

Build Back Belief: France Update

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September 2026

RESEARCH SUMMARY

- The National Rally in France continues to be in pole position for the next Presidential election in 2027 – whether led by Le Pen or Jordan Bardella.
- While Le Pen is most known, Bardella has built up a reputation with voters as someone who broadens the National Rally's appeal and has less baggage. They see him as fresh compared to Le Pen.
- Swing voters who participated in the research were leaning towards the National Rally in the absence of a strong alternative from the centre and centre-left.
- The voters were exercised about crime and the degradation of their localities, fearing criminal gangs and disrespect on the streets. They want to see a restoration of order, and their politicians focussed on a strong France – they see this as a zero sum game.
- They feel there is little to lose from switching to the National Rally, despite their misgivings on economic policy and community cohesion.
- Success for the centre/ centre left depends on offering a positive and strong alternative for these working-class voters that focusses on their priorities of local safety and patriotism / national strength.

PPI has been conducting research with voters around the world as part of its Project on Centre-Left Renewal, which aims to create a strong centre-left dialogue to fight against radical right-wing populism. Our report published in 2025, 'Build Back Belief: how governments around the world lost trust in government and how to win it back,' showed that centre-left parties need to win back significant numbers of the 'working middle' of society with examples from around the world. In June, PPI conducted focus groups of women and men in towns and cities in France, who are non-graduate swing voters currently moving from left to right. City voters were screened to have voted centre or centre left in 2026 – town voters were a mix.

FINDINGS

The little girl who was murdered – it seems like nothing changes. Nothing's being done to stop it. It's unbearable. The people at the top of the pyramid need to finally do something.

(Man, swing voter, town)

The national mood is troubled by a sense of disorder

- The terrible murder of 11-year old Lyhanna framed the discussion, which caused huge despair. It was seen as a symbol of widespread disorder and predation upon women. Judicial failures in the case were seen as evidence of a government that's let things get out of control.
- Crime, immigration and (in some cases) welfare dependency were absolutely central across all four groups. The three issues had dovetailed into a single omni-complaint – criminal gangs, most of them in the country illegally, with the system paying unemployment benefit and turning a blind eye.

- This dystopian feeling meant issues like cost-of-living, health and education were either squeezed out or folded into the narrative – e.g. stories of teachers scared to discipline feral youths.
- Voters described littering, swearing, disrespect towards elders and contempt for the public realm.
- The economy was often seen through the same lens – waste, lack of control etc.
- Across the four groups all but 4 participants said their area was declining.
- They want to see a restoration of order on the streets, public safety and for better purchasing power.
- They want politicians' focus to be on a strong France, prioritising the local, regional and national over Europe and the global.

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The right could be a real change. They're never been in power so I think we need to try. They talk about public safety and justice, which are things that are important to us. Are they just words or can they take action now? We...need to really be looking after the French.
 (Woman, swing voter, town)
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Previous centre and centre-left voters feel there is little to lose to switch right

- The sense of disorder and moral crisis is creating a nihilism at the ballot box – there is nothing left to lose, things cannot get any worse.
- Therefore voters feel taking a punt on the National Rally has been de-risked – despite misgivings about National Rally's economic policy and community cohesion.
- The 'can't get any worse' instinct is rooted in a populist telling of recent French political history – in which they claim that centrists and socialists have run the country into the ground.
- Voters often chose regional parties over national ideologies if they were seen to be doing a good job locally, judging them to a different standard with party loyalties fragmented.
- The political centre was felt to have ceased to function – when asked, many of our city voters felt it was eroded or empty, with only the extremes remaining. Some saw it as detached and internationalist, looking down on ordinary people. Others conflated it with the left – seeing the centre under Macron and the left under Hollande as having colluded in the same failure.
- A raft of ills were laid at Macron's door, including highhandedness, putting Europe above France, and excessive liberalism.
- The left were seen as on the wrong side – migrants and welfare claimants who they felt were not contributing as much, or even siding with criminals against the law-abiding.
- Doubts persist about the National Rally, who seem as divisive and uncertain on economic policy. But they are the only party speaking to these voters directly with the radicalism to restore order.
- The centre right could be an alternative to the National Rally for these voters, but they were absent both in the sense of the issues they care about and putting forward a suitable candidate to carry the argument.
- Success for the centre / centre-left depends on reconnecting with working-class voters in the towns and cities with a positive offer that shows they will stand up for the change they want to see.