

# French PM's Ouster Shows Deep Cracks In Legitimacy Of Europe's Neoliberal Order



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*12-08-2024 ~ The French left and far right joined forces to reject austerity, exposing the hollowing of the political center.*

France's National Assembly approved a no-confidence vote in Prime Minister Michel Barnier on Wednesday — just three months after he was appointed by the highly unpopular President Emmanuel Macron.

The rapid collapse of Barnier's government reinforces the long-held view among political experts that a parliamentary multiparty system has more checks and balances and responds more readily to the will of the people than the U.S. presidential two-party system. And no, the collapse of the government does not mean that France is hurtling toward a U.S.-style government shutdown. French institutions are strong, and the country's laws ensure that the public sector continues to do its work uninterrupted even in the absence of a government and a budget.

Yet, the government's collapse speaks volumes of the political legitimacy crisis facing not only France but much of Europe in the age of advanced neoliberalism. Centrist parties are in decline across the continent, and the once ascendent left parties are now facing an existential crisis while the far right is marching steadily into the mainstream. It is not a pretty picture by any stretch of the imagination, but it fits with [Antonio Gramsci's reflection](#) that "the old is dying and the new cannot yet be born."

Two months ago, Barnier unveiled to his cabinet a deficit-slashing 2025 budget that sparked vocal opposition, even before all the details were released. [Manuel Bompard](#), a lawmaker for the left-wing, action-oriented [La France Insoumise](#) (LFI) party described the spending cuts, which included \$66 billion in deficit reduction, as “the most violent austerity plan that this country has ever seen.”

France is under pressure from the [European Commission](#) to bring its widening deficits and growing debt under control; the budget cuts targeted mainly welfare, health, pensions and local governments. But without a majority in government, Barnier’s budget scheme was going to be rejected, especially since Marine Le Pen’s far right National Rally party had made it clear that it also opposed the austerity measures. Public discontent in France over Macron’s policies has never been higher. A recent poll reveals that [78 percent](#) of the French public disapprove of his leadership.

On December 2, Barnier tried to push the budget through the lower chamber of the National Assembly by activating a provision of the French Constitution — article 49.3 — which allows the government to pass legislation without a vote, but also opens up the opportunity for Parliament to put forth a no-confidence motion. [Article 49.3](#) has been used many times in the past, but no-confidence motions rarely succeed in the French political system precisely because of the multitude of political parties represented in the National Assembly. But since both LFI and National Rally lawmakers opposed the proposed budget, and the government had failed to secure the [Socialist vote](#), the stage was set for the toppling of Barnier’s government. No French government had lost a confidence vote since Prime Minister George Pompidou’s in [1962](#), but the cruelties of capitalism have reached such heights that even far right leaders in Europe, unlike their counterparts in the U.S., oppose the attack on social programs and services.

It is a mistake to think that the far right’s support for the welfare state is empty marketing. Unlike the parties of the center left, which have moved so close to the right of the ideological spectrum that they now occupy the position once held by conservative parties, Europe’s far right parties have included a distributive agenda in their electoral programs for many years now, which is one reason why across Europe parts of the working class are turning to the far right. In June, [57 percent of blue-collar workers](#) (*ouvriers*) voted for the National Rally in the first round of the French parliamentary election. However, while Europe’s far right parties are defending the traditional welfare state, they are employing a “new

form of distributive logic” by categorizing people as either “deserving” or “undeserving,” as political scientist [Juliana Chueri](#) has so astutely pointed out. Under this right-wing framework, welfare benefits should be exclusive to native citizens and more widespread to those with longer employment records. Migrants are simply excluded from any welfare state benefits.

The collapse of the French government also forcefully reveals that the country’s political establishment is at a critical legitimacy juncture. The same can be said about Europe’s economic powerhouse: Germany. Germany’s own government, a [three-way coalition](#) comprising the center left Social Democrats, Greens and the neoliberal Free Democrats, is now history. It collapsed over economic and budget disagreements and a [snap election](#) has been set for February 23, 2025. Meanwhile, east Germany has become home to the far right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party. This past September, [AfD](#) became the first far right party to win a state election in Germany since the Nazi era. Its popularity has been growing rapidly over the past several years while mainstream political parties are on the decline.

There is also a new influential anti-establishment player in German politics, the national-populist [Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance](#) (BSW) party. Founded by a former member of [Die Linke](#), a German socialist party that is now in a crisis, BSW espouses anti-NATO, antiwar, socially regressive and anti-immigrant rhetoric while promoting left-leaning economic policies. The rise of BSW validates the view that the rising stars in Europe’s political landscape are, unfortunately, parties that attempt to garner support by defending the welfare state at the expense of immigrants, LGBTQ people, and other oppressed groups.

What happens next in France is that Macron will most likely stay in office until his second term ends in May 2027, even though he is facing growing [calls to resign](#). Meanwhile, the choice of the new prime minister will be very complex as no party in the current National Assembly has a majority. If Macron insists again, like he did with the selection of Barnier this summer, on finding a new prime minister without involving political parties, another government collapse could very well be in the cards. Neither LFI nor the National Rally are in the mood to do Macron any favors. Not only is he responsible for the current crisis, his brutal neoliberal policies have helped fuel the surge of Le Pen’s far right National Rally party — as well as the French left in the form of the [New Popular Front](#) coalition. Indeed, in the upcoming months and possibly years, France’s political landscape may well be

shaped by an old-fashioned contest between radical left and far right forces.

As for Germany, once dominant but now desperate as it sees the once economically beleaguered nations of southern Europe — Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal — growing quickly while its own economy may in fact end the year in [stagnation](#), anti-establishment parties (AfD, BSW and perhaps even Die Linke) will likely figure prominently in the country's political arena ahead of next year's federal elections.

The establishment parties in Europe's two most powerful nations are in political disarray. Whether it will be the left or the far right that fills the void, or whether the system manages somehow to return to business as usual and postpone the implosion until a deeper crisis surfaces, remains to be seen.

*Source:*

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*Change* (an anthology of interviews with Noam Chomsky, 2021); *Economics and the Left: Interviews with Progressive Economists* (2021); *Illegitimate Authority: Facing the Challenges of Our Time* (an anthology of interviews with Noam Chomsky, 2023); and *A Livable Future Is Possible: Confronting the Threats to Our Survival* (an anthology of interviews with Noam Chomsky, 2024).