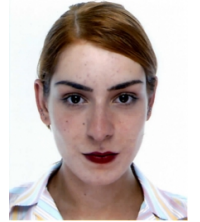


Europhiles should temper their enthusiasm about Macron's win

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*The second round of the French Presidential elections was widely presented as a referendum on Europe. In the international press especially, a clear opposition was established between the Eurosceptic Front National leader Marine Le Pen and her centrist pro-European counterpart, Emmanuel Macron. Nevertheless, as **Lise Herman** argues, Europhiles should not become complacent about Macron's win and put too much faith in centrist politics.*



While the far-right candidate promised to submit the country's continued European membership to a popular vote and conditioned the application of her economic program on France abandoning the euro, her opponent played the European anthem at his rallies and defended the EU more adamantly than any French politician of the previous generation ever had. Unsurprisingly, a majority of commentators thus equated the clear victory of Emmanuel Macron, with 66.1% of the vote, with French support for the EU. EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, for instance, tweeted "the French have chosen a European future" while German chancellor spokesman Steffen Seibert hailed a "victory for a strong and united Europe".

Fears of a domino effect after the British referendum on EU membership became, from one day to another, unfounded. Perhaps British exceptionalism could be blamed after all for Brexit? Perhaps the populist surge of 2016 was only a temporary setback in the unstoppable progress of liberalism? Macron's victory will have reassured those who still want to believe in the end of history. Such were the voices echoing in the media.

Dominant interpretations of striking electoral results both simplify a necessarily complex reality and forget to account for part of it. In this particular case, two main elements should serve to temper the enthusiasm of Europhiles. First, many French voters voted for Macron not to signal support for his pro-European ideas, but to avoid what they considered to be a worse outcome than his election. In the first round, only [58% of Macron voters cast their vote out of conviction](#), against, as a point of comparison, 84% of Mélenchon voters and 73% of voters overall. In this instance, Macron benefited especially from the vote of former socialist voters wary of witnessing a second round between Les Républicains candidate François Fillon and Front National candidate Marine Le Pen.

In the second round, at least 53% of those who supported him did so to [counter the possibility of Le Pen's election](#). A large number of voters also expressed their discontent with the choice on offer: 12% cast a blank vote and 25.44% of those who could vote abstained, a record for second round Presidential elections under the 5th Republic. More broadly, the newly elected President benefited from an extremely favourable set of circumstances: corruption scandals dividing Les Républicains allowed him to gain centre-right votes, while the leftist choice of Benoît Hamon in the Parti Socialiste primaries made Macron particularly attractive to the centrist wing of the formerly governing party. Strategic voting, rather than the adhesion of the French to Macron's pro-European stances, explain his election.

Second, this campaign saw a surge of Euroscepticism. Both the far-right and the far-left radicalised their discourse on the EU as compared to previous campaigns. In 2012, Marine Le Pen did not suggest a referendum on France's EU membership and wanted, instead, a popular consultation on the euro. In her 2017 program, Frexit becomes an option and abandoning the euro a campaign promise, unsubjected to popular approval. As for Jean-Luc Mélenchon, while his 2012 program does emphasise the necessity of a radical transformation of the European Union, with France's mission being to spur a renegotiation of EU treaties, only in 2017 does he suggest a referendum to leave the EU in case such a renegotiation fails. Together, these strongly eurosceptic candidates accumulated 41.3% of votes in the first round of the Presidential election, gaining more than 12 points as compared to 2012.



Emmanuel Macron. Credit: <https://en-marche.fr/>

Emmanuel Macron is a strong supporter of the European project. What is less noted is that he also expresses awareness of its flaws and has campaigned on an ambitious program of reform of EU institutions. He has pronounced himself in favour of important investments within the Eurozone, on the basis of a common budget voted by a newly created Parliament and executed by a government of the Eurozone. He has suggested putting into place a *Buy European Act* to favour firms that localise at least half of what they produce within the European Union. He advocates generalising Erasmus and extending it to manual apprentices. He wants citizen assemblies within each Member State to discuss a new project for the EU, and have the resulting project validated by national referenda. An optimistic reading of Macron's program suggests that he will not only blindly defend what the EU is and represents, but will seek to address the reasons why so many people in France, and elsewhere, support eurosceptic candidates in the first place.

Those who rejoiced at Macron's election should do their share of helping such a movement, and change the terms of the debate we are having about the EU. Hooghe and Marks famous inverted [U-curve model of support for EU integration](#), strong in the political mainstream and weak at the political fringe, may well be shifting with the radical transformation that the space of political competition itself is undergoing in Western Europe. As parties such as the Front National become a credible alternative, the Left-Right opposition is progressively being replaced by that between technocrats and populists, moderates and radicals, europhiles and eurorejects. Ms Merkel's chief of staff, Peter Altmaier, suggested no less when he tweeted on April 23rd "The center is stronger than the populists think!".

In a democratic regime, the main opposition force gets to exercise power at regular intervals, and it is thus only a matter of time, within such a configuration, before the Le Pen's of this world win more elections and referenda. Events like Brexit and the election of Donald Trump will set the trend for the future, not be accidents of history.

It is urgent that we change the terms of the current debate about the EU instead of playing into an opposition that, ultimately, serves those who represent a real danger for European cooperation and, more broadly, for democracy itself. We need to start arguing about what purposes the EU should serve. Pro-Europeans need to accept to be divided over the project they want for Europe and organise transnational partisanship around such alternative projects. These divisions will paradoxically strengthen the EU by allowing for its democratisation: only when EU citizens feel that they can affect the course of EU government every five years will the populist fuel run dry. Let us not see Macron's election as an opportunity to continue business as usual, and simply defend the EU for its own sake. Only then can it be a win for Europe.

This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of LSE Brexit, nor of the London School of Economics.

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