

Transcript - The Rise of the French Far Right

Emmanuel Kattan [00:00:05] This is Vis-A-Vis, a podcast series brought to you by the Alliance program at Columbia University. Vis-a-vis features conversations that challenge our understanding of key global, economic and social issues by casting them in a transatlantic perspective. I'm Emmanuel Catan. I head the Alliance Program, a partnership between Columbia University and three French universities, Sciences Po, Paris-Un Panthéon Sorbonne and École Polytechnique. Every episode, I sit down face to face with, or as we say in French, vis-à-vis some of the most insightful thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic. I hope you enjoy our conversation. In June 2024, the French far-right party, the National Rally, came in first at the European elections, way ahead of the party of President Macron. This sent shockwaves in the French political world, and Emmanuel Macron decided to dissolve the National Assembly and call for early legislative elections. On June 30th, the National rally won 33% of the vote nationally, the best score ever for a far- right party in France. What process led to such a success? How deep rooted is the support of the far right in France? Did the national rally really manage to win the hearts and minds of a large part of the French population? And what can we expect next? Is the future win of the Far Right a foregone conclusion? In order to help us understand the current shifts in France's political landscape and what they mean for the future, Vis-à-vis is honored to welcome École Polytechnique professor Étienne Olyon, whose latest book, *A Strange Victory*, co-authored with Michael Fosseil, explores the causes behind the recent electoral upsurge of the far right in France. Étienne Olyon is a professor of sociology at École Polytechnique and a researcher at CNRS. Specializing in politics, his work investigates the texture of power in modern societies. He uses qualitative and quantitative methods alike, and is an enthusiastic promoter of computational social sciences. Professor Lyon is the author of several books including *Candidates, Amateurs and Professionals in French Politics* published by Oxford University Press in 2024. He held visiting professor positions at ENS Paris, UC Berkeley, and the University of Chicago. This spring, he is a visiting professor at Columbia University as part of the Alliance program. Etienne Oluyon, welcome to Vis-A-Vie. Hi, Emmanuel, thanks for having me. The latest success in the polls by the national rally resulted in a feeling of astonishment. In French, we say *s'idération* that spread throughout French society. Your book, *Strange Victory*, uses this as the kind of defining moment, the starting point of your investigation. What happened on June 30th, 2024, and how did we get there?

Etienne Ollion [00:03:13] Yeah, good question. So you're right to say that June 2024 is important and that if we want to understand what happened, we need to go back in time. So first we need go back a few weeks on June 9th. And as you said, this was election day and all across Europe people voted to elect the representatives for the parliament. And France did too, and an unprecedented number of them, effectively a third, voted for the national rally. So to the observers of the French political life, this was certainly not a surprise. For one thing, the party had been pulling high for months, hovering around 30% since the start of the campaign. And likewise, Marine Le Pen's party clearly had some win in her sale. In 2022, she had once again reached the second round of the presidential election after her first qualification in 2017. And in the following legislative election in 2022, her party gathered 89 MPs, making the national rally not the main party, but a central actor. So for them, this was a resounding success. They went

from eight to 89 MP's. And beyond numbers, this also a game changer for this long marginal party. With such numbers, it was not only able to officially establish a political group in parliament, giving it access to plenty of resources. It was also able to weigh in on the debates in the chamber. And this is all the more so true that the chamber wasn't stable. No coalition was big enough to rule with three blocks in place, Macron's majority with 246, the left block with 136, and then the far right. So this result was a hung parliament, which in France is a novelty, and which Macron found deeply frustrating. That's the background. And so on June 9th the national rally won the European election. And a few minutes after the results came in, Macron went on TV and he called for a snap election. And this came as a shock to many, including in his own party. Sure, they didn't like the political configuration, the hung parliament, but they also knew that this was not the right moment for them. They were polling pretty low after a series of tough-to-swallow reforms. And they knew a snap-election would be hard to win and the far right would be very high. And they were right, but I'm probably getting ahead of myself to just say that what Macron did on June 9th was a shock, because it meant that the far right was, for the first time since World War II, in a position to access power.

Emmanuel Kattan [00:05:48] That's great, and this explains the immediate aftermath of the election. Your book really is a long view investigation into the past as well, and the title of your book, *A Strange Victory, the Far Right Against Politics*, refers actually to French historian Marc Bloch's book *A Strange Defeat*, which was written in 1940, just after the French defeat against the Germans. And in this book he charts the deep-rooted reasons that explain France's capitulation. Why do you think that the success of today's national rally is strange? And in what way does it defy our traditional understanding of how politics works?

Etienne Ollion [00:06:36] Thanks for bringing up Marc Bloch's name, because he was indeed instrumental in our reflection as we were thinking and conceiving this book. Because as you certainly know, Bloch is a famous historian who was murdered by the Gestapo for being in the resistance in 1944. But Bloch also wrote several books, one of them, which is now entitled *A Strange Defeat*. He wrote in the summer of 1940, right after France was defeated by the D... You know, German army in the lightning-fast war that took place in May. And the question Bloch asks in this short but very incisive book is, how did that happen? And his book offers an insightful analysis of the reasons of French defeat, which all hinge on one aspect, surprise. French people did not see this coming because they had been oblivious to a set of factors that had led to the defeat. He named several, the lack of preparation of the army. Of course, this is famous, but also the way the political and mediatic debate is organized, or again, the organization of social and labor relations. And this is what we were considering when we started our project, because the book, in fact, had been in the making long before 2024 and Macron's snap election. For years, my co-author and I had been thinking about how the far right was gaining ground in France. And it turns out that we thought surprise was a key element. Not so much that the far right could win, the vote in its favor kept rising, but the surprise lied in the way history was happening. It was strange. How so? Well, the national rally did not look like the far-right of yesterday. It certainly did not look like the party of a yesteryear, at least on surface. Just consider the platform. Today's national rally, voted in 2023 to constitutionalize abortion. Marine Le Pen herself did it, and she made sure everyone knew about it. So this is quite a change for a

party that had been a home for some of the most notorious pro-life advocates over the last five decades. Or consider foreign policies. In 2017, again, the national rally was still advocating strongly in favor of leaving the European Union, of doing a sort of... French Brexit, you know, Frexit, if you will, not anymore. In 2024, they defended the European Union, at least some sort of European Union. And the same thing is true for policies such as dual citizenship, which they wanted to get rid of as part of their big and all-encompassing immigration reform, and now they endorse it. So I couldn't multiply examples, but there was clearly a discrepancy between what the party stood for ideologically. Before recently and what they advocated publicly and this was blurring our reading of who they were, who they are. It sort of ratified a narrative that said that they had changed, that they were not what they used to be. And is it the case? Well, at bottom no, but there was a form of strangeness in seeing them advocating for the exact opposite of what they had been long standing. And in this book, we make the case for that the blurring of a political identity was essential to their increasing appeal. It was, for instance, instrumental in removing the stigma of the old party, which, let us remember, was founded by neo-Nazis for some of them. But this mainstreaming did not happen in a vacuum, and the rise of the national rally in the Pol and in the ballot was also helped by the changing coordinates of the French political landscape.

Emmanuel Kattan [00:10:16] Right, I mean, and of course, in your book, you also say that President Macron, when he was first elected in 2017, attempted to redefine the political landscape in France by offering a platform that was neither on the right, neither on left. And the result was, as you say, this blurring of lines and a deconstructing of the traditional left-right opposition. How precisely did this repositioning benefit the far right, in France in particular?

Etienne Ollion [00:10:50] That's right. So in 2017, you remember maybe that when Emmanuel Macron rose to prominence and that he became the likely and then the official candidate for his party in the presidential election, he ran on a centrist platform. At that time, clearly not to the left, but not yet clearly to the right. But he did more than that. He also called for us to transcend the classic left-right divide, the same one that had presided in French politics for decades. In fact, it had presided over France for at least centuries. You certainly know that the left-right divide was invented in France in 1789, when parliamentarians sat either to the left or to the right of a king during the revolutionary period to show support or not for some measures. And then it disseminated globally. I mean, in fact, it's probably one of our biggest experts, you know, one that you cannot even tax. Right. And since then, you know, with ups and downs, the left-right divide had been an organizing element of our political life. So when Macron tried, but also partially succeeded in blurring this defining line, he not only did manage to carve out a space for him and for his platform, which he needed to do, he also recused what had been structuring principles for politicians and voters alike. Elementary coordinates with which they all, we all, make sense of politics. And so this blurring of a political landscape helped the National Rally to claim that it was not a far right party, because when there is no left and no right, there is not far right, this is what was at stake.

Emmanuel Kattan [00:12:31] And what's interesting is that, you know, you go against popular wisdom as well in your book where, you know, the far right is usually understood as successful

only if it wins the culture war. In other words, that they need to win the hearts and minds of people on core issues that they defend like immigration, security, economic, nationalism, family values in order to win in the polls. But you show in your book that this is not the case in France. While the national rally stuck to their guns on some issues, like migration and security, on many others, far from imposing their own ideological positions, they are the ones that moved across the aisle, as it were, and moved closer to mainstream opinion. Can you give examples or an example of this shift? And how do you explain it?

Etienne Ollion [00:13:28] Yeah, you're right, this is indeed a classic argument, one that you hear from political parties across the board, but also from diverse commentators. And it sort of hinges on a certain reading of Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci, which, if you want to put it in a sentence, would say that political success comes almost as a consequence of ideological success, that it is preceded by a cultural transformation. And this theory Which is not exactly what Gramsci said, but this theory is often mobilized to explain the success of the far right in France and elsewhere. And the argument is that the far-right is winning because they managed, over time, to impose their ideas in the public sphere. And there is, of course, as you said, some truth to this. For instance, they managed to impose immigration on the agenda, or insecurity, or even more, the connection between the two. But on the rest, it is not so true. Take what we call the sort of cultural values, abortion, gay marriage, surrogate mother, but also death penalty. On none of these aspects has the far right imposed its view, quite the opposite. In fact, the far-right has not so much won the hearts and minds of French people than it has itself changed its discourse and its position. And so you cannot say that cultural hegemony did it. The battles happened in another realm.

Emmanuel Kattan [00:14:55] And your book also charts the history of how little by little the French rally gained ground with mainstream French opinion. You call this process de-demonization, and you describe the role that the media in particular played in this process, in this transformation. How did media reporting shifting away from discussing core policy issues to focusing more on internal... Battles within the party, what you call backstage politics or *politique de coulisses*. How did this contribute to normalizing the French far-right?

Etienne Ollion [00:15:35] So once again, following historian Mark Block, we tried to look beyond classic places to account for the rise of the far right. And in this extended analysis, the media is of course an obvious place to consider. So we did investigate the transformation of the media ecosystem and the clear shift to the right of some outlets or channels. But we also looked at the mainstream media and we argue that they also played a role in the normalization of the Far Right. Not so much because it relayed its ideas, although this should be looked into in closer details, but for some other, apparently less important, almost minute aspects. And one of the aspects we look at, for instance, is how journalists cover politics. So on surface, it seems that politicians change, but journalism doesn't. And in fact, what we show is that on many counts, journalism and the reporting of politics has changed. For instance, the way of talking about politics in the media, the way journalists talk about politics has drastically evolved. Journalists talk more about struggle, internecine battles, and less about content or about impact. Let me just give you an example, one that regards the use of sources. French political

journalists use a lot of unattributed quote, a lot. By unattributed, I mean, you know, the citations whose author is not mentioned by name, they will, for instance, write, you know, according to a source close to power, or an anonymous source says that, blah, blah. We quantified this on several French newspapers using AI, and we showed that these types of sourcing increased fivefold over the last two decades in the mainstream media. And so it's quite obvious that journalists use those more, much more. And so why would you use anonymous source, except if you want to retell what happens behind closed door, you know, to help us see what happens backstage. Hence what you were telling, you know, about backstage reporting to help us describing power struggle between groups and individual. And this is all good, but as you are doing this, as you're writing about backstage politics, you're talking about a certain type of politics. As you cover internecine struggles, you do not talk about the discourse of the party or its historical consistency, you don't assess the consequences of a measure suggested by a candidate. And so, an argument we make is that, among other things, this new mode of political narration certainly played a role. The reasons, you know, are several, but one of them is that if you apply this coverage to the far right. It makes the far right look just like any other party with its internal science struggle, and you're not talking about ideological evolutions or shifts.

Emmanuel Kattan [00:18:28] And to this point, your book, *A Strange Victory*, highlights some of the moral battles being fought in French society, not so much at the level of big ideas, like what is the common good, but rather at the levels of emotions, feelings of humiliation and resentment or threaten national pride. One example of such infra-political battles, as you call them, is... Nationalism. This is a term that you coin. I'm surprised by this term actually because usually wokeism is associated with left of course. What do you mean by woke nationalism?

Etienne Ollion [00:19:07] Yes, so one of the big claims of the book is that the battles are not waged and in fact not won on the ideological ground, you know, as I said before, what has sometimes also been called meta-political by some authors hailing from the far right, in fact. Rather, most of the battles took place at a much less explicit political level that we call infra-politic. It happens at the level of the political language, of the values which become politicized. And so what you mentioned about woke nationalism is a manifestation of this. People on the right, on the far right, have been telling us for over a decade now that we have been invaded by your quote unquote woke ideology, which we defined by your hypersensitivity to discriminations. So as you know, the primary meaning of woke means being aware of all forms of discrimination, Which is red at the far right as many things, but partly as a victim-based discourse. And what is striking is that when you look at the current rhetoric of the far-right, it has changed. While its proponents used to summon a historically powerful conquering, virile, manly rhetoric, they now invoke a much more victim- based discourse. So in the book, we dissect the ways in which this language, this new language of microaggressions and discrimination is taking root to the far right and how they fight over microaggression. And this is why we speak about, you know, what is also a bit of an oxymoron, of course, woke nationalism to show that this type of language has shifted also on this side of a political exchequer.

Emmanuel Kattan [00:20:51] And this also, this change in vocabulary is in line with what many pretend, which is that the term far right itself is defunct. And you claim in your book that the

term, on the contrary, is still operational and should still be used, actually, to describe the party of Mahingalopan. Why is that the case, according to you? An end. And how would you define, actually, the far right? What counts as far right in the French context? You're right, they're very...

Etienne Ollion [00:21:25] Indeed an ongoing battle about this term far right. You know the far right itself, the far right parties, at least some of them, try hard to get rid of that label because well because it's bringing them back you know to some roots that they are that are not to their liking. But if you look at a conventional definition there is little doubt that the national rally is far right you know at least if you respect you know the sort of like conventional definitions that exist in the field. And what we say in this respect is really not very original, you know, it's what's agreed upon by social scientists, namely that the far-right is an ideological family that has a series of defining traits. They defend nationalism, they advocate for authoritarianism, they support nativism. So if you take this sort of broad definition, the National Rally is undoubtedly a far- right party. These three traits are in fact everywhere in the program. And I don't think that they would deny these traits. They would maybe deny the appellation, but not these traits, they would claim the traits. So they are, at least in this definition, a far right party. But of course, they do not want to carry the weight of this label.

Emmanuel Kattan [00:22:38] And jumping back to the present moment, we're recording this episode in April 2025. Earlier this month, a court ruling found Marine Le Pen, the president of the National Rally, guilty of helping to embezzle several million euros of EU funds for use by her party. As a result, she was banned from running for elections for five years. And based on your analysis, will this strengthen the hand of the National Rally? In the minds of their electorate, is there confirmation that the liberal left, that the political establishment is actually trying to muzzle the far right and disenfranchise the voice of those who voted for them?

Etienne Ollion [00:23:24] It's hard to know how people, in this case voters, are going to react is deeply uncertain. For now, what we see is that the party did not manage to organize a substantial popular protest despite its different attempts. So it's a bit hard to speculate as it could really go in different ways, but for now, we have no signs, not a lot of signs of that.

Emmanuel Kattan [00:23:49] I don't necessarily want you to speculate and make predictions two years ahead of time, but as we know, France will be facing its next presidential election by April 2027. After reading your book, the question one asks oneself is, is the national rally's victory inevitable, and if not, what can be done to prevent it?

Etienne Ollion [00:24:14] Yeah, so you're right, you know, it's it's clear that making predictions, you know, especially in in hot weather or in stormy weather is, you know, hard to do. It's a complex endeavor. But there is little doubt, you know, that Marine Le Pen is a serious contender. So a bit less so recently, because, as you said, you know, because of her conviction, she may be prevented from running. So, you know, in that sense, maybe she is not the absolute contender, But in terms of vote, her party is still quite ahead. So then the question is what is going to happen, you know, is the national rally going to go for Marine Le Pen or Jordan Bardella? Are they gonna go alone, which would be Marine Le pen's position, or are they gonna

try to enter into a coalition with some elements of the conventional right, which is more the line that Jordan Bardella is actually trying to promote, that we don't know and how the political field is going to react, we also do not know. In 2024, in this crazy month that went from the European election to the snap election, the right, the conventional right, actually sided mostly with the conventional parties and refused to go towards the national rally. They continued establishing this cordon sanitaire, this barrage. Is this going to happen in the future? Hard to tell, but I'm not so sure. There's a bit of appeal in trying to catch voters. The thing that is for sure is that the far right in whichever form, you know, is here to stay in France and in Europe. And so this is probably some information that we need to compute now when we think about these topics.

Emmanuel Kattan [00:25:53] Etienne Ollion, you've given us a lot of food for thought. Thank you for this very enlightening conversation.

Etienne Ollion [00:25:59] Thank you very much.

Emmanuel Kattan [00:26:03] Vis-à-vis is brought to you by the Alliance Program, a partnership between Columbia University, Paris-Union-Panthéon-Sorbonne, Sciences Po, and École Polytechnique. This podcast is produced by Rachel Kahn and Georgia O'Neill, and I'm Emmanuel Kattan. Special thanks to Esther Jackson and her colleagues at Columbia Libraries. If you like what you hear, please leave us a review on your podcast platform. If you're interested in learning more about the Alliance program, and how we support academic exchanges, research and collaboration between the US and France, please visit us at alliance.columbia.edu or follow us on Facebook and Instagram. Make sure to subscribe wherever you get your podcasts. Thanks so much for listening.