

Snap Out of It? Governmental Instability and Far-Right Mainstreaming in the Dutch and French Elections of 2023/2024

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Introduction

Neither the Netherlands nor France were expected to have new governments in 2024. Dutch voters were due to go back to the polls in 2025, while France was to hold the next legislative election in 2027. However, between the summer of 2023 and the summer of 2024, both Mark Rutte and Gabriel Attal government's term came to an early end, with snap elections being held in November 2023 in the Netherlands and June/July 2024 in France.

In this article, we compare the two elections to show how despite widely differing institutional conditions, both elections returned weakened governments dependent on the goodwill of the far right for their political survival. France and the Netherlands can be regarded as two 'most different cases' when it comes to their electoral and governmental systems. Whereas the former relies on a two-round majoritarian voting system favouring the emergence of clear and stable governmental majorities, the latter is based on a strongly proportional electoral system where post-electoral coalition building plays a key role. However, in this case, their electoral systems led both countries towards a similarly unstable equilibrium. Both countries departed from, and returned to, a situation of political instability. Moreover, the far right made remarkable inroads in both cases. Far-right ideas and personalities dominated the debate, contributing to a continued mainstreaming of their positions. In the Netherlands, Geert Wilders's *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV – Party for Freedom) also gained a foot in a coalition government after laborious and lengthy inter-party negotiations. In France, the *Rassemblement National* (RN – National Rally) failed to win enough seats to form a government and faced continued demonisation, but still acquired a pivotal role in the government negotiations that followed the elections.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we trace the circumstances leading up to the snap elections. We then revisit the political campaigns in both countries, highlighting how they were dominated by the personalities and themes of the far right. Finally, we offer comparative insights on the implications of these developments.

I. Nobody Expects a Snap Election! The Road to Early Elections in the Netherlands and France

Snap elections are, by definition, an unexpected or sudden political development. However, in both the Netherlands and France, the conditions for an early election were ripe. In the Netherlands, the centre-right Rutte IV government officially dissolved on

7 July 2023 following a breakdown in negotiations over migration policy (Otjes and de Jonge, 2024). A key point of contention was the issue of limiting the number of so-called *nareizigers* (family reunification migrants), particularly between Prime Minister (PM) Mark Rutte's liberal-conservative *Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie* (VVD – People's Party for Freedom and Democracy) and the smallest governing party, the Christian-social *ChristenUnie* (CU – ChristianUnion).

The coalition government had been fraught with tension from the outset. In fact, it is impossible to fully understand the collapse of the Rutte IV government without taking into consideration the downfall of the Rutte III cabinet in 2021 (Otjes and Voerman, 2022). That government resigned following what has since become known as the childcare benefits scandal, which came to light after a parliamentary inquiry concluded that the government had unjustly persecuted parents for minor fraud in the childcare benefits system. The scandal disproportionately affected families with a dual nationality or a migration background, many of whom were then faced with financial ruin.

One of the key figures in uncovering the scandal was Pieter Omtzigt, a member of parliament (MP) from the coalition party *Christen-Democratisch Appèl* (CDA – Christian-Democratic Appeal). Omtzigt had used his parliamentary position as an MP to push for greater accountability and transparency, despite resistance from both his own party and government ministers. During the 2021 coalition negotiations, Rutte then proposed relocating Omtzigt to a position outside parliament – a suggestion leaked through a photograph of parliamentary scout Kajsa Ollongren's meeting notes. This, combined with the protracted coalition talks – the longest in Dutch history – further eroded political trust, exacerbating tensions surrounding the childcare benefits scandal and other controversies.

After lengthy negotiations following the 2021 general election, the *same* four parties from the previous government (CDA, VVD, D66 and CU) reformed the Rutte IV government, which was installed in January 2022. This new administration was immediately (re) confronted with two lingering yet very contentious issues: nitrogen policies and migration (Otjes and de Jonge, 2023). In 2019, nitrogen pollution re-emerged as a long-standing issue. The Netherlands' disproportionately large livestock sector contributed significantly to nitrogen emissions, which impacted environmental quality. To comply with European Union (EU) regulations, the government was tasked with reducing nitrogen levels, but disagreements arose within the coalition over the methods to achieve this, including proposals for compulsory farm buyouts. Tensions with agricultural interest groups deepened, culminating in widespread farmers' protests in the summer of 2022. As the 2023 provincial elections approached, the CDA, traditionally a staunch advocate for farmers, began losing ground to the newly formed agrarian populist party, the *BoerBurgerBeweging* (BBB – Farmer-Citizen Movement). In response, the CDA sought to renegotiate the agricultural portion of the coalition agreement, placing agricultural issues at the forefront of the 2023 provincial elections – which helped pave the way for a sweeping victory for the BBB in those elections.

In that same period, the VVD sought to amend the migration section of the coalition agreement. In previous years, VVD-led governments had implemented budget cuts for asylum seeker housing, leading to severe accommodation shortages. To address this, the VVD proposed a migration bill that would grant the central government authority to compel municipalities to house asylum seekers. However, internal divisions within the VVD prompted its parliamentary group to advocate for a broader package aimed

instead at curbing overall immigration, including labour, family reunification, asylum and student migration. The most contentious debate centred on asylum policy: the VVD, supported by the CDA, pushed for tougher measures, while the CU and the liberal-progressive D66 opposed such restrictions.

On 5 July 2023, as the cabinet was nearing a migration agreement, Rutte insisted on additional restrictions to family reunification, a demand that the CU refused to accept. With no compromise in sight, the cabinet collapsed. Rutte, the longest serving PM in Dutch history, resigned, leading to the dissolution of the Rutte IV government and the calling of snap elections later that year.

Like in the Netherlands, France's snap election took place in a context of protracted political instability, yet its timing caught many unawares. France had been facing governmental instability since the June 2022 parliamentary elections delivered a hung parliament – a highly unusual outcome in France's two-round majoritarian system (Durovic, 2023; Lorimer and Herman, 2023). In spite of the lack of a majority, the minority government, led by Elisabeth Borne and supported by president Macron's allied group *Ensemble*, was able to pass two deeply contested reforms. The first was a reform of the pension system, approved using the controversial article 49.3 of the Constitution. Article 49.3 engages the government's responsibility on a given piece of legislation, thereby requiring an absolute majority to censure the government for the law to be rejected. The second was an immigration law, passed with the votes of the mainstream right *Les Républicains* (LR – Republicans) and far right *Rassemblement National* and deemed by the latter to be an 'ideological victory' for their ideas since it enshrined the kind of 'securitising' policies (Griffini, 2023; Rosina, 2022) the party promoted for so long. Neither reform increased confidence in either the president or the PM, leading to the replacement of Elisabeth Borne with Gabriel Attal, in the hope that his would provide the government with some momentum. However, Attal faced many of the same challenges of Borne, with the lack of a majority and generally low popularity ratings hindering governmental action.

The European Parliament elections of June 2024 took place in this context of governmental unpopularity and provided the impetus for the snap election. The EU elections delivered a resounding rebuke of the government, and an equally resounding victory for the *Rassemblement National*. The far-right party led by Marine Le Pen and Jordan Bardella obtained 31.4% of the vote, its highest vote share outside of presidential elections. The presidential coalition *Ensemble*, for its part, lagged on 14.6% of the vote, closely followed by the centre-left *Parti Socialiste* (PS – Socialist Party) on 13.38% of the vote, radical left *La France Insoumise* (LFI – France Unbowed) on 9.89% and *Les Républicains* on a measly 7.25% (Ministère de l'Intérieur, 2024a). Shortly after the results were announced, Emmanuel Macron made an announcement, as swift as it was unexpected, that he would be calling a snap election to be held at the end of June.

Although some had expected an early election to be called, few expected it to happen so soon. The election, defined by the president as a 'necessary moment for clarification', would, he hoped, become an opportunity for French voters to express a clear preference concerning who they wanted to be governed by (Macron, 2024). Less explicitly, the president likely imagined that calling an election at such short notice would give his party an advantage over other parties. Expecting the left to be divided, and the right to struggle to find suitable candidates, he thought *Ensemble* would be well placed to improve its results by becoming the RN's main opponent (Gougou, 2025). Failing that, a RN victory would

have forced the party into the uncomfortable position of having to govern, potentially hampering Le Pen's chances at winning the 2027 presidential elections – an outcome that would suit well Macron's own narrative of being the 'last rampart' against extremism (Herman and Lorimer, 2024).

Whatever the reasons behind Macron's decision, left-wing parties threw an early spanner in the works by creating a coalition within days of the election being called. The *Parti Socialiste*, *Europe Ecologie et Les Verts* (EELV – Europe, Ecology and Greens), *La France Insoumise* and the *Parti Communiste* (PC – Communist Party) came together in the umbrella movement *Nouveau Front Populaire* (NFP – New Popular Front). The right, for its part, did indeed struggle to organise and find suitable candidates. The RN's campaign was marred by allegations against several of its candidates, who had been found to have expressed extremist views in the past (Sénécet et al., 2024). Les Républicains were unable to file candidates in all seats and also suffered from a party split when their leader, Eric Ciotti, announced that he wanted to ally with Marine Le Pen. His decision was quickly rebuked by most of his party, and Ciotti ended up running separately as part of an electoral alliance with Le Pen.

II. Different Campaigns, Similar Vibe. The Centring of Far-Right Personalities and Themes in the Dutch and French Elections

The Dutch and French campaigns displayed remarkable similarities, centring as they did on far-right themes and leaders. Although other potential foci existed, a significant amount of attention was paid to the preferred topics of the far right, as well as to these parties' leaders' personalities and potential governmental roles.

In the campaign leading up to the 2023 Dutch general election, it is useful to first consider the role and positioning of the centre-right VVD and how it contributed to the PVV's success. After Rutte's resignation, Dilan Yeşilgöz succeeded him as the leader of the VVD. Prior to taking the helm of the party, Yeşilgöz had served as Minister of Justice and Security in the Rutte IV cabinet. Under her leadership, the VVD shifted further to the right, with immigration becoming the central issue of the party's election campaign. One of the VVD's primary goals was to reduce overall immigration to the Netherlands. In its manifesto, the party argued that the country had experienced 'pretty much unchecked immigration', which had 'exceeded what our country can handle', contributing to increased housing shortages, 'flooding' of neighbourhoods and villages and severe strain on the asylum system (Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie, 2023, p. 5).

Alongside this hardline stance on immigration, the party also signalled a willingness to govern with Geert Wilders's PVV. A pivotal moment in the campaign came when Yeşilgöz stated publicly that she was open to forming a coalition with the far-right party. This marked a significant departure from Rutte's position, as he had consistently excluded the PVV from coalition talks since 2012. This shift in strategy paved the way for the PVV's rise, reinforcing the long-held belief that voters tend to prefer the 'original' over the 'copy' when it comes to issues like immigration (Krause et al., 2023). Thus, the success of the PVV can to some extent be attributed to the strategic manoeuvring of the VVD.

The PVV itself also played a crucial role in its own success. This is largely due to Wilders, as the party revolves entirely around him (Vossen, 2017). The PVV has only two

formal members: the natural person Geert Wilders and the legal entity Foundation Group Wilders (with Wilders as its sole member), effectively making him the only member. Since the party at the grassroots level and in central office is virtually non-existent, the PVV is synonymous with the party in public office, which is also headed by Wilders. Accordingly, Wilders controls key party functions, including candidate recruitment, platform drafting, and agenda setting (de Jonge and Voerman, 2025).

Over the course of the 2023 campaign, especially after Yeşilgöz tacked further to the right and signalled a willingness to collaborate with the PVV, Wilders adopted a ‘milder’ tone. He vowed to ‘freeze’ some of his hardline positions on Islam, which led some media outlets to dub him ‘Milders’. This nickname reflected his shift in rhetoric and the perceived moderation in his stance. This shift in rhetoric, along with his willingness to compromise on his hardcore anti-Islam positions, likely persuaded some voters to support the far-right PVV over the centre-right VVD. However, it is important to note that the PVV’s election manifesto remained anything but mild. For instance, the party called for the closure of borders and the limitation of asylum and migration inflows, with a focus on preventing ‘the Islamisation of our country’ (Partij Voor De Vrijheid, 2023, p. 6), and advocated a ban on Islamic schools, the Quran and mosques. In addition to its strict anti-immigration stance, the party proposed harsh law-and-order policies, such as allocating funds for 10,000 additional police officers and harsher punishments for criminals. This suggests that there were very few discernible differences from previous manifestos – apart from the fact that the party no longer actively advocated a Dutch exit from the EU.

The PVV surged somewhat unexpectedly in the final weeks of the campaign. Whilst social media generally seemed to play a less central role in these elections compared to the 2021 elections, which took place in the context of COVID-19 lockdowns, traditional media played a significant role in the success of the PVV, particularly by contributing to the ‘mainstreaming’ of Wilders. For instance, in early November 2023, the public broadcaster’s children’s TV news programme featured Wilders visiting an animal shelter with young kittens. The segment, titled ‘Cuddling Kittens with Geert Wilders’, was widely shared and became the arguably most striking example of how the far-right politician was being normalised in the media. As the election drew closer, Wilders also made several appearances on entertainment and talk shows, where he leveraged his extensive experience as a debater. Four days before the election, polling data from pollster and entrepreneur Maurice de Hond indicated that the PVV was polling in first place – although no margins of error or sample sizes were provided. The evening public broadcaster news then led with the story that Wilders was set to win the election. Wilders, in turn, took to X (formerly Twitter), commenting on what he described as a ‘historically beautiful’ opening of the evening news. This media attention may have contributed to a so-called ‘bandwagon effect’, encouraging more voters to support the perceived ‘winner’.

Overall, the 2023 Dutch election campaign saw significant shifts in party strategies, particularly with the VVD’s move further to the right and its willingness to co-operate with the PVV. Wilders’ media-backed ‘milder’ image, combined with the VVD’s strategic positioning, played a key role in the PVV’s electoral success.

The campaign for the French legislative elections bore some similarities with the Dutch campaign. As in the Dutch case, the personalities of far-right leaders received strong attention, with debates focusing on their likelihood of forming a government. Coming off the back of the EU election, the campaign also displayed remarkably little

focus on what parties planned to do if elected. Instead, it was dominated by the question of whether the parties in the running, most notably the RN, but also the Left-wing coalition, could be considered 'fit' to govern.

Questions around the RN's fitness to govern have plagued the party since its early successes as Front National in the 1980s. For several decades, it was perceived by voters to be a threat for democracy (Kantar Public – EPOKA, 2022). As a far-right party, it has been placed behind a '*cordon sanitaire*' by all other actors in the French political system, who have for the most part both refused to strike up alliances with the party and formed a 'republican front' against it when it was in position to win (Mondon, 2014). Despite reaching the presidential run-off three times (with Jean-Marie Le Pen as leader in 2002, and with Marine Le Pen in 2017 and 2022), and despite having an increasingly large base of MPs, to date, the RN has never had access to the presidency or to governmental responsibilities.

Since coming to power, Marine Le Pen has sought to turn things around and get her party to be considered fit to govern via a conscious strategy of '*dédiabolisation*' (de-demonisation). De-demonisation entails abandoning some radical positions, expanding the political offering to include themes that do not belong to the radical right core of nativism and authoritarianism (Mudde, 2007) and projecting a more moderate political image. In the run-up to the election, she and her 'candidate prime minister', Jordan Bardella, pursued this strategy by continuing the diversification of their political offering, progressively moderating some of their positions (particularly on the economy, see, e.g., David, 2024), seeking to build rapport with businesses and signalling their openness to working with other parties by striking up a deal with Eric Ciotti.

Bardella's fresh face and polished political persona were treated as assets in this de-demonisation strategy. Personalisation, intended as a development in which politicians become the main anchor of interpretations and evaluations in the political process (Holtz-Bacha et al., 2014) through the prevailing association of the party with its lead figures' political beliefs and non-political, that is, personal, traits (Adam and Maier, 2010), has been a trademark of the RN since its origins. The 2024 legislative election saw Bardella's personality and background take centre stage, complementing the existing focus on Marine Le Pen. Together, as Le Pen put it, they would cater to the needs to the French people, by 'working as an executive couple to fulfil at best the duties invested in them by the French people' (Skujins, 2024). With his slick, composed and, at the same time, ordinary aesthetics and with the aid of a sharp use of social media campaigning, Bardella became a TikTok superstar exerting particular influence on the youth (Caulcutt, 2024). Mainstream media contributed to this narrative, dedicating their reporting to Bardella's online success (Bordenet et al., 2024; Clairouin, 2024). Le Pen herself has reportedly seen Bardella as a godsend for her mainstreaming purposes (Caulcutt, 2024).

The success of this strategy of de-demonisation, both long term and short term, is reflected in the fact that for the first time, in the legislative election campaign, the prospective of a RN government was being discussed as a realistic probability rather than as a far-fetched future scenario. Debates concerned not just what the RN would do but also how cohabitation with Emmanuel Macron would work.

However, it is worth noting that de-demonisation remained only a partial strategy and the RN maintained many of its radical positions. Programmatically, as was the case with

the PVV in the Netherlands, the party programme remained broadly in line with a typical nativist far-right agenda. Although the RN continued extending the reach of its programme into economic areas (Mazzoleni and Ivaldi, 2022; Vasilopoulou and Halikiopoulou, 2024) and moderated some of its Euroscepticism (Lorimer, 2024), the hard core of its anti-immigrant ideology did not peter out, with the protection of borders, the reintroduction of the crime of irregular immigration, the clamping down on regular and irregular immigration, including the expulsion of immigrant criminals, being key pledges (Rassemblement National, 2024). The RN's electoral campaign was also infused with anti-establishment messages and gravitated around rampant disaffection with the status quo. Notably, the RN suggested that should there be a hung parliament, Macron would have to consider resigning (Dély, 2024) – even though there is no requirement in the French Constitution for such a step to be taken. During the campaign, the party also came under fire for some of its more extreme behaviours, including discussing a proposal to ban dual nationals from holding 'sensitive' jobs (Lesueur, 2024), selecting candidates holding extremist views (Sénécat et al., 2024) and for its previous EU alliance with the German Alternative für Deutschland, who had recently been caught in a scandal because of the pro-Nazi claims of one of its leaders (Parker and Vock, 2024).

Whilst much of the campaign focused on the RN and its fitness to govern, it is worth noting that a parallel conversation was happening for the Left. Left-wing parties in France, as noted earlier, had successfully formed a pre-electoral coalition. The inclusion of La France Insoumise in the coalition, however, prompted outrage amongst the centre and the right. Macron and his allies, but also LR and the RN, consistently labelled it 'extremist', suggesting its presence in the left-wing coalition discredited the Nouveau Front Populaire as a whole.

III. Far-Right Wins, Mainstream Losses, New Challengers and Unexpected Comebacks: The Results of the French and Dutch Elections

Both the Dutch and the French elections returned strengthened far-right parties and weakened mainstream forces. However, they also saw the emergence of new actors and the return of previously declining forces. In both cases, the results were but the prelude to difficult periods of government formation. The results of the elections are shown in Tables 1 and 2.

In the Dutch case, Geert Wilders' PVV emerged as the largest party, securing a remarkable 37 out of 150 parliamentary seats by winning nearly a quarter of the vote. This result can undoubtedly be viewed as a landslide victory, especially in the context of the highly fragmented Dutch political landscape (Otjes and de Jonge, 2024). In second place was the joint list of the GreenLeft and Labour parties, which had been intensifying their collaboration in recent years, partly to offer a counterbalance to the rise of right-wing parties. Together, they secured almost 16% of the vote, a modest increase of just 5% from their combined results in previous elections, indicating that the joint campaign underperformed. Overall, parties associated with the left suffered significant losses, shrinking to just a third of the seats in parliament. Meanwhile, the VVD, which had long been the dominant party in Dutch politics, finished third with 15% of the vote, having lost a significant portion of its electorate to the PVV.

Table 1: Parliamentary Election Results in the Netherlands.

Party/movement/electoral coalition	% of vote	Change since 2022	Seats
Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV)	23.5	+12.7	37
GroenLinks (GL) /Partij van de Arbeid (PvdA)*	15.8	+4.9	25
Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie (VVD)	15.2	−6.7	24
Nieuw Sociaal Contract (NSC)	12.8	+12.8	20
Democraten 66 (D66)	6.3	−8.7	9
BoerBurgerBeweging (BBB)	4.6	+3.6	7
Christen-Democratisch Appèl (CDA)	3.3	−6.2	5
Socialistische Partij (SP)	3.1	−2.9	5
DENK	2.4	+0.4	3
Partij voor de Dieren (PvdD)	2.3	−1.5	3
Forum voor Democratie (FVD)	2.2	−2.8	3
Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij (SGP)	2.1	0	3
ChristenUnie (CU)	2.0	−1.4	3
Volt	1.7	−0.7	2
Juiste Antwoord 21 (JA21)	0.7	−1.7	1
Others	1.8	n/a	0

Source: Dutch Electoral Council, www.verkiezingsuitslagen.nl. Notes: Turnout: 77.7%. *Ran with a joint list.

Table 2: Parliamentary Election Results in France.

Party/ movement/ electoral coalition	First round			Second round			Seats total
	% of vote	Change since 2022	Seats won in first round	% of vote	Change since 2022	Seats won in second round	
NUPES/NFP	28.1	+2.4	32	25.68	−5.9 (−)	146	178
Ensemble	20.0	−5.7	2	23.14	−15.4 (−)	148	150
Les Républicains	6.6	−3.8	1	5.41	−1. (−)	38	39
Rassemblement National	29.3	+10.6	37	32.05	+14.7	88	125
A droite!	4.0	*	1	5	*	16	17
Others	12.2		3	8.74		65	68
							577

Source: Ministère de l'Intérieur, <https://www.archives-resultats-elections.interieur.gouv.fr/>. Notes: Turnout: 66.71% (first round); 66.63% (second round). *The 2022 equivalent of the NFP was called Nupes (Nouvelle Union populaire écologique et sociale).

The election also saw the rise of newcomer parties. Founded just 2 months before the elections by former CDA MP Pieter Omtzigt, *Nieuw Sociaal Contract* (NSC – New Social Contract) won 20 seats, making it the second-best result for a Dutch newcomer since the introduction of universal suffrage. Meanwhile, the agrarian-populist BBB, which had won a landslide victory in the provincial elections earlier that year, secured just under 5% of the vote, translating into seven parliamentary seats.

The PVV's success at the ballot box, coupled with the fragmented political landscape, paved the way for a difficult government formation period. Just prior to the 2023 election,

the Dutch Parliament had adopted a motion revising the formation process, notably by establishing new rules regarding the appointment of a scout by the outgoing Speaker of the lower house before the new house was installed (Otjes and de Jonge, 2024). According to these new guidelines, the largest party would have the right to propose a candidate; however, the candidate had to be someone with sufficient distance from daily politics and broad support amongst party leaders.

As a memberless and highly centralised party, the PVV's lack of organisational depth became apparent during the formation period. Wilders initially nominated one of the party's senators, Gert van Strien, but he resigned the following day amid news of his involvement in an embezzlement scandal. Wilders was then forced to rely on experienced figures with affiliations to other parties, such as the PvdA and CDA. Ronald Plasterk, a former Labour minister and columnist for the right-wing newspaper *De Telegraaf*, was appointed to succeed Van Strien, and ultimately proposed a four-party coalition consisting of the PVV, VVD, NSC and BBB.

Together, these four parties held 88 out of 150 seats. However, a major obstacle arose from Omtzigt's explicit opposition to co-operation with the PVV before the election, arguing that many of its anti-Islam proposals were unconstitutional and violated the rule of law. In response to these concerns, coalition talks focused extensively on ensuring alignment with the Constitution, protecting civil rights, and upholding the rule of law. Ultimately, this deal amongst the four parties paved the way for the most right-leaning government in the post-war history of the Netherlands to be formed.

Beside discussions on the content of the coalition agreement, there was substantial debate regarding the nature of the cabinet. The VVD had already signalled its preference to serve as a supporting party in a minority government, whilst the NSC had expressed interest in a technocratic or extra-parliamentary government, aimed at creating a more distant relationship between parliament and the cabinet. In such a configuration, ministers with some distance from daily politics would be appointed and tasked with drafting a government program. The government that eventually materialised was led by Dick Schoof – a former top civil servant with no party affiliation – and was indeed conceived of as an 'extra-parliamentary cabinet' in the sense that none of the four coalition party leaders held formal cabinet positions. Instead, they remained in parliament, while also being active behind the scenes to guide policy and strategy. This structure suited the PVV, allowing Wilders to exert influence on the government whilst still maintaining the ability to criticise it, effectively having one foot in and one foot out.

Like the Dutch elections, the French elections resulted in a stronger far right, however, a much-anticipated RN government did not materialise, in no small part thanks to a strong anti-RN mobilisation both at the party and at the voter level. The elections displayed a remarkable increase in turnout compared to the previous elections. In the first round, it stood at 66.71%, the highest recorded level since 1997 and nearly 20% higher than in 2022. Second round turnout was similar, standing at 66.63%.

In the first round, the RN won just over 28% of the vote – its best result in national elections to date. Its alliance with Ciotti scored 33.2% overall. The left-wing electoral alliance came in close second position with 28.06% of the vote, whilst Ensemble secured just 20.04% of the vote. Les Républicains made it to 6.57%. In the first round, the RN-Ciotti coalition secured 38 seats, the left 32 and Ensemble two. Smaller parties secured a handful of victories in the first round, leaving 501 seats to be contested in the second round.

The RN's positive result prompted the re-establishment of the republican front. Leaders of the left and, more reluctantly, Ensemble leaders, called for their candidates to withdraw from contests in which they had come in third behind an RN candidate, so as to avoid splitting the anti-RN vote. Whereas nearly all left-wing candidates withdrew, several Ensemble candidates refused to do so, particularly when the face-off involved members of LFI.

The republican rally worked, leading to an unexpected victory for the Left but no clear governing majority. The NFP secured a total of 178 seats, with the PS performing significantly better than in 2022 and LFI losing some ground but still holding on (Ministère de l'Intérieur, 2024b). However, this was far from the required majority of at least 289 seats. Ensemble secured a total of 150 seats, significantly fewer than in 2022, when it had managed to get 245 seats (Ministère de l'Intérieur, 2024b). The RN ended up in a disappointing third place with 125 MPs plus a further 18 coming from Ciotti. Although this was up from 89 in the previous legislature, it was a disappointing result given the pre-electoral expectations. Les Républicains, on their part, secured 39 seats – not enough to form a government, but enough to be important for potential government formation (Ministère de l'Intérieur, 2024b).

If clarification and governability were what Macron was after when he called an election, he failed on both counts. Like in 2022, the election delivered a hung parliament with no workable majority and even forming a minority government would prove hard to achieve. Even though the Left came out on top, other parties' reluctance to govern with it, or even let it govern as a minority, led to Macron refusing to grant them the opportunity to form a government. Instead, he appointed former Brexit negotiator and long-standing member of Les Républicains Michel Barnier as PM.

Barnier managed to create a short-lived minority government with Ensemble and LR. The government was propped up by the RN's quiet assent, as the party refrained from voting an immediate censure motion in exchange for a say in the government's policies. This deal came to an end when the government proposed its social security budget and declared it would use article 49.3 to pass it. On that occasion, the RN decided to vote in favour of the no confidence motion put forwards by the left, leading to the collapse of the government and the replacement of Michel Barnier with centrist leader François Bayrou.

Conclusion

At first glance, the Netherlands and France would seem to be unlikely countries to compare. Their significantly differing electoral and political systems would be expected to lead them in different directions. However, on this occasion, their snap elections displayed important similarities and seemed to steer them down a similar path. The comparison of these cases highlights striking parallels in ongoing government instability alongside the continued rise and mainstreaming of the far right.

Starting with governmental instability, both Dutch and French elections resulted in increased, rather than reduced, political uncertainty. In the Netherlands, coalition formation took several months, and the resulting four-party structure remained fragile due to deep-seated divergences between the parties, the inexperience of the cabinet members and the unpredictability of the PVV. Within just the first 6 months, the cabinet faced

three major crises that threatened its survival, thereby reflecting the coalition's inherent fragility. The first crisis occurred in late August 2024 due to disagreements over the budget. The second concerned a controversial plan to implement emergency measures aimed at limiting the inflow of asylum seekers. The third major crisis unfolded in November, following violent clashes after a football match between Ajax Amsterdam and Maccabi Tel Aviv, which sparked a national debate about the integration of (primarily) Muslim youth. The government eventually collapsed in June 2025, less than 1 year after its formation, when Geert Wilders withdrew support over failed efforts to further restrict migration policies.

In France, the Barnier government put in place by Emmanuel Macron in September fell after 3 months. In a country with no political tradition of compromise, Barnier was effectively hostage of the RN, having failed to secure the support of the Left and depending, therefore, on the RN's quiet assent to pass any measures. This approach was criticised, as it effectively made the RN kingmaker for the government and left the Left, who had won the greatest share in the election, with no voice. Ultimately, the deal proved fragile, and Barnier had to admit defeat once the *Rassemblement National* decided to pull its support. Barnier's successor, François Bayrou, appears to have learned at least a partial lesson from this and, in negotiating a new budget, relied more strongly on the PS – much to the dismay of the left-wing coalition. Bayrou has so far been able to pass a budget but will, going forwards, face many of the same challenges faced by Barnier. The composition of the parliament has remained unchanged and will continue to do so until new elections take place. Given the growing consolidation of the tripartite division of the French electorate (Durovic, 2023; Gougou, 2025), it is likely that any future election will deliver a similarly divided parliament. However, depending on electoral timing, Marine Le Pen may not be a member of it. In March 2025, she was found guilty of embezzling EU parliamentary funds and banned from public office for 5 years with immediate effect. Le Pen has appealed the decision but will not be able to run unless the sentence is overturned.

As far as the mainstreaming of the far right in the two cases observed is concerned, both the French and Dutch cases highlight the extent to which far-right ideas and parties have become not just successful but normalised. While the final election outcomes may initially appear to differ – with a far-right landslide victory for the PVV in the 2023 Dutch general elections and an electoral defeat of the RN in the 2024 French legislative elections – the more significant takeaway is the increasing influence and dominance of far-right ideas in both countries. Furthermore, in both cases, the prospect of a far-right government ceased to be a distant and undesirable possibility; rather, it became a likely outcome – and in the Dutch case, a political reality.

It is important to note that this mainstreaming process is driven by a dual dynamic: the (partial) moderation of far-right ideology, style and strategies, alongside the normalisation of the far right by mainstream political actors (Brown et al., 2021). Our comparison presents a clear picture of the pragmatic moderation of the PVV and the RN. Whether this is cosmetic or substantive goes beyond the scope of this article. In any case, moderation took on different context-specific features, thus reflecting the 'situational' character of mainstreaming (Crulli and Albertazzi, 2024). In France, the RN studiously carried on with its historical de-demonisation, evident in both its ideas and in the choice of Bardella as its frontman. The Netherlands followed a similar trajectory of strategic moderation, through

a softening of the public image of Wilders to the point of gaining him the title of ‘Milders’, and the toning down of some of the PVV’s more radical stances. At the same time, mainstream parties continued copying some of their more radical ideas and even opened up to the possibility of working with them, further contributing to their normalisation. This was particularly evident in the Netherlands, where the VVD played an important role in giving salience to the PVV’s preferred themes and legitimising the idea of a government with it. France showed a different dynamic, as other parties successfully managed to ‘re-demonise’ the RN during the campaign. Normalisation, in essence, is a gradual process that involves the legitimisation and acceptance of ideas that were once considered deviant or extreme. This process is, to a large extent, facilitated and driven by the media and mainstream political elites.

Although both parties have become more normalised, they have not, as noted above, been normalised equally. In the Dutch case, the process of normalisation advanced further. The PVV was not held back by a *cordon sanitaire* and became part of the government. This is a clear sign of the party being perceived as a ‘normal’ and legitimate partner (Moffitt, 2021; Seddone and Zulianello, 2023). Although participation in government could have led to moderation, as being in government may have a moderating effect on the far right because it demands that it faces up to its responsibilities and work closely with its coalition partners, that was clearly not the case with the PVV. After the party’s entry into the government, racist conspiracy theories were openly discussed in parliament, exemplifying the risk of a normalised far right. After all, the impact of such ideas is far more pronounced when they are spread from the centre of power rather than from the fringes.

In the French case, the French *cordon sanitaire* held, and through the historically rooted republican front and strong mobilisation, the RN was kept out of government. The survival of a persistent, albeit weakening, *cordon sanitaire* suggests that the party has not achieved full normalisation (yet). However, the role it played in propping up the Barnier government suggests that relying on it for government is no longer unthinkable. If a first step in this direction had already been taken with Macron’s immigration law, Barnier’s accommodation of RN requests and his openness to ‘hearing them out’ represented a more open attempt to include the RN in shouldering the responsibilities of a governing party.

This raises the important question as to whether the trend towards a growing inclusion of the far right in government can be reversed, and if so, how it might be done. Whilst there is no silver bullet to counter the far right, one key takeaway for mainstream parties in both countries is the need to shift the political agenda away from issues where the far right holds dominance, such as immigration and security. By refocusing on other pressing concerns – including economic inequality, climate change, the cost of living and infrastructure – mainstream parties can provide voters with viable alternatives and reclaim space for pressing political debates.

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