

Macron's Refusal To Accept Election Results With French Politics Analyst Arnaud Bertrand

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Glenn Greenwald (GG): All right. One of the friends of our show is Arnaud Bertrand, who is an entrepreneur and political analyst on economics and geopolitics. He is from France and is French, but also lives in China, where he's become an expert in both countries. He has published articles in numerous political journals around the world, is an archaeologist who has a doctorate in sinology, specialising in relations between the Chinese and Central Asian worlds in antiquity. And to me, he has become one of the most reliable, one of the most incisive, one of the most important political analysts about France and the EU politics, about, certainly the relation with China and its neighbours and the United States, as well as foreign policy in the world. And we are delighted to welcome him back to the show. Well, let's dive in, because I'm finding what's happening in France so fascinating. I followed both French elections, the one that Marine Le Pen's party won shocked a lot of people, a lot of right wing parties around Europe won as well, for sending representatives of each country to the EU Parliament. And then I covered as well, in large part with your analysis, how President Macron kind of shocked a lot of people by dissolving the parliament and calling early elections, apparently trying to show that Marine Le Pen's party doesn't have the support that that first election might have suggested she had it, in a way that French election did that job in the sense that while Marine Le Pen's party got more support than it ever got before, it still came in third. The issue, though, is that it wasn't Macron's party that won the election. It was a coalition this time of left wing parties, many of whom are sort of considered far left, many of whom are considered a little bit more, I guess you could call them centre left. And I remember you talking about, I remember reading all kinds of European journals about what was going to happen that first week, Gabriel Attal, who is Macron's protege, who I think he's grooming to run once his term is over, he's sort of a younger, gayer Macron, tendered his resignation, as he should have, because he said, Look, our party lost, were no longer the majority, I can't be prime minister anymore and Macron refused to accept that resignation. He is the prime minister to this day, months later, and absolutely nothing has changed in the French parliament and legislature as a result of those elections. What is going on? It seems

like Macron just decided to pretend the election has never happened.

Arnaud Bertrand (AB): Yes. It's very strange. So, basically the result, as you said, is that the New Popular Front, which is the name of that left coalition, came first. They have 193 seats in Parliament out of a total of 577. But the issue is that they don't have a majority, because for a majority you need to have 289 seats. So basically Macron's argument is that if I appoint a prime minister from their party, which is normally the rule, you appoint the prime minister from the party that that won the election, that arrived first, then that Prime Minister, their government will be censored by the Assembly because then the other MPs can join together and vote that government out. But basically once you have that argument, then it's like then so what? Then you stay in power even though you have even less MPs than the New Popular Front?! It's very strange. And so Macron has been stalling, really, you know, the election was, I think, 50 and something days ago. He's been saying: I'm working on it. I'm working on it. First he said, there should be a truce around the Olympics. So he had this excuse. And then the Olympics went by..

GG: Just to interrupt you there. That excuse: Oh, we have the Olympics now has always been so funny to me because the reason the Olympics followed the election is because it was Macron himself who...

AB: Exactly.

GG: ...right before the Olympics began. And then when he didn't get the result he wanted, you said, Oh, look, the Olympics are here. Who had any idea that we were going to vote, right? So let's just keep everything the same until the Olympics are over.

AB: Exactly. It is very hypocritical. So I think his original tactic actually was that, if you remember, he gave an extremely short timeline for the election. He basically announced the election two weeks ahead, which is extremely short for any party to organise and run a campaign. So I think that is, that he was the only one who knew there was going to be an election. So he was the only one who could get prepared and run an actual, I mean, in his mind, run an actual proper campaign because he could get prepared in advance. And he was betting on the others, so mainly, Le Pen on the National Rally and the left, of being completely taken by surprise by his announcement and running a very chaotic campaign. And then he would emerge as sort of the stable competent party. But that's not what happened because, as you pointed out, the left actually got organised extremely fast. Within two days they put together that New Popular Front coalition. And so then it's Macron who was taken by surprise. Actually he showed on many occasions that he was extremely annoyed by that. Because, obviously his bet didn't pay out. So then after the election, the results came out and obviously that didn't pay out. Then it's a lot of stirring tactics and everyone is wondering, what's going to happen?! Because France technically has no government now. Attal and the government actually resigned. They actually did, but they're still running the country. It's a bit of a special situation, but that can't be sustained. At some point there needs to be something that happens. Will Macron finally appoint a prime minister or he resigns himself as president or he has a bunch of other options, like, in the Constitution there is an article, article 16, that

basically gives himself almost dictatorial powers. So he's going to have to make a move, one way or another. But the current situation is just unsustainable.

GG: One of the reasons why I'm so interested in what's happening in France, and we've had people on talk about the movement of Germany and right wing populism in Europe, is because I think that especially with the internet being so interconnected, the political culture in all of these countries is much more similar than they were say 20 years ago. I really believe that if the Iraq war happened now instead of back in 2003, when Germany and France had such a radically different political outlook than the United States, I could easily see the majority of the French, the majority of Germans, all connected to the same propaganda that caused the United States to support the war in Iraq. But nonetheless, what I also think is happening, and this has been one of my major concerns for a long time, is that European elites and American elites have seen that they can no longer control the outcome of elections. They, I think, first began to realise the extent of that in 2016, when the British decided to leave the EU and ratify Brexit, something the entire establishment was opposed to. And then, of course, three months later, Americans went to the ballot and voted for Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton, which shocked the entire world. And since then, it's only gotten worse. And then you have this paradox where all of these Western leaders constantly stand up and say: We have to control the internet because we have to fight for democracy. We have to prevent hate speech and disinformation from undermining democracy. And yet, you know, you look in the United States and you see how the Democrats decided to deal with Trump. They banned him from the internet. Then they tried to ban him from the ballot, and now they're still trying to imprison him. The sort of things we were always taught happen only in tyrannical countries. And France has very much the same rhetoric. We're part of the democratic world. We stand for democracy. And yet here you don't have one vote, you have two votes. And while the outcomes were different, Macron didn't win either. And you have the left wing that won the legislative election. And he just seems to continue to argue that you cannot have the left wing in control of the Assembly, even though it got the most votes, because somehow, in his mind, but not the voters, that would be a threat to French stability and French prosperity and whatever. It seems like these leaders are, as they increase their rhetoric about how only they protect democracy, are becoming more and more contemptuous of actual democracy. I'm wondering what you think of that.

AB: Yeah, I think you're 100% right. So the rhetoric you always hear in France, is the rhetoric of the so-called extremes. You know, they are called the extremes, both Le Pen and the RN and that left coalition, the New Popular Front. And you even hear from Macron's allies these days, that's what the vote was saying, is that the French rejected the extremes. That's what they're saying. But when you actually look at the votes, what the French people expressed is the exact contrary, because when you add the votes to Le Pen, to the RN and to the New Popular Front, 60% of the French voted for them in the second election. So, in fact, what the French absolutely reject is the centre. That's very, very clear from the vote. They are saying, we're effectively fed up with decades of being run by the centre. France has basically alternated between the centre left and the centre right, ever since the Second World War, really, although de Gaulle was a bit of a special case, and the French want dramatic change,

they don't want that anymore. But when you listen to the rhetoric from that centre, they're basically gaslighting the population by telling everyone that the French want them. And what Macron is actually likely to do because you hear some names of prime ministers that he might appoint and the two most likely names, these days, from what's written in the French press, a guy called Xavier Bertrand, who has the same family name as me, actually, even though I don't think we're – maybe he's a distant cousin, I don't know – or Bernard Cazeneuve. And look at those guys, Xavier Bertrand is from the Republican right. So basically the party of Sarkozy and Chirac, which is now extremely small in Parliament. I think they have something like 60 MPs or something, far behind the New Popular Front, Le Pen or even Macron. And Bernard Cazeneuve the other possibility used to be prime minister of France under François Hollande, who was historically the most unpopular French president ever. At some point it was even at 4% popularity. So 96% of the French were against him. So they are thinking about bringing that guy back, well him as prime minister back. So it's absolutely mad because you just know that the French absolutely don't want that. It is a real denial of democracy. That's very, very clear.

GG: All right. Let me ask you, this is the last question. One of the things I like about French culture and there's several things, but one of the things I like is the propensity for citizens to go and protest in the streets. It's something that they do commonly. I think we don't do that enough in the United States, for example. I think it's important that leaders see citizens out in the street expressing their anger. How would you gauge public sentiment about the fact that there was this election that Macron wanted, both elections said very clearly that the majority is not with Macron, and yet he's essentially ignoring those results. And I realised his strategy – I just saw again today that he's saying, Oh, I think we found our candidate – I don't know if it's one of the people you mentioned, but it's someone from the very, very centrist weighing of whatever the left wing coalition may be. But it's still the case that it hasn't happened, and it's been so much longer than it should. Are the French angry, even angrier toward Macron than they were about the fact that they had this whole election and it seems to have changed nothing so far?

AB: Yes, I think they are. An electoral protest is planned for the day after tomorrow. So I think they're angry on both sides, on the side of Le Pen, everyone who voted for the RN, because – actually, when you look at the number of votes, they came first. But the French electoral system is a bit special, so they actually came third in the number of seats. So there is a lot of anger about that because they feel that, you know – I think it's fairly legitimate. They feel that their votes are not heard, because, you know, it's the party that got the most votes and then they can come third. It's a bit strange. So there is a lot of anger for that, especially if Macron then goes and appoints basically a clone of himself as prime minister. And of course, there is a lot of anger on the left as well, because they produced the Prime Minister, they arrived right first in the number of seats, second in the number of votes, and Macron is categorically refusing to appoint a Prime Minister from their side.

GG: From the side that won?

AB: From the side that won in the number of seats. So there is considerable anger on both

sides. And then on top of that, there is a lot of anger about living standards in France. Macron passed a lot of extremely unpopular reforms like the retirement age, that you retire later, and things like that. So you can really feel a lot of popular discontent in the country.

GG: Yeah, it's so fascinating because I really think it is a microcosm of the growing contempt, the fear, actually, and therefore that contempt that Western leaders have because they know that populations, rightly or wrongly or regardless of that, their guiding belief is that ruling class elites don't care about them, have brought us on a completely wrong path, and the more freedom those people have, which is called democracy, the more threatened the ruling class is and the less freedom they have to be able to speak on the internet, to be able to speak freely, even to have their votes counted, the more secure they are. And I think what you're seeing in France really is a microcosm of what is taking place in the broader West, where they really have lost the faith and confidence of the public in their institution. So we're going to continue to follow this story. I think that you have been, at least for me, one of the two or three most informative sources on everything taking place. So it's a delight to have you on our show, and we hope to have you back again.

AB: Thank you. Thank you, Glenn.

GG: All right. Have a good evening.

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