. A large swath of the governing classes mistrusted the masses and the elections that gave them a voice. (And most of those in power also agreed that women should not be given the vote; they were only enfranchised in 1945.)

The catastrophic defeat of 1940 at the hands of the Germans and France's experience of authoritarian rule under Marshal Philippe Pétain ensured that, after the liberation of France in 1944, most anti-democratic voices were silenced. But French politicians did not suddenly embrace the democratic process.

On the contrary, the reconstruction of the country after the war was led by unelected technocrats, and when Charles de Gaulle returned to power in 1958, he changed the constitution to ensure that the democratic urges of the French were firmly kept in check. His new constitutional settlement—known as the Fifth Republic—bypassed parliament by creating one of the most powerful directly elected executives in the world. It also instituted a two-round electoral system that was designed to allow voters to express their frustration in the first round before making a “sensible” choice in the subsequent runoff.

As for the French themselves, they have long been aware of the various attempts to keep their political urges at bay. That is why the power of protest and the fear of the angry mob have been powerful driving forces in French politics. Even today, every minister knows that their days are numbered if the street turns against them, regardless of the result of the previous election.

With all of this historical baggage, it is not hard to see why almost everyone was completely taken aback by President Emmanuel Macron's unexpected announcement on June 9 that he would be dissolving parliament. Only an hour before, the first estimations of the results of the European Parliament elections had been released. There was little in the way of suspense: Opinion polls had predicted for months that the far-right National Rally party would do very well. In the moments before Macron spoke, people were more likely to be worried about finishing their washing-up than the composition of the European Parliament.

But Macron had other ideas. His decision to call an election flew in the face of two centuries of French political history. Every single one of his predecessors would have told him the same thing: When the chips are down, the very last thing you do is ask the French people to decide. They will punish you—not simply because they don't like you, but also because you had the temerity to ask them what they think.

How, then, can we explain such a momentous and uncharacteristic decision?

In the days since Macron's announcement, even the most experienced political journalists have struggled to answer this question. It appears that there was a special group of advisors working on the possibility of dissolving parliament. There were also members of Macron's coalition who were recommending this course of action—especially a cluster of right-wing senators, whose mandate is not dependent on the outcome of direct elections.

But this is hardly an adequate explanation. Presidents always have teams whose job it is to game different political scenarios, and they also have to deal with incessant lobbying from their allies. If we want to understand Macron's logic then we need to probe deeper into his worldview and his vision of French politics.

We might start with the historical precedents that exist for Macron's dissolution of parliament. There have been only three preemptive dissolutions of the parliament under the Fifth Republic: In 1962, de Gaulle needed parliamentary support for his decision to create the directly elected presidency. In 1968, he sought a new mandate in the wake of the huge student and worker protests that had taken place in the spring. And in 1997, Chirac hoped to confirm his success in the presidential elections of 1995 by renewing the right-wing majority in parliament.

It is clear which of these precedents is in Macron's mind. In 1962 and 1968, de Gaulle's party was massively reelected, and he came away with renewed legitimacy for his policies. In 1997, by contrast, Chirac was severely punished. The left gained more than 200 seats and formed the majority in parliament until 2002. Given how much more fragmented French politics is in 2024—and given the collapse in party discipline since the 1990s—the dissolution of 1997 seems to be a far more accurate guide to what might happen in a few weeks' time.

Of course, Macron knows his political history; he knows the risks. He might believe that he has the charisma and stature of de Gaulle, but he will be aware that the general himself was punished by the popular vote. When de Gaulle called a referendum on decentralization only a year after his spectacular success in the 1968 parliamentary election, he told the French that he would resign if he lost. And he still lost.

Even the most formidable French leader of the 20th century was ejected from power by a dissatisfied electorate. What makes Macron think he can do better?

The only credible answer, it seems to me, is that he has belatedly embraced the power of chaos. After telling the French incessantly since his first victory in 2017 that he is the guarantor of stability and the only bulwark against the political extremes in France and Europe, he has decided that his goals can be most successfully achieved by utterly destroying the existing system of political parties and coalition.

Already in the past few days, profound realignments have taken place on the left and right of the political spectrum. It is not impossible that the French center right—the political heirs of Gaullism—will all but disappear. On the left, the real fear of a far-right government has forced entirely incompatible politicians, from Trotskyists to centrist social democrats, into an ad hoc alliance. In the best-case scenario, Macron emerges from this turmoil as the only credible figure of government, like a revolutionary leader left standing after a purge.

But the risks of unleashing chaos are huge. Macron could lose his parliamentary power and his party. He could suffer a crushing defeat at the hands of an angry electorate. Most of all, he could permanently tarnish his legacy by being the first French president to swear in a far-right prime minister who is supported by a

far-right majority in parliament. The symbolism of this would be almost as powerful as the notorious picture of Pétain shaking hands with Hitler in 1940.

Many people have compared Macron's gamble to former Prime Minister David Cameron's decision to call a referendum on the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union in 2016. But Cameron was naive: He was told he would win, and he had not drawn any lessons from the near-miss of the referendum on Scottish independence in 2014.

Macron is not naive; he understands exactly what he has done. He may, in time, be vindicated. But if he fails, he alone will bear the responsibility for tearing France apart.

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