



By: TA | AP Insight

France's poorest regions backing Le Pen's party as support for Macron wanes



The date was May 7, 2017. Addressing cheering supporters, the newly elected leader of France, Emmanuel Macron, made a promise that now, in his waning 18 months as president, lies in tatters.

The rival that **Macron** defeated that day, Marine Le Pen, had secured 10,638,475 votes. They were nowhere near enough for the far-right leader to win.

But they were too numerous for Macron to ignore, a best-ever watershed at the ballot box for Le Pen's once-ostracized National Front party that she inherited from her Holocaust-denying father.

Gazing out over a sea of French flags, Macron acknowledged "anger" and "distress" that he said motivated Le Pen voters.

He pledged to do everything to win them over, "so they no longer have any reason to vote for the extremes."

But since then, Le Pen's us-against-them nativist politics targeting immigrants, Muslims and the European Union have made millions more converts.

Her **National Rally** party, rebranded in 2018 to broaden its appeal and shed its sulfurous links to her dad, **Jean-Marie Le Pen**, has become the largest in parliament and has never appeared closer to power, with the next presidential and legislative elections scheduled in 2027.

Poverty worsened under Macron

Many factors explain why Le Pen has gone from strength to strength. Some are intrinsic: The 57-year-old cat-loving mother of three is more polished and popular than her gruff ex-paratrooper father who had multiple convictions for inciting racial hatred and for downplaying Nazi atrocities in World War II. He died in January.

Others are external and include voter

disgruntlement over wealth inequality that has worsened significantly under Macron.

An additional 1.2 million people have fallen **below the poverty threshold** in the world's seventh-largest economy since the 2017 election and 2022 reelection of France's pro-business president.

The former investment banker slashed business taxes and watered down a wealth tax to boost France's allure for investment. Left-wing critics labeled Macron "president of the rich."

The poverty rate was 13.8% when Macron took power and had barely shifted during the previous presidency of François Hollande, a Socialist.

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By 2023, into Macron's second term and the most recent year with official data from the French national statistics agency, the poverty rate had ballooned to 15.4%, which is its highest level in nearly 30 years of measurements.

The following year, National Rally triumphed in French voting for the **European Parliament**. So heavy was the defeat for his centrist camp that Macron stunned France by then dissolving the **National Assembly**.

Again, National Rally surged in the ensuing legislative election. It didn't come close to winning a majority — no party did. But with 123 of the 577 lawmakers, **National Rally** vaulted past all other parties and surpassed its previous best of 89 legislators elected in 2022.

Put bluntly: the worse off France becomes, the better National Rally seems to fare.

Showing the correlation

Mapping by The Associated Press both of poverty in France and of the Le Pen vote in the four French legislative elections since she took over her father's party in 2011 show how both have grown.

The maps show particularly evident progress by National Rally in some of France's poorest regions, especially in what have become National Rally strongholds: the deindustrialized northeast of France and along its Mediterranean coast.

Region-by-region poverty rates were mapped through 2021, beyond which the national statistics agency INSEE doesn't have data for all 96 of mainland France's regions.

The AP mapped support for the National Front and then National Rally by using the party's showing in the first rounds of voting in legislative elections in 2012, 2017, 2022 and 2024.

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"We clearly see that the National Rally vote is very strongly correlated with issues of poverty, of difficulties with social mobility" and with voters "who are most pessimistic about the future of their children or their personal situation," said Luc Rouban, a senior researcher at Paris' elite Sciences Po school of political sciences who studies the party.

François Ouzilleau, who stood for Macron's party in the 2022 legislative election and lost to a National Rally winner in his district in Normandy west of Paris, puts it more simply.

"It feeds off anger and people's problems," he said.

Parallels with Trump are apparent

But poverty is only part of the Le Pen success story and her appeal isn't limited to voters who struggle to make ends meet.

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Rouban sees National Rally similarities with the playbook of U.S. President Donald Trump.

"They're doing Trump-ism à la française," he said. "They say, 'We're wary of the justice system,' like Trump. 'We're taking back control of our national borders,' like Trump."

National Rally establishes strongholds

The party says that its proposals to slash France's spending on migrants and on the EU and to redirect money to people's pockets by reducing the costs of energy and other necessities appeal to voters in financial need.

"The French have clearly understood that the ones defending the purchasing power of the working and middle classes are the National Rally," Laure Lavalette, a parliamentary spokesperson for the party, told the AP.

Lavalette represents the southern Var region, one of National Rally's new strongholds as Macron's popularity has plummeted.

In legislative elections that followed his election in 2017, Le Pen's party failed to win any seats in Var. But after Macron's reelection in 2022, National Rally grabbed seven of Var's eight seats and repeated that feat in 2024.

Poverty rates in the Var have long surpassed the national average, the AP's mapping shows.

Lavalette says that making ends meet is "crazy difficult" for some of her constituents and that "some tell me that they have to choose between eating or heating."

Voters hunger for change

The 2024 legislative election produced a fractured parliament with fragile **minority governments** collapsing one after the other. To untangle that knot, Macron could have dissolved the National Assembly again this year, triggering a new election.



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That is what National Rally wanted, buoyed by polls suggesting it could perhaps win enough seats to form its first government.

Mindful that such an outcome could saddle him with a National Rally prime minister for the remainder of his presidency, Macron held his fire.

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"There's a sword of Damocles hanging over us, it's called the National Rally," said Ouzilleau, who serves as mayor in the Normandy town of Vernon and is a long-time friend of Lecornu.

He says voters have increasingly been telling

him that they are ready to test-drive National Rally, breaking decades of uninterrupted rule by mainstream parties.

"It's been two or three years that we've been hearing this: 'We've tried everything except the National Rally, so what is the risk?'" he said.