

# Understanding the Macron Phenomenon— The Causes and Consequences of an Unprecedented Political Rise

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When Emmanuel Macron launched his political movement, En Marche, roughly translatable as “Forwards” or “In Motion”, in his hometown of Amiens in April 2016, roughly 13 months prior to the presidential elections, the endeavour not only seemed futile but indeed megalomaniacal. At the time, many observers wondered whether the then French minister of economic affairs under President Francois Hollande was indeed planning to install himself at the top of the state leadership. The fact that the short form of the new political movement spelled out his own initials, “E. M.”, provoked sneers among his political opponents, who saw in Macron an overly confident young politician who seemed to ignore traditional boundaries and who had wildly overstepped the mark.

Macron himself assured observers that his actions were not motivated by personal career goals. Instead, he stated, his sole ambition was to find a way forward for a country that was held back by self-doubt and internal conflicts. Macron described his position as being neither part of the political left nor of the political right. Instead, he positioned himself as a part of both camps, or “all at the same time”. Macron first learned of this key element of the theory of “dual thinking” when he collaborated with philosopher Paul Ricour during his time at university. Macron later began to employ the concept to explain the policies of the political centre. In fact, as his support base grew to encompass politicians of all politically moderate camps—including conservatives, socialists, the Greens and followers of the pro-European centre party MoDem (*Mouvement Démocrate* or Democratic Movement)—long-held divisions began to blur.

Launched by a political newcomer like a political start-up, Macron’s movement, positioned at the political centre, was a novelty in France’s political system, which is widely based on confrontation between the left and the right, both of which traditionally display little taste for compromise and cooperation. The political rise of the right-wing populist Marine Le Pen of the Front National had led to the collapse of

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<sup>1</sup> Translated from the German original by Dr Susanne Rentzow-Vasu.

France's traditional two party system as the two traditional parties continued to lose public support. However, the question remained if the political system had space for an additional party?

Macron delivered the evidence. When the then 38-year-old, who had left the Cabinet voluntarily in the summer before, announced his candidacy for the presidential election in November 2016, his chances of success were still low—surveys saw him at around 16 percent. Despite low polling numbers, he was to triumph half a year later, enjoying his victory on election night in front of the Louvre with thousands of enthusiastic supporters cheering him on.

How did the young politician emerge victorious—an outcome the press termed either a “political tsunami” or “earthquake”—at his first presidential candidacy, and without established party backing? For the first time, neither of the two traditional parties had reached the run-off election. Instead, they had to watch as voters and some of their staff migrated to *En Marche*.

Previous certainties were far from certain. As it stands, Macron's rise has permanently changed France's political landscape. The reasons for his success lie in a combination of factors that he has only partially influenced himself.

For, in addition to a clever strategy with the construction of a strong financial network, a positive image in the media, and a political offer promising renewal, dynamism, and optimism, Macron benefited from the political context in France. This context was marked by growing discontent of the voters, a deep mistrust of politics and political institutions in general and the resulting acute weakness of the two major people's parties. Each party had proposed candidates for the elections that failed to garner the support of the majority.

Paradoxically, Macron also took advantage of the strength of his closest challenger, Marine Le Pen, who herself had managed to overtake the Socialists and Republicans on her path to the run-off election. Macron was able to distinguish himself as a representative of the humanistic and republican position. Between the first and second ballots he succeeded in positioning himself as a bulwark against the extreme right, thus winning over those parts of the electorate who effectively voted for him as an expression of their protest against Marine Le Pen. Indeed, the entry of the right-wing populist candidate into the second round triggered no protest storms, as had been seen in 2002, when her father Jean-Marie Le Pen surprisingly reached the second run-off against Jacques Chirac. What then signified the breaking of a taboo had long become predictable. Marine Le Pen had largely managed to position the Front National into the political mainstream, steadily moving it to the centre of society, anchoring it regionally and expanding its voter base. Nevertheless, in 2017 the majority of French voters were still firmly opposed to the idea of a right-wing nationalist politician as their head of state. Pre-election polls thus widely predicted that she was likely to reach the second round; yet her opponent would emerge victorious in the end. The polls proved to be true.

In the past, many French voters had only been swayed towards a candidate if he appeared to them as the lesser of two evils. In 2002, Jacques Chirac decidedly won against Jean-Marie Le Pen, and five years later Nicolas Sarkozy convinced the electorate with his promise of a “break” with the rigidity of the Chirac era. In 2012, François Hollande emerged triumphant, as the majority of the French electorate became tired of what they saw as Sarkozy’s erratic style of governance.

Hollande’s failure in the eyes of his countrymen was also a crucial element for the political rise of Macron. The socialist president had tied his own legitimacy to his early promise of economic growth and falling unemployment rates. Concrete results, however, only emerged at the end of his term of office—a time too late to sway most of the disappointed French voters. Consequently, Macron began to distance himself from his former mentor, a political move that hit Hollande hard. In his book *Lessons of Power*, published earlier this spring, the socialist ex-president adopted a bitter tone in recounting what felt to him like a betrayal. He trusted Macron, he writes in the book, describing the latter as “friendly, lively, fast, cultivated,” but quickly adding Macron’s ability to “seduce his interlocutor, by quickly guessing what he liked to hear”. In fact, Hollande had probably underestimated Macron’s instinct for power as the latter went on to unscrupulously distinguish himself from Hollande.

As president, Macron continues to demonstrate the same level of self-confidence that was on display during his political rise. He has demanded a strong role on the international stage by contesting other dominant political leaders, including US President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The election of Macron marked the first time in the Fifth Republic that a politician who was not affiliated with either of the two major political parties became president. Macron, as a matter of fact, had only been a member of the Socialist Party for a short while in his younger years. Macron owes his electoral success largely to the unpopularity of his predecessor and the strong desire among the French public for a new beginning. While many foreign observers celebrated him as the “Saviour” and “Saviour of Europe”, a considerable part of the French population remained sceptical of him.

This lingering mistrust partly stems from his past career and his close ties to the private sector. Early on, Macron cultivated a network of supporters that included many industry partners whose donations provided him with the necessary financial backing for his solitary election campaign. In addition, he gathered support from experienced and widely respected politicians, such as former socialist Gérard Collomb, mayor of Lyon, and German-French Green Party politician Daniel Cohn-Bendit. Macron has long been able to exploit his personal charm to find influential supporters. His group of supporters included Jacques Attali, a well-connected economist, who worked alongside Macron on reform proposals for conservative ex-president Nicolas Sarkozy, and David de Rothschild, chairperson of the private

bank Rothschild & Cie. The latter hired Macron as an investment banker in 2008, promoting the then only 32-year-old to become a partner a mere three years later. In 2011, Macron entered politics as a supporter of Hollande.

His unprecedented political rise was partially fuelled by a media largely captivated by Macron's smart demeanour and his ability for perfect grandstanding, which has become increasingly grandiose following his election. Public interest in Macron has steadily increased beginning with his role as economic consultant in the Élysée Palace and subsequently as minister of economic affairs since the summer of 2014.

Macron's penchant for sometimes foolhardy but quick-witted *bon mots* helped fuel the interest of the public and the media. One example is his comment on President Hollande's plan to impose a rich tax of 75 percent. France, Macron quipped, would then become "like Cuba without the sun." Even his unusual private love story with his marriage to his former teacher Brigitte, whose three children are about his age, has helped his public image more than it has hurt him. His marriage to a woman 25 years his senior is seen as proof that he will pursue his own path regardless of the opinion of others.

Holding hands with his wife, Macron posed for influential tabloid *ParisMatch* on several occasions. His wife hired a professional celebrity adviser to manage the publication of all her images. While the Macrons appear relaxed and spontaneous in public, nothing about their public image is left to chance. Modern storytelling, inspired by former US President Barack Obama, is part of Macron's winning strategy. He likes to tell personal anecdotes to display a likeable, human personality. When meeting with citizens, he is approachable, interested, and affable. It is only since his election as president that he has adopted a level of detachment and solemnity resembling monarchical qualities, which have made him vulnerable to accusations of autocratic ambitions.

He has consistently used social media to promote his public image. His team of mainly young employees use social media channels to make their boss seem ubiquitous. Unlike traditional parties, membership in Macron's party, *En Marche*, which he has renamed *La République en marche* (LREM) following his election, is free and is attained with a simple mouse click. Thousands of casual supporters have quickly been gathered this way.

Another innovation was the idea of a "Grande Marche", which saw Macron's followers going from door to door across the country during the summer of 2016 to interview the public about their grievances and concerns. The campaign collected data from 25,000 completed questionnaires and 100,000 interviews. In Macron's own words, this novel way of public consultation demonstrated his modern thinking and his closeness to the electorate. It also served as an early campaign to publicise the budding candidate. The feedback gathered during the public consultation was promised to be incorporated into his presidential programme. His employees refer

to the example of gender equality and the fight against sexual harassment in their assurance that this has indeed been carried out. They claim the issue was made a priority in the presidential programme even though it was a lot less visible in the summer of 2016 than a year later as a result of the #metoo movement.

The survey was repeated as the “Great March for Europe” in spring 2018. This, too, can be interpreted as preparation for the election campaign as the outcome of the European elections in May 2019 poses a potential challenge for the French head of state. While most of his ten competitors in the presidential election campaign represented largely European Union-hostile positions, he campaigned on a clear pro-European platform, advocating greater integration of European Union (EU) Member States in all areas.

This pro-European platform cannot be taken for granted in France. In 2005, a public referendum rejected the proposed EU Constitutional Treaty, thus plunging the European Union into a political crisis.

Macron explains his pro-European stance as a lesson learnt from history and he references his home region in northern France, which suffered bitterly from the bloody wars of recent centuries and still has many military cemeteries. While at present France is generally supportive of the European Union and rejects a withdrawal from the euro zone (“Frexit”) as demanded by Marine Le Pen, in view of public scepticism, the support is rather cautious.

Nevertheless, Macron’s clear commitment to deeper European integration would entail further transfer of national sovereignty. Furthermore, it remains unclear where his party, LREM, will position itself within the current European political system. A possible inclusion into one of the existing political groupings has met objections. Nonetheless, it seems uncertain whether the discreet activities of Macron’s employees aimed at founding an independent LREM group will succeed. At present, the establishing of party offshoots is well under way in several European countries. The question remains if Macron’s success, which was strongly linked to his personal strategy and the political context in France at the time, can be repeated at EU level. Undoubtedly, the European elections will offer the first significant assessment of public opinion since his election. If his rise to power seemed almost playful at times, its preservation appears much more laborious.

However, it was not just the talent, the extraordinary will power, and the coherent strategy of a single man that led to the astonishing change that France has experienced in a short time. By disrupting the previous political system, Macron knew how to exploit a development that was already underway.

This is also the premise of demographer and historian Hervé Le Bras and pollster Jérôme Fourquet, who analysed the presidential election in their study *The French Puzzle: A New Political Landscape*. According to the authors, the two traditional parties split into several political movements, while the electorate

remained stable: “[t]wo worlds developed separately: those of the voters and those of the political class with parties that divided into ever smaller cliques. The exchange between these two worlds is interrupted.” The race for the nomination of the respective presidential candidate within each party further reinforced this trend.

Socialists and Republicans agreed on a single candidate out of necessity to qualify for the second round of the election in preparation for the anticipated qualification of the Front National. This strategy had proven positive for socialist candidate François Hollande during the elections five years earlier.

However, according to Le Bras and Fourquet, instead of creating conciliation among the parties, the 2017 primary elections gave rise to brutal internal struggles. In the wake of these struggles, candidates with distinctive ideological positions, such as Benoît Hamon among the Socialists and François Fillon among the Republicans, rose to prominence. Neither men enjoyed great support within their own party. While each represented the centre of their respective parties, neither epitomised France’s political centre. The political space that opened as a result was thus subsequently occupied by Macron. While he was not the only potential candidate, he proved to be faster and better prepared than the others, profiting from what Le Bras and Fourquet describe as a “sclerotic political class”.

By the time the Socialists entered the elections, they were already weakened despite forming the government. Ironically, it was their long-time party leader Hollande, widely known for his mediating skills, who drove the Socialist party to the brink of division and alienated many members of its electoral base during his five-year term as president. In an attempt to appeal to left-wing voters Hollande had initially declared the financial world as his “enemy” during the election campaign, only to anger his voters by later abandoning this stance in favour of a moderately entrepreneur-friendly course, largely inspired by Macron in his role as economic consultant and later as minister of economic affairs.

Thus, some of his own followers in the government and in Parliament turned against Hollande. This group of opponents eventually came to be known as the “rebels” and systematically blocked his reform efforts in the National Assembly, thus undermining the credibility of the president. Nevertheless, Hollande’s announcement that he would no longer be available for a second term came as a surprise. Hollande’s decision followed Macron’s announcement of his own candidacy and could thus also be read as a direct response. Furthermore, as the incumbent, Hollande was unwilling to subject himself to the humiliating practice of party-internal primaries.

Ex-Minister of Education Benoît Hamon, a representative of the left wing of the Socialist Party and a member of the “rebels” in opposition to Hollande, emerged as front-runner from the primaries. However, he was unable to overcome the internal fragmentation of the party he had previously help create. His proposal of a basic

income and a robot tax failed to strike a chord with the electorate and he subsequently lost important votes to the left-wing populist Jean-Luc Mélenchon. The latter scored a surprising 19.6 percent of the votes, while the previous ruling party, with Hamon as the leading candidate, experienced a historic low of 6.4 percent. The Socialist Party, from which he subsequently left to set up his own movement, has not recovered since.

The election was similarly disastrous for the conservative Republicans. François Fillon, former prime minister under Nicolas Sarkozy, had emerged victorious from the party-internal primaries. With Fillon as their candidate, the Republicans supported a socially conservative yet economically liberal platform.

Not only did his proposals lack majority appeal, it was above all the series of scandals during the election campaign that tarnished Fillon's image to the point that he became an unfit candidate for many, eventually destroying his reputation as a serious statesman.

The Courts are still investigating allegations of fraud related to payments made by Fillon over several years to his wife and two of his children as parliamentary staff for non-existent jobs. Further revelations such as Fillon's acceptance of generous gifts from a politically dubious personality harmed him further and he ignored calls for resignation from his own party.

However, according to Hervé Le Bras and Jérôme Fourquet, it was not these affairs alone that cost him the chance of a victory. Instead, they merely served as a "simple and simplistic illustration of movements that were well hidden and more powerful"—namely, in the first instance, the rejection of politicians in general. In fact, the French presidential election has in the past frequently resulted in the at times involuntary retirement of key figures who had been part of France's political discourse for decades. These included ex-presidents Hollande and Sarkozy as well as ex-prime ministers Alain Juppé and Manuel Valls, each of whom resigned after defeat in the party's primaries, as well as a number of ministers who left politics for good. While even the self-proclaimed opponent of the "system", Marine Le Pen, and her more-than-40-year-old party, ultimately became an integral part of it, Macron capitalised from his fresh and untainted image.

At a crucial moment during the election campaign, Macron received a boost in the form of the political backing of François Bayrou, leader of the centre party MoDem, who had turned away from the Conservatives following the Fillon scandals. Ten years earlier, Bayrou himself had come close to entering the second ballot when his centrist political platform won him 18.6 percent of the vote. However, he lacked political allies at a time when the Conservatives and the Socialists still represented robust pillars of French politics and the National Front was unable to qualify for the second ballot. At least Bayrou became "kingmaker" by helping Macron to distinguish himself as an opponent of an opaque "system" conducive to corruption.

Indeed, Macron delivered on his political promise to introduce new and transparent rules for members of parliament. Incidentally, Bayrou was the first to fall victim to the new rules. After only a few weeks in office as minister of justice, he was forced to resign over allegations made against his party concerning the illegal use of European Parliament funds to pay employees.

Against the background of a chaotic election campaign marked by scandalous revelations, Macron's position changed from that of an outsider to that of a favourite. Besides Bayrou, he was joined by several important figures from various political camps, which made it seem even more likely that he as the newcomer could actually win the election.

His bipartisan position at the centre of the political spectrum allowed Macron to recruit members for his government across party lines after his victory. This has permanently weakened the opposition parties. The position of the opposition parties in relation to the government has been further complicated for the main parties as former party colleagues are now part of the government. Among the former socialists in Macron's government are Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian, previously a confidant of then President Hollande, and Interior Minister Gérard Collomb. Former members of the Conservatives are also occupying key posts in the government, including those of prime minister, minister of economic affairs, and public action and accounts minister. Republicans Édouard Philippe, Bruno Le Maire and Gérald Darmanin were expelled subsequently from the Conservative Party for taking these roles. However, as Macron's reform policy largely corresponds with the demands of the Conservatives, the party remains divided over whether to support the government or to oppose it. One fraction in the National Assembly known as "Constructive Republicans" acknowledges the party's ideological proximity to Macron's political position. Nonetheless, the sub-group is firmly rejected by party leader and political hardliner Laurent Wauquiez, who is instead steering the Republicans further to the right, thus intensifying its competition with the Front National.

Nonetheless, even Wauquiez struggles with being audible as an opposition force. Although Marine Le Pen achieved a historic victory for her party, with some 11 million supporters and 34 percent of the votes in the second round of the presidential election, the result was perceived as a failure that clearly showed her limitations. The right-wing populist candidate did not meet her own self-imposed goal and disappointed with an unprofessional performance in the crucial televised debate with Macron. As a result, not only did she lose followers, she also lost the support of her main adviser, the EU- and Euro-sceptic Florian Philippot, who has since founded the rival party "The Patriots". It is questionable whether the simple renaming of the Front National to *Rassemblement National* (National Collective Movement) will be enough to sever ties with its historical legacy and mark a much-hoped-for new beginning. At any rate, the renaming of the party did not include its ideological realignment.

The situation of the Socialist Party is comparatively more disastrous. It continues to struggle with its ideological foundation while lacking a central party figure. With numerous key players having left the party, it has sold its historic headquarters and dismissed more than half of its staff. Owing to massive losses in the parliamentary elections in June, a large part of previous subsidies, based on the number of votes won and the number of Socialist parliamentary representatives, have vanished.

Macron's astonishing election as president was followed by the second surprise of his LREM party winning the absolute majority in the National Assembly in the parliamentary elections in June. The new parliament underwent a rejuvenation, boasting a much higher proportion of female members of parliament (MPs), while many, often veteran, MPs of the other parties were voted out of office. These parliamentarians too were affected by the voters' desire for renewal and change.

This parliamentary power base has permitted Macron to implement his plans speedily and efficiently. While Macron justifies his actions with the democratic legitimacy gained from his election, critics highlight the dearth of democratic debate. In particular, dissenting voices within the ruling party criticising the implementation of a tightened immigration and asylum law were systematically ignored by their leadership. The role of Parliament, which is already frail in the French political system, is thus being further weakened under Macron's leadership.

At present, there are no signs for a quick recovery of the opposition that would permit a challenge to the current government. Warnings usually come from other sources. The economist Thomas Piketty, author of the bestseller *Capital in the 21st Century*, has compared the French president's tax reduction policy to that of Trump's and has warned about widening social inequality. Contrary to Macron's own motto that he is "both left and right", socialists like ex-party leader Martine Aubry criticise the president as "neither left nor left"—so, not left at all.

As has been illustrated by the contrast between Macron and Le Pen in the run-off election, the historical, neat division of the social and political system is in the process of disintegration. In their study, Fourquet and Le Bras no longer draw the "new dividing lines" between the left and the right but between critics and opponents of globalisation. After careful analysis of the election results, they conclude that the urban, high-income and educated population voted for Macron, while Le Pen dominated in areas with high unemployment and poverty rates, appealing largely to those members of the electorate that were feeling disenfranchised. The opinion pollster and researcher Martial Foucault, director of the research centre CEVIPOF, speaks less of a division of the country into winners and losers of globalisation. Rather, he divides people into optimists and pessimists: "[t]he Front National not only gets the votes of the lower class, but those of the unhappy and dissatisfied classes. Macron is not just the candidate of the rich, but that of the confident." Indeed, the people living in Le Pen's strongholds were among the most pessimistic and fearful of further deterioration of their living conditions. These strongholds are

found in the Mediterranean region of France—home to a large number of immigrants and Muslims—which has seen rising levels of mistrust and friction between the different cultures, and the northeast of the country, which has suffered greatly from the deindustrialisation of the past decades and where many people feel both abandoned by the state and economically deprived. It is in these parts of the country that globalisation raises particularly strong fears. It is Macron's responsibility to overcome these divisions. While he beat the right-wing populists at the polls, the reasons for their support remain. The challenges facing Macron originate less from the traditional parties but from the extremes, including both the left and right wing.

As the political opposition continues to redefine itself, expressions of opposition is increasingly turning to the streets. Unions and, in some cases, the radical left have been trying for months to mobilise opponents of reform policies—from officials, to hospital and nursing staff, and students. However, an extensive, unified protest movement has not emerged. Even the long-drawn-out strike by the SNCF (French National Railway Company) in opposition to a rail reform, where employees downed tools two days a week for three months, could hardly force the government to move.

Thus, within a year, France has experienced the unprecedented downfall of the major parties. A 40-year-old Macron rules with the support of his own party and largely without opposition. In a system strongly geared towards the directly elected president, attention is largely focused on him, while his government consists mostly of loyal technocrats, often without political experience.

The traditional left/right-wing divide seems to be permanently damaged, while new forces have yet to emerge. Macron's triumph can be explained as the interplay of his successful political strategy within a specific national context, with large parts of the electorate demanding a fresh start and a fundamental change to the political system. The coming years of his presidency will show if Macron will respond satisfactorily to these demands or if further political upheaval is imminent.

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