

Macri and Macron: Why the Argentine and French presidents share more than their surnames



When Emmanuel Macron won the French presidency a little over a year ago, he was viewed by many of his supporters as an ‘antidote to populism’ and as someone capable of implementing an ambitious reform programme. [Sam Maynard](#) and [Ilona Lahdelma](#) compare Macron’s period in office with another President who came to power in similar circumstances: Mauricio Macri, the President of Argentina. They write that in both cases, promises of reviving society with a combination of liberalism and conservatism have produced less than revolutionary results.

Amidst the global surge in populism in recent years, Argentina and France stand out as notable exceptions. Mauricio Macri and Emmanuel Macron rose under similar “anti-populist” electoral waves, and apart from their similar surnames, they share much in common.

Both leaders boast technocratic economic credentials: Macri a prominent Argentine businessman before serving as Mayor of Buenos Aires, and Macron the former Economy Minister under French president François Hollande. Additionally, each secured electoral victories via newly-formed electoral coalitions. Macri’s *Cambiamos* (Let’s Change!) coalition achieved an upset victory in 2015 and maintained this political momentum with a resounding midterm victory in 2017, winning Argentina’s top five urban centres and achieving a healthy majority in the lower congressional house. In France, Macron not only achieved a [landslide victory](#) over the Front National’s Marine Le Pen in last year’s presidential elections, but also won a [crushing majority](#) in the French legislative elections just one month later. Each win was historic for both Argentina and France.

However, the electoral honeymoon has begun to fade for each. Since December, both presidents have suffered sharp drops in their public approval. Macron, whose government has presided over a rapid market-based economic reform programme, is facing a severe backlash from voters as well as members of his party. His approval rating has fallen and is currently hovering around 40 percent – a notable drop from the end of 2017. The rank-and-file of his party have begun to voice concerns about the administration’s [unwillingness to incorporate its concerns](#), causing some ruffled feathers among legislative party officials. [Several strikes](#) from railway workers to civil servants have crippled public services, as workers in various fields of the public-sector air opposition to Macron’s planned cuts to job security protections and decreasing funds for public services.

In addition to cuts in the public sector, Macron has simultaneously implemented pro-business legislation and tax policies, earning him the reputation of the “president of the rich” and prompting criticism even from former socialist president Hollande. In addition to provoking strikes across the nation, Macron has also angered the army with his leadership style, as well as his decision to cut funding for the armed forces and his plans to introduce [compulsory military service](#) for the young. Macron, despite campaigning on a pro-refugee, humanitarian platform ahead of last year’s elections, has since [changed his stance](#) on immigration and recently introduced a law that makes getting asylum in France more difficult, thus disappointing some of his voters.



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In Argentina, Macri faces similar if not more troublesome woes. Like Macron, Macri implemented a far-reaching reform programme that sought to quell inflation and rein in deficit spending, all while maintaining steady growth. However, recent surges in the price of utilities and a dramatic plunge of the peso have generated a truly dire situation for him. Moves to negotiate with the IMF have sent Macri's approval rating into a tailspin – it is [now at the lowest point of his presidency at 35 percent](#).

For many Argentine voters, this brings back memories of the country's previous dealings with the fund, which ended in a catastrophic economic crisis that put over 50 percent of the nation below the official poverty line. As a result, Macri's coalition in congress seems to be getting restless, with some key members offering public criticisms of the government's latest moves. The situation has [caused former Argentine officials to speculate about the panic](#) that could ensue if Macri's administration does not resolve the situation quickly. Indeed, if Macri wishes to be the first non-Peronist president of Argentina to serve the duration of his term, he will need to find a solution to this seemingly impossible situation.

For both leaders, the erosion of support (from both voters and the legislatures) is crucial. Macri and Macron have relied on their favourable public images to push through their reform plans. Now in each case, over half of the country views their leader unfavourably. If Macron fails to revive support from his base, the remaining four years of his presidency may be painful. With resistance from key economic sectors already hampering his plans (including France's crucial public transportation unions, as well as university students), the situation may be difficult to reverse in the short-term. Additionally, it could mobilise the opposition, and for a new party organisation, the consequences could be fatal.

In Argentina, the stakes are higher. Not only is the country's famously resilient Peronist opposition beginning to rev its political engine, but Macri is having to make [costly concessions that could embolden his detractors](#) just in time for the 2019 election season. On top of the political ramifications, the economic forecasts continue to look bleak. Inflation has been climbing [at a rate the government cannot keep up with](#) and the peso continues to devalue, which complicates the country's ability to reduce its deficit. A weak position going into 2019 may be the best-case scenario for Macri, with many beginning to see the possibility that he may end up like the last non-Peronist to occupy the Casa Rosada – resigning prematurely amidst economic turmoil.

Macri and Macron, both elected in part due to their technocratic, "apolitical" appeal, face large obstacles. While both promised political change in the face of divisive electoral opponents, each has turned to policy programmes that many voters – both Argentine and French – associate with the not-too-distant past. The increasing pressure on their presidencies may complicate the long-term endurance of their parties.

Both *Cambiamos* and *La République en Marche* refused to adhere to traditional party lines, the former by fusing traditional parties into a coalition and the latter by creating a citizen-driven start-up movement in lieu of a political party. While both parties promised an antidote for populism in the form of meritocracy and a combination of liberalism and conservatism, the outcome has not been substantially new in either case.

If anything, in both cases it seems to have been the economic elite that has benefited from the reforms, which is not likely to prove a successful antidote for populism. Both Argentina and France have proven to be fertile grounds for populism, so Macri and Macron need to be careful with how much they dare to please their country's small meritocratic and economic elites at the expense of the larger segments of the electorate.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.

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