

Why Macron's Victory Is a Triumph for Disillusionment and Populism

Written by Russell Foster

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RUSSELL FOSTER, MAY 16 2017

With Marine Le Pen and Geert Wilders defeated, it is easy to believe that Western liberal democracy has triumphed over the short-lived populist wave of Brexit and Trump. Fresh-faced, media-savvy, and with a huge fan base, Emmanuel Macron has become President of France with a two-thirds majority. But as President by Default rather than President by Popular Choice, this sweeping victory for *En Marche!* over *Front Nationale* is not the end of Europe's struggle against populism.

One thing is now certain – the feared domino effect of Brexit has not happened. Outria and Quitaly were defeated in December 2016. Nexit was halted in March 2017, and finally the spectre of *EU Revoir* has been exorcised. For now. In five years it will return, and with more force. Because Emmanuel Macron's victory does not represent the victory over establishment liberalism but rather the reproduction of the same forces which birthed the recent wave of popular apathy and hostility to a transnational elite that is distinct from, but inevitably symbolised by, the scapegoat of the EU.

The French election saw the same forces observed in Britain, the Netherlands, Austria, Germany, and Italy in the past twelve months, a struggle between seemingly incompatible forces which Marine Le Pen summarised as a choice between patriotism and globalisation.

The European Union's challenges fall into two categories: structural and spontaneous. Spontaneous crises come and go. And the EU is remarkably resilient, surviving every external and internal spontaneous problem since the Franco-Dutch refusal of a European Constitution in 2005. But these crises are only surface concerns. Structural problems are of far greater significance.

Macron is well aware of this. One of his campaign pledges was to reform the EU, and with the passion and drive of a popular politician behind it, a genuine drive for reform just might happen. A counter-argument to this is that the EU has still not affected reform after Brexit. If secession did not trigger reform, what is the likelihood that an election will trigger the process? A Macron victory could kickstart reform, but equally it could lull the EU into a false sense of security and blind the EU to the urgency of reforming the Union's patchwork structure and myriad problems.

This raises the question of Brexit. Consensus opinion before the election was that a Le Pen victory would pose an existential threat to the EU. If the French nation was frustrated enough to vote for Le Pen, so the argument went, then they would be frustrated enough to vote "Non" in her probable Yes/No referendum on EU membership. Much less was said about the consequences of a Macron victory. Staunchly pro-EU, how will an *En Marche!* presidency regard Brexit? In his election campaign he called Brexit a "crime", and strongly implied that he would make Britain pay a hefty bill. So popular consensus is that Macron will be tough on Britain, demanding payments and refusing to dilute the common market in order to pander to the Britishers' expectations. It is tempting to believe that Macron will make Brexit negotiations tough. But an equal possibility is that Macron will find that Brexit is very low on his list of priorities.

Macron has perhaps won not because of his own strengths, but because of his opponents' weaknesses. Running against Marine Le Pen strengthened Macron's position in similar fashion to the 2002 election, when Jacques Chirac crushed Jean-Marie Le Pen. Both of these elections were exceptional in their large majorities against FN, indicating

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that FN's toxicity encourages votes for any candidate other than FN. Once his media honeymoon ends, Macron will face the reality that he is still associated with the discredited Socialists, will be forced to outmanoeuvre a possibly significant *Front Nationale* group following the upcoming National Assembly elections. Macron appealed to many through his promises of EU reform, re-investment, and hope. But he alienated millions with a manifesto which preaches austerity – the very austerity which caused mass hostility in the first place. In their second Presidential election, *Front Nationale* vote increased from 18% in 2002 to nearly 35%. Combined with the lowest turnout in fifty years and a slimmer majority than anticipated, this is not as decisive a victory as imagined.

A little-seen slogan in the campaign was “*ni banquier, ni raciste*” – “neither a banker nor a racist”, chanted by supporters of Jean-Luc Mélenchon and Benoît Hamon. Macron is not France's saviour from populism; as a symbol of the transnational elite he embodies the initial causes of mass disillusionment with establishment politics and the neoliberal status quo. In this regard, the French election reflected the recent Dutch election and the upcoming British election. Although both are still sizeable groups, like the Dutch VVD *Les Républicains* have bled away support to newcomers; and like the PvdA, *Parti socialiste* has been obliterated. This suggests a trend that will be repeated in Britain in June and in Germany in September; the collapse of an establishment Left and the survival of an establishment Right only by adopting nationalist rhetoric. *En Marche!* has emerged victorious not as an establishment party, but as an ostensibly anti-establishment faction paradoxically led by the embodiment of the neoliberal elite. Emmanuel Macron has not won because the French nation wants him; he won because the French judged him slightly less objectionable than Marine Le Pen.

Facing difficult parliamentary elections and governing a country through unpopular policies means that Brexit will not rank highly on Emmanuel Macron's list. When Theresa May wakes up to her increasingly inevitable landslide on June 9th, she will likely find herself negotiating with a Commission that is no longer fighting for survival, and a French president who has more pressing concerns than That Sweet Enemy across the Channel. Will this make Brexit negotiations harder or easier for the British? With France looking elsewhere and the European Commission no longer as frightened of a domino effect, Britain could gain a far more favourable deal.

France, the European Union, and Western liberalism itself seem safe. For now. But once Macron begins implementing his austere economic vision the reality of unemployment and cuts, political factionalism, the continuation of structural problems and the near-impossibility of reforming the EU, will soon reveal that for Emmanuel Macron dancing on his own volcano, being the lesser of two evils is far different from being the peoples' positive choice.

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