



POLICY COMPASS

Le Pen Barred:

Implications for France's

Political Landscape

By

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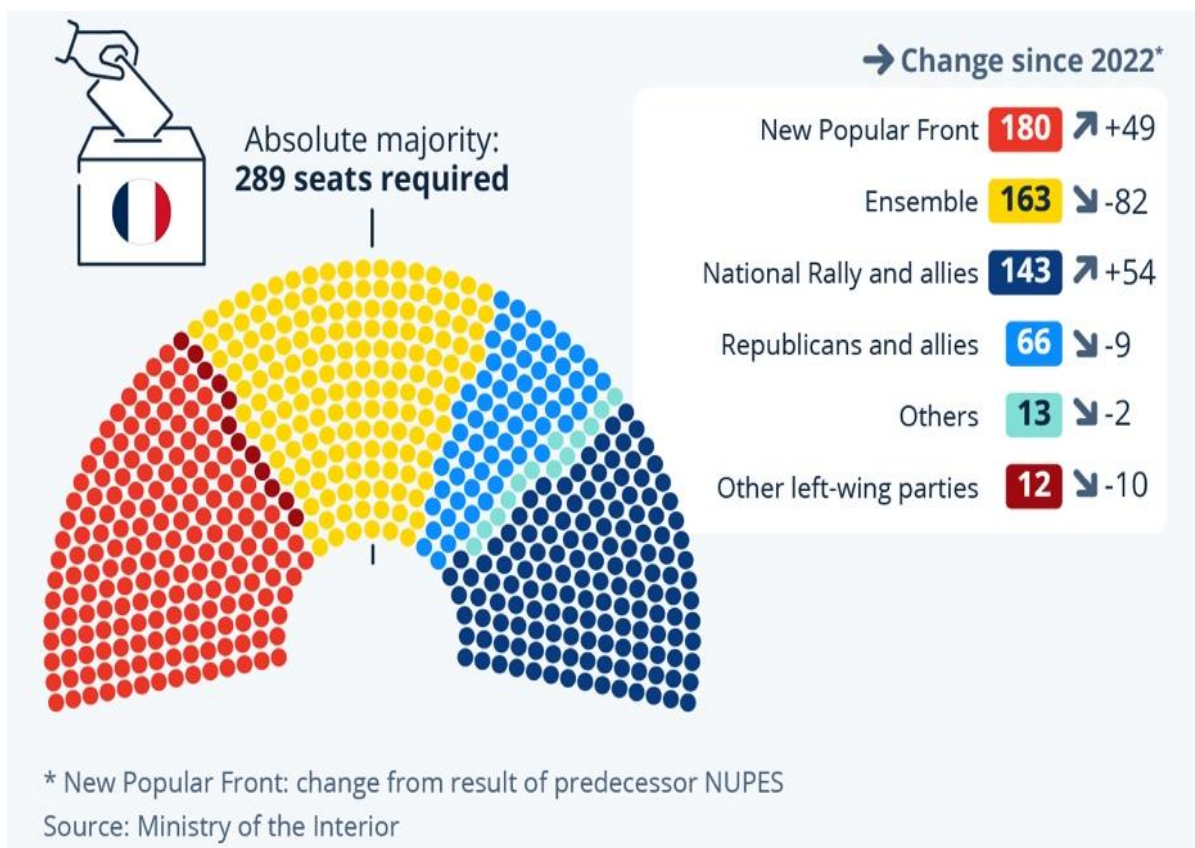
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Executive Summary

- ✦ Marine Le Pen was convicted of embezzling EU funds and received a prison sentence, fine, and a five-year ban from holding public office, likely excluding her from the 2027 presidential race.
- ✦ Le Pen has appealed the ruling, but the slow pace of the French legal system makes it unlikely that her conviction will be overturned in time.
- ✦ Her supporters have framed the verdict as a political attack, while critics view it as a sign of judicial independence.
- ✦ The ruling has shaken France's political landscape, with potential gains for rivals like Bruno Retailleau of Les Républicains.
- ✦ Jordan Bardella, Le Pen's political heir, is gaining momentum among younger voters and could become the RN's next presidential contender.
- ✦ The case has intensified debates about democracy, populism, and elite power in France and across the West.

Key Picture: Distribution of Party Seats After France's 2024 Legislative Elections



Source: [Statista](#)

1. Breaking Down the Le Pen Case

On March 31, far-right opposition leader Marine Le Pen was convicted of embezzling €474,000 from the European Union by employing four fictitious assistants in the European Parliament between 2009 and 2017. She was also found guilty of being involved in a broader embezzlement scheme totalling €1.8 million. Le Pen received a four-year prison sentence, with two years suspended and the remaining two to be served under electronic surveillance. Additionally, she was fined €100,000 and immediately barred from holding public office for five years.¹

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The prosecution highlighted the structured and deliberate nature of the embezzlement, presenting detailed evidence of an organised scheme led by Marine Le Pen. The defence argued that various types of parliamentary assistants exist and that their presence in Brussels is not always required, but the court remained unconvinced.²

Is this the end of Le Pen's bid for the presidency?

The court's decision, which reshapes France's political scene, is expected to prevent Le Pen from entering the 2027 presidential race, where she had been a leading contender. She admitted that the court's decision effectively removed her from the 2027 presidential race but pledged to continue her fight and challenge the ruling through an appeal. Le Pen criticised the judges' decision, claiming it was unfair and undermined voters' right to choose their candidates. She vowed to fight the ruling through all available legal channels.³

For Le Pen to be eligible to run in the next election, a higher court would need to overturn the ruling. However, retrials in France usually take place several months after the original decision, leaving her with limited time. There is no legal mechanism for speeding up the process, and the country's judicial system is notoriously slow-moving.⁴

At this stage, the likelihood of Le Pen running in the 2027 presidential election remains low. An appeal to the Court de Cassation could potentially be resolved within six months, which would leave her with about five or six months before the election in April 2027. However, the chances of the verdict being overturned in time are slim, and there's no assurance that the appeals court would rule differently.⁵

1.1 Verdict: The Reaction

Le Pen supporters call it a politically motivated attack, while her critics see it as proof that the justice system remains fair and independent. It's still unusual in France for well-known politicians to be convicted, which is why the case has attracted so much attention. Some believe the case is straightforward - a clear misuse of public money - and feel the judges acted fairly.⁶

However, the far right was quick to reject the court's decision. Jordan Bardella, Le Pen's young political ally, strongly criticised the sentence, framing it as an attack on democracy. Le Pen and her supporters are portraying the ruling as a deliberate and unfair move against her, suggesting it was politically motivated. This might deepen the divide between those who see the conviction as unjust and those who view it as a normal consequence of breaking the law. Consequently, analysts warn that the situation could add to political instability in France, especially if the far right manages to turn the verdict into a rallying point. There are concerns that Le Pen might be cast as a victim of the system, using the trial to strengthen her support and portray herself as being unfairly targeted.⁷

Indeed, at a recent rally, Le Pen portrayed herself as a victim, claiming her fundamental rights had been violated. She made an unusual comparison by referencing figures like Martin Luther King Jr. and Alexei Navalny - names not typically linked to her nationalist, anti-immigration, and pro-Russia stance. Le Pen argued that preventing her from running in the 2027 presidential election would undermine French democracy.⁸

Overall, the court's decision will likely have a lasting impact on French politics and fuel ongoing debates about the state of democracy in the West.

It plays into a broader narrative, pushed by figures in the US and elsewhere, that political elites have rigged the system against ordinary citizens. Populist leaders across Europe and beyond, including Viktor Orban, Matteo Salvini, Geert Wilders, and even Kremlin officials, have quickly rallied behind Le Pen, framing the ruling as proof of democratic backsliding. Donald Trump has echoed this view, using it to reinforce claims that opposition voices are being deliberately silenced.⁹

1.2 The Effect on France's Far Right

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It's still uncertain whether Le Pen's harsh sentence will boost support for her party, the National Rally (RN), or further divide the French far right, but it has stirred intense reactions among the country's political class. Le Pen and her allies have painted the ruling as an attack on democracy, claiming that France's institutions have been destroyed or corrupted, and accusing the justice system of acting as a political weapon. Many on the right continue to view her as the most popular politician in the country - someone who was on a clear path to the presidency before being unjustly stopped. In the aftermath, France is now beginning to grapple with the fallout and a growing, though uneven, backlash.¹⁰

The current political climate could result in early parliamentary elections this summer, potentially allowing the National Rally (RN) to strengthen its position in parliament by leveraging its portrayal as a victim of political injustice. Such a development might even lead to a political stalemate that places pressure on President Macron, raising the possibility of his resignation. In this shifting landscape, increased attention is now turning to Jordan Bardella, Le Pen's unofficial heir and a potential presidential candidate should her legal appeal fail. At 29, Bardella has gained significant traction, particularly among younger voters, by addressing widespread discontent over declining living standards and immigration - factors that could position him as a strong contender in the 2027 election. Bardella has worked to rebrand the National Rally (RN), distancing it from its openly racist and antisemitic past. However, the party has continued to embrace a populist narrative, blaming its setbacks on unelected elites and media suppression.¹¹

Nonetheless, converting Bardella's enthusiasm into actual votes remains a challenge, especially as other experienced or high-profile figures on the right, such as Interior Minister Bruno Retailleau, begin to draw attention as potential contenders.¹² Retailleau appears well-positioned to benefit from the recent setback faced by the National Rally. A prominent 64-year-old figure within the right-wing Les Républicains, Retailleau has gained significant visibility and public support since being appointed by former Prime Minister Michel Barnier. He is currently a candidate for his party's leadership in the upcoming internal election. If successful, he may appeal to voters who share some of the National Rally's views on immigration and cultural issues but prefer a candidate without the party's controversial associations.¹³

1.3 National Rally's Challenge

The coming months are expected to be challenging for Le Pen and her supporters. By openly attacking the political establishment and stepping away from the National Rally's long-term strategy of mainstreaming its image, the party risks losing the backing of the middle class and economic elites - groups essential for winning national power. Public perception of the judiciary in France already leans toward it being too lenient, making it unlikely that many citizens will rally behind politicians accused of misusing public funds for political gain. A poll conducted on March 31 showed that 57% of the public viewed Le Pen's conviction as justified, with 68% supporting the immediate enforcement of her disqualification. These numbers may increase as public frustration with the controversy continues to grow.¹⁴

This development may prove to be the decisive setback that ends Le Pen's political career. Even if it does not, her momentum has been disrupted. Until recently, she was enjoying strong polling numbers, with forecasts suggesting a likely victory in the first round of the 2027 presidential election and a competitive showing in the second.

With a substantial bloc of loyal lawmakers in the National Assembly and her political positions gaining broader acceptance within French society, Le Pen had appeared closer than ever to overcoming the longstanding barriers that have prevented her from attaining power.¹⁵ As of now, her future appears way less certain.

NOTES

¹ Mujtaba Rahman, “Le Pen is down but not out”, Politico, accessed 15 April 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/france-marine-le-pen-down-not-out-election/>.

² Charlotte Schmitt-Leonardy, “Dictatorship of the Court vs. Will of the People?”, Verfassungsblog on Matters Constitutional, accessed 13 April 2025, <https://verfassungsblog.de/marine-len-pen-verdict/>.

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⁵ Charlotte Schmitt-Leonardy, “Dictatorship of the Court vs. Will of the People?”, Verfassungsblog on Matters Constitutional.

⁶ Sophie Stuber, “Le Pen’s conviction in France: Career-ending or fuel for a new far right?”, Al Jazeera, accessed 13 April 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/4/1/le-pens-conviction-in-france-career-ending-or-fuel-for-a-new-far-right>.

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⁸ Mujtaba Rahman, “Le Pen is down but not out”, Politico.

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¹⁰ Andrew Harding, “Marine Le Pen’s ban outraged France’s far right - they may well take revenge”, BBC, accessed 15 April 2025, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cx27lg8vp41o>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Clea Caulcutt, “Marine Le Pen verdict: The winners and losers”, Politico, accessed 14 April 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/marine-le-pen-jordan-bardella-emmanuel-macron-france-guilty-verdict/>.

¹⁴ Laurent Geslin, “The Brief – Pundits are wrong: Le Pen’s conviction is a disaster for the French far right”, Euractiv, accessed 15 April 2025, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/opinion/the-brief-pundits-have-it-wrong-le-pens-conviction-is-a-disaster-for-the-french-far-right/>.

¹⁵ Clea Caulcutt, “Marine Le Pen verdict: The winners and losers”, Politico.