

# France in Political Turmoil: An Inquiry into the Uncertainty of the Liberal Order in Europe

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**Abstract:** *Over the past decade, Europe's political landscape has undergone significant changes, with populist parties rapidly rising across EU member states, challenging the core values of EU liberalism. This paper uses France as a case study to explore the challenges facing the European liberal order, particularly how the rise of right-wing forces in France, amidst migration, economic crises, and social fragmentation, has shaken the foundations of liberalism. By analyzing social conflicts, police-civilian tensions, and divisions among the elite within France, this paper reveals the slowing process of European integration and the gradual decline of liberalism on the political stage.*

**Keywords:** *French political crisis, populism, liberal order, nationalism, European integration*

## 1. Introduction

As the birthplace of modern liberal politics, Europe has long maintained the core values of freedom, democracy, and market economy through the framework of the European Union. However, over the past decade, with the intensification of economic crises, waves of immigration, and social conflicts, populism and right-wing forces have rapidly risen in several EU member states, severely destabilizing this liberal order. France, as one of the core countries of the EU, has long upheld liberalism, but in recent years, internal social divisions and heated debates over immigration have fueled the growth of the far-right party "National Rally," challenging the traditional political structure. This paper aims to explore the turmoil in Europe's liberal order through the example of France and to analyze how France's political instability impacts the process of European integration.

Over the past decade, Europe has faced crises, leading to shifts in its political landscape. Populist parties have rapidly risen across EU member states, challenging the values and ideology of EU liberalism.

In June's Parliament elections, President Emmanuel Macron suffered a significant defeat and had to cooperate with the left-wing coalition to prevent the far-right National Rally from gaining power. Political instability in France will persist as no party holds a majority.

This paper uses France to explore the uncertainty of the European liberal order. As a core EU member, France has long supported liberal values, but recent crises have fueled far-right leader Marine Le Pen's rise, challenging Macron's government.

The liberal order in Europe is under threat from both supranational and domestic forces, with far-right populist coalitions emerging and internal conflicts between ethnic groups, police, and elites destabilizing France's social structure.

## 2. Intergovernmental variables that challenge Europe's liberal political order

There are deep contradictions in French society, with racial, police-citizen, and elite conflicts being the most acute. Integration remains a persistent issue. Many European countries, including France, have received large numbers of migrants and refugees, leading to rising ethnic tensions, particularly after the "Arab Spring."

### **2.1 The contradictions within French society have sharply exposed the divisions within the established elites**

The far right blames France's social issues on immigration, especially from Muslim-majority North Africa. Le Pen's rhetoric, calling for an end to "anarchist immigration," resonates with many. In June

2023, the fatal police shooting of a 17-year-old boy of North African descent sparked riots across France, spreading panic nationwide.

The French Constitution states that the Republic's values are universal, granting all citizens equal rights, regardless of origin, race, or religion. Linking migration and unrest violates this principle. The death of a French-born teenager of African descent exposed systemic racism within the French ideal of color equality. Anti-immigrant rhetoric from far-right parties fuels racial tensions, especially among the middle and lower classes.

Frequent riots have escalated clashes between police and civilians, making confrontations routine. Protests and repression have entered a vicious cycle. After the riot, France's National Police Union condemned young Muslims involved. Since the "Yellow Vest" movement in 2018, France has seen regular protests, with schools, city halls, and police stations attacked. Each year, France strengthens its police force through new legislation.

A July 2023 Statista study found that French police caused four times more deaths in 2021 than in 2010. The number of deaths from police actions has been rising, with a record 52 deaths in 2021. Middle-class citizens increasingly view police violence as state-sanctioned abuse, yet it persists unabated.

The French people face both a deteriorating living environment and rising costs. Following the European debt and refugee crises, living standards have dropped. The energy crisis from COVID-19 and the Russia-Ukraine conflict has worsened social tensions. Rising costs, deteriorating security, and high unemployment have angered the lower and middle classes. In December 2023, food prices were 7.20% higher than the previous year. From 1991 to 2023, food inflation averaged 2.00%, reaching 15.90% in March 2023. Overall inflation hit a record 4.9% in 2023.<sup>[1]</sup>

Unemployment in France has risen due to the global economic downturn, reaching 7.4% in the third quarter of 2023. The Bank of France predicts it will rise to 7.8% by 2025,<sup>[2]</sup> posing a significant challenge to Macron's government.

## ***2.2 The strength of National Rally continues to rise, breaking the pattern of parliament***

Compared to the US, Europe's political space is more complex, emphasizing a multi-party system. In France, political parties include the centre-right Republican Party (Républicains), supporting free markets and European integration, and the Socialist Party, which backs social democracy. La République En Marche! Macron's centrist party, promotes reform and liberalism. National Rally (RN), led by Marie Le Pen, is a far-right party focusing on nationalism and anti-immigration. The radical left party, La France Insoumise, opposes capitalism and globalization. Various small parties keep French politics dynamic.

This summer, after a crushing defeat in June's European Parliament elections, French President Macron gambled on an early election but lost his seat. Although Macron's presidency is secure until 2027, France faces greater uncertainty, and the liberal elite's dominance is at risk.

Le Pen's National Rally achieved its best result, nearly securing the largest number of seats in parliament. To stop the far right, Macron had to collaborate with the left. The left-wing coalition, New People's Front, won 188 seats, an increase of nearly 60, while Macron's centrist alliance lost 70 seats, coming second with 161 seats. National Rally and its allies finished third with 142 seats. With no party able to secure the 289 seats needed for a majority in the 577-seat parliament, France entered a period of political turmoil with a hung parliament.

After the first round, Le Pen's National Rally was on track for a parliamentary majority. To stop her, Macron joined forces with left-wing leaders, while many left-centrist candidates withdrew to prevent vote-splitting.

## **3. A supranational variable challenging Europe's liberal political order**

### ***3.1 A coalition of far-right populists, a shift to the right of European political forces***

Political polarization has become a heatedly debated topic in public and academic discourse in recent years. While definitions differ widely, one common element in most concepts is that political polarization involves opposition of two (or more) groups that might be purely ideologically divided<sup>[3]</sup> or emotionally opposed.<sup>[4]</sup> Earlier research found a general trend of convergence rather than polarization.<sup>[5]</sup> Recent studies show that the rise of extreme parties, and in particular right-wing populist parties, will lead to a

more polarized public in several European countries.<sup>[6]</sup>

It is usually believed that political conflict is inherent and necessary in democracies according to Schattschneider,<sup>[7]</sup> the challenges are expected to become more serious if conflicts consolidate, different lines of conflict overlap, and if they are associated with salient social identities. A political cleavage is defined as a politically mobilized structural conflict.<sup>[8]</sup> A social conflict only becomes relevant if it is used, supported and even amplified by certain political organizations.

Europe's far-right parties emphasize nationalism, anti-immigration, and Islamophobia, often labeled as "extreme" or "populist" by the liberal elite. Besides France's National Rally, far-right parties are gaining ground across Europe, with a noticeable shift to the right.

In Western Europe, parties like Alternative for Germany (AfD), the Netherlands' Party for Freedom (PVV), Austria's Freedom Party (FPÖ), and Belgium's Vlaams Belang promote anti-immigration, anti-Islam, and nationalist ideologies, influencing their national politics.

In southern Europe, Georgia Meloni led the far-right Fratelli d'Italia party to victory in 2022, becoming the largest party in parliament. Spain's far-right VOX party is closing the gap with left-wing parties, while Portugal's Chega became the third largest party in 2022.

In northern Europe, the Sweden Democrats and the Danish People's Party are gaining influence, while Norway's Progress Party and Finland's Finns Party are key players.

In central and eastern Europe, Hungary's Fidesz party has dominated since 2010, with Jobbik as a more radical far-right force. Poland's Law and Justice (PiS) won again, while right-wing parties like SPD in the Czech Republic and We Are Family in Slovakia are also rising.

The allocation of seats in the European Parliament is determined by elections held every five years. All EU citizens can vote, and in some countries, non-EU citizens are also eligible. Voting procedures vary across Europe.

Countries use different systems, such as proportional representation, where seats are allocated based on vote share. The total number of seats depends on each country's population, and seats are held by political parties or groups. After elections, members participate in legislative work at European Parliament headquarters in Brussels and Strasbourg, including lawmaking and budget approval. These elections allow citizens to directly engage in EU decision-making.

The far-right alliance aims to influence European policymaking, gain seats in the European Parliament, and secure key positions in EU institutions, potentially playing a major role in shaping EU law.

### ***3.2 The intervention of US forces to undermine European unity and strategic autonomy***

The United States influences French domestic politics, fearing that Macron's push for EU "strategic autonomy" could lead other NATO members to distance themselves from U.S. policy toward China. The U.S. has used unrest in France to pressure Macron's government, potentially even leading to his resignation.

Europe is defining its strategic position amid rising U.S.-China geopolitical competition, fearing a new Cold War. While Europe has aligned with the U.S. on China, many other governments reject this binary split. Macron's efforts to challenge U.S. dominance have faltered, and divisions within Europe have grown. The COVID-19 pandemic and Russia-Ukraine conflict have exposed the dangers of relying too heavily on the U.S.

Despite anti-U.S. sentiment, Europe's neoliberal principles focus on an open world and the circulation of capital, preventing full self-sufficiency. Strategic interdependence—cooperation and competition with various global partners—guides Europe's foreign policy. The EU maintains strong economic ties with China, exemplified by initiatives like the Indo-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor and the Global Gateway.

In its relations with the United States, Europe has been in a weak position. Europe relies on U.S. nuclear protection and NATO for defense, allowing it to keep military spending low. However, the EU's internal constraints and its principle of "coherence" hinder collective security actions.

The Russia-Ukraine conflict has strained this system. The U.S. is pushing the EU to assume more security responsibilities, adding pressure and weakening EU unity. Macron's push for "EU strategic

autonomy" is gaining traction, but events like the July 2023 French riots, reportedly fanned by the U.S., have damaged trust between France and the U.S.

Further, the U.S. nuclear submarine contract with Australia strained French relations, deepening mistrust between NATO and the EU. NATO's failure to achieve Ukraine's membership highlights the ongoing friction among France, Germany, the U.S., Britain, and Poland, complicating efforts to contain Russia and China through NATO's "globalization" strategy.

### ***3.3 Social media platforms have become new battlefields and changed traditional political models***

Western parties and politicians increasingly use social media to bypass traditional media, as seen in the Brexit campaign, Bernie Sanders, and Donald Trump. The French National Rally has also thrived through this strategy.

Social media and populism are symbiotic, with far-right populists dominating online spaces. Populists use social media to mobilize support, spreading messages quickly and widely, making political actions more radical and flexible. Bypassing traditional media controlled by the liberal establishment, populists reach a broader audience, forcing moderate centrist parties to lose ground. Research shows populist leaders have more social media followers than their centrist counterparts.

The National Rally has long been a pioneer in digital communications, making web-centricity a core strategy. It was the first French political party to create a website in the 1990s and has invested heavily in social media.

Before the 2017 election, Le Pen's team had built a mature network. Described as the strongest radical social media operation in French politics, they used hashtags like #lepionMacron to attract attention beyond far-right supporters. Le Pen's team, larger and more professional than Macron's, consists of senior party officials and network operatives who skillfully blend far-right ideas into viral content.

Le Pen's investment in social media has paid off, giving her the highest engagement rate among presidential candidates and a global army of online volunteers. Their disciplined, organized efforts amplify her message effectively.

However, social media has also fueled extremist politics, playing a negative role in the French riots. Videos of burning cars and violence spread quickly, inflaming emotions and accelerating unrest. Despite Macron's call to remove sensitive content, platforms like Meta and Twitter refused, prompting the French government to shut down internet media to contain the riots.

## **4. The impact of a change in Europe's liberal order**

### ***4.1 The integration process has slowed down and the mainstream position of liberalism has declined***

Since the 1950s, European liberal ideology has risen, with the EU serving as a platform for liberal institutional theory, promoting free movement of personnel, capital, and markets. However, after the 2008-2011 financial crisis, liberal policies worsened social contradictions, eroding establishment support. France, a liberal bastion, has faced a decade of riots, struggling to maintain its liberal order, which may trigger anti-liberalism in other EU countries.

Political order refers to how power is organized and exercised in a society, influenced by its political, legal, and cultural systems. Europe's political spectrum is diverse, with factions spanning left, center, and right. The European Left includes socialism, which emphasizes social equality and public ownership, and social democracy, combining the market economy with the welfare state. The center includes liberalism, focused on individual freedom and market economy, and Christian democracy, which merges conservative values with social justice. The right includes conservatism, which supports tradition and limited government, and nationalism, emphasizing national interests and sovereignty. The far right opposes immigration, Islam, and the EU, while the far left opposes capitalism.

The Maastricht Treaty, which took effect in 1993, aimed to usher in "a new phase of European integration" and end the continent's divisions. However, the EU has struggled to fulfill its commitments to fundamental rights. From budget cuts during the euro crisis to poor refugee conditions, the EU and its members have lacked solidarity. Thirty years on, key projects face challenges: economic union is undermined by currency crises, and the Common Foreign and Security Policy has been ineffective against war and ethnic violence. The refugee crisis has further complicated EU cooperation, and Brexit

dealt a major blow to integration. While EU enlargement has been a significant achievement, the current candidates for membership, including Ukraine and Turkey, seek primarily to benefit from the EU, rather than build a stronger community.

As liberal democracy has matured in Europe, representative democracy and the electoral system will not be shaken in the short term, but the policy orientation based on liberal values will change.

#### **4.2 Change in the relationship between elites and the people**

The EU is a meritocracy, not an elected one, and its governance model is a combination of consultative democracy and technocracy. The EU has only monetary integration without fiscal integration, and economic decisions cannot be coordinated. The opposition between the EU's meritocratic governance model and populism has a long history.

To consolidate leadership, the elite made compromises, becoming more "passive," while the people became "active." Macron's government failed to ease tensions with the middle and lower classes, and the far-right exploited issues like immigration.

In late 2023, Macron passed a controversial immigration bill to counter Le Pen's rising support. The bill restricts welfare for foreigners, tightens rules for foreign students, introduces quotas, and makes it harder for children of non-French citizens to gain citizenship. It also allows dual nationals convicted of assaulting police to lose citizenship and speeds up deportations of criminal migrants. A win on immigration could weaken Le Pen ahead of the European elections, while a defeat could embolden the opposition.

Immigration has been central to French elections, with National Rally linking terrorist attacks to refugees. Since 2022, Macron's pension reforms have caused unrest. Having lost his majority, Macron faces challenges passing legislation, relying on ad hoc deals with opposition forces in the Senate. Without compromise, National Rally could capitalize on Macron's failures in the upcoming European elections.

Macron's decision, despite internal opposition, highlights the deep divisions within the liberal establishment. To consolidate his power and limit National Rally, he shifted from original liberal policies to address France's internal issues. This shift suggests the liberal approach is insufficient for a country in crisis. If Macron's government fails to resolve social contradictions and ease tensions between different groups, he may struggle to maintain re-election with only urban elite support.

### **5. Conclusion**

Liberalism once promoted upward mobility in the West, but it has now become a liability for the establishment, losing appeal, especially among middle-class voters. The debate between "supranationalism" and "intergovernmentalism" continues, both aiming to maintain the liberal political order established after WWII. While liberal institutions thrived when the EU was stable, they have failed during crises. Declining living standards, worsening security, and social distortion have led to public disillusionment, anger, and resentment toward the elite. Populist forces have capitalized on this, turning the people into tools of another political class. In crisis, Europe may need to explore a different path.

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