Opinion
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Newly appointed French Prime Minister Sébastien Lecornu, right, shakes hands with outgoing

Newly appointed French Prime Minister Sébastien Lecornu, right, shakes hands with outgoing Prime Minister Francois Bayrou at the end of the handover ceremony at Hotel Matignon in Paris Sept. 10. Lecornu resigned Oct. 6. (OSV News/Ludovic Marin, pool via Reuters)

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The surprise resignation of Sébastien Lecornu as French prime minister after less than one month in office, and especially the crisis it portends, illustrates the unique situation in France but also some of the challenges facing all Western democracies.

Lecornu had formed an uneasy coalition of centrists and conservatives in his cabinet, but they could not agree on a common program to sustain a government. "Political parties are continuing to act as though they all have an absolute majority in the National Assembly," Mr. Lecornu said. "I was ready to compromise, but each political party wants the other to adopt its whole platform."

A very smart Frenchman recently explained to me that when the Fifth Republic was formed by Charles DeGaulle in 1958, it was designed to provide a strong president,

and that the legislature would follow the president's lead, sharing his party affiliation. And, for most of the time since, that is how it has worked. During the presidency of the Socialist Party's Francois Mitterand, (1981-1995), he twice had to work for a time with a legislature controlled by the conservative Gaullist party. During the 1995-2007 presidency of Gaullist Jacques Chirac, he had to work with a Socialist-controlled legislature for five years from 1997-2002, but even then, there was a governing majority in the legislature with whom the president could negotiate.

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Today, the legislature is itself divided into multiple smaller parties, so any prime minister must not only negotiate with the president, he must achieve compromises within the National Assembly too. My wise friend pointed out that during the Third Republic, from 1870-1940, these kinds of negotiations were typical, with small parties forging coalitions all the time. Legislators knew how to negotiate. In the Fifth Republic, they did not need to do that and have lost the touch. Stability will only return to French politics when the legislators give up pretending, as Lecornu said, that "they all have an absolute majority in the National Assembly."

Here is the larger problem, one shared with the rest of the West: The French mainstream parties may not learn how to negotiate in time for a majority of the electorate to lose all confidence in those establishment parties. If President Emmanuel Macron calls snap elections, voters could turn to the party that has most consistently argued that the politicians in Paris are selling France down the river: the extreme right-wing National Rally party. This party, created by Marine Le Pen in 2011 to soften the neo-fascist, antisemitic image the party had when her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen, led what was then known as the National Front.

Le Pen came in second in the first round of presidential voting in 2022, but lost to Macron in the runoff. Still, she garnered 41.5% of the vote in the runoff, the highest total for a nationalist presidential candidate in France. Later that year, legislative elections made Le Pen's National Rally the largest opposition party. Recently found guilty of embezzlement, Le Pen is under house arrest and is barred from running for

office in the 2027 presidential election. That does not mean her party couldn't become the vehicle for an anti-establishment landslide.

Sound familiar? Of course, we in the United States have only had one constitution, not five. French politics is not drowning in special interest money the way our political parties are. Their legislative schedules are not dominated by the need for legislators to be back home in their district every weekend and, even when they do, anywhere in France is a short train ride from Paris.

The underlying dynamic, however — mainstream parties unable to do the people's business in a responsible way leading to the rise of extremist parties — is common throughout the Western democracies. There are differences among the extremists: Viktor Orban in Hungary repeats Kremlin talking points about Ukraine not being sovereign while Italy's Georgia Meloni continues to focus on restricting immigration but has stood by Ukraine. Trump is all over the place when it comes to Russia and Ukraine, but his anti-immigrant policies are as extreme as those promoted by European nationalist leaders.

Le Pen's successor during her legal troubles, Jordan Bardella, could get on well with Trump, Meloni or Orban. Asked about the differences between him and Le Pen, Stanford University professor Cécile Alduy told the Guardian: "It's still the same triad of immigration, identity and Islam. The big difference is tone and style. The message is the same but delivered in a really smooth, poised and calm tone of voice."

The rise of these extreme right parties is very troubling, but where is the political leadership in the center or on the left? Why have the establishment parties throughout the West failed to engage in the soul-searching their precarious electoral situation demands? The short-lived premiership of Sébastien Lecornu shows how politicians unable to compromise soon cannot govern. This failure only increases the willingness of the electorate to embrace authoritarianism. A majority of Americans overlooked Trump's thuggish, authoritarian tendencies because they deemed him preferable to a candidate who embodied the establishment that had repeatedly ignored their concerns. Will the same now happen in France?