



[The Reasons Why Mass Protests Have Emerged in France Over President Macron's Choice of Prime Minister](#)

Starting on September 7th, protests against French President Emmanuel Macron have erupted across the country, with hundreds of thousands of protesters nationwide. The French interior ministry put the total number at 110,000, with local police saying 26,000 were in Paris; however, other sources have indicated that the numbers could be higher at close to 300,000 nationwide and 160,000 in Paris. These protests were triggered by President Macron's announcement that conservative Michel Barnier would be the next French prime minister, prompting a fury of anger across France's left, with the Unbowed Party calling for demonstrations against the move. Other parties have called for "grand popular mobilization," and some have gone so far as to say that citizens "must get rid of Macron for the good of democracy."

As for context and background on what has elicited the backlash, in France it is the president's responsibility to name the prime minister, who then must gain the confidence of the National Assembly – the lower house of the bicameral French Parliament – in order to remain in office and pass legislation. Recent elections for the National Assembly were held on June 30th and July 7th, the latter being the second and final round. Going into the decisive last round of the election, the French left united into a single electoral alliance, the New Popular Front (NPF), which consisted of parties ranging from the Unbowed Party to the Socialists and the Greens. President Macron campaigned for his liberal centrist political coalition Ensemble, also known as Together for the Republic. Many were afraid that the far-right National Rally (NR) would become the largest party. In fact, several days before the first round of elections, news network *France 24* showed polling data that the National Rally was estimated to win more than 35 percent of the vote and become the largest party. As the poll predicted, the NR came in first for round one with 33%. However, in French elections, races without a candidate or party receiving more than 50% go to a second round between the top two candidates and anyone with more than 12.5% of the vote. To prevent a National Rally victory, over 200 left and center candidates who came in 3rd place withdrew to avoid vote-splitting. This worked with the second-round results, putting the leftist New Popular Front first with 182 seats, the liberal-centrist Ensemble coalition in a close second with 168, and the NR in third with 143. So, with this being the case, many wondered how the Republicans – a traditional conservative party that came in fourth place with only 46 seats – ended up securing the position of prime minister.

President Macron has been vocal against the far-right for their extreme positions and thus the danger of allowing them to govern France; he has also been vocal about what he sees as extremists on the left, namely the Unbowed Party, which is the largest party within The New National Front. Macron made his ideal government known by writing in an open letter, "I call on all political forces that recognize themselves in republican institutions, the rule of law, parliamentarianism, a European orientation, and the defense of French independence to engage in sincere and loyal dialogue to build a solid majority, necessarily plural, for the country." With this, Macron made clear his desire to form a broad centrist coalition that excluded both the far-right and far-left, and that would continue his liberal centrist agenda which included a pro-European Union and pro-NATO stance.

Knowing that a minister from France's Unbowed Party would never survive against the right and center, the NPF named Lucie Castets, who is associated with the Socialist Party, as their candidate for prime minister. Jean-Luc

Mélenchon, the leader of France's Unbowed Party, also stated that he would accept a government without ministers from his party, a key goal of Macron. Given the election results, this seems like the best that Macron could do. If the NPF and Ensemble could unite behind Castets, they would control a majority and completely exclude the far-right. They would include the far-left Unbowed, but they would hold no ministerial positions close to Macron's broad centrist coalition. However, Gabriel Attal, the previous prime minister of France and a current member of Ensemble, said that even without any ministers from Unbowed, an NPF government could not survive a vote in the assembly, signaling that Castets would not have Ensemble support – which would doom her government. In response, the NPF said that it would back out of the negotiation unless Castets was chosen. Concerns among Ensemble are likely over the NPF increasing taxes, state spending, and attempting to undo some of their key policy accomplishments such as the recent retirement age increase from 62 to 64. Any government with France's Unbowed looks to be too far to the left for Gabriel Attal and some other members of Ensemble. At the same time, the NPF, seeing itself as the largest bloc in the National Assembly, likely feels that it should not be the one that is asked to overly compromise.

Macron, seeing that any coalition between the NPF and Ensemble was fruitless, appointed the senior French politician Michel Barnier – who led the Brexit negotiation for the European Union – to now lead a minority center to the right-wing government between Ensemble and the fourth-place conservative Republicans. Barnier appears to have been chosen for his strong negotiation skills, political experience, and being seen as acceptable by the French center and right. Together, Barnier with Ensemble and the Republicans would fall way short of a majority, but they could survive if the National Rally refused to vote them out. So, while the NR would not be in government, in every censure vote whereby the government would be brought down if passed, they would be kingmakers whose demands would have to be met if Barnier would want to survive. Thus, in an effort to keep extremists (both on the left and right) out of the government, Macron is surrendering power over it to the far-right. Le Pen, the leader of National Rally, said on September 8th that she would not immediately censure Barnier and would “judge the new government on its acts.” Considering that Barnier has been increasingly against immigration to France, his appointment was likely made in the hopes that he was far enough to the right to appease Le Pen and the National Rally. Speaking on the news network *France 24*, Dr. Anna McKeever – a political scientist from Scotland – theorizes that even though the National Rally has so far avoided being included in government, it has, over time, pulled the French political spectrum to the right by bringing issues such as immigration to the forefront and forcing parties like the centrist Ensemble and traditional conservative Republicans to take further right stances.

France's political climate has made a left-center government seemingly impossible, even with the assurance that the far-left will not be involved. If a minority right government is formed in France without most French voters behind it, political polarization will likely worsen. This could allow the National Rally to make gains, as the collaboration between Ensemble and NPF recently in the second round of French elections may not be seen again, leaving the National Rally in an even stronger position to win the next French presidential election in 2027 and the subsequent legislative election if there is no strong challenger to the far-right. Given France's position as the third-largest economy in Europe and a key player in the European Union and NATO, the entire world should be mindful of what transpires.