

Is France having a moment? Emmanuel Macron and the Politics of Disruption

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On 19 June 2018, at a joint press conference with German chancellor Angela Merkel, French president [Emmanuel Macron proclaimed](#) that Europe, the EU and each of its member states had reached a moment of existential truth: unite or implode.

Europe probably is facing exceptional challenges, but political leaders routinely deploy the language of crisis to make their points. Crisis and drama sell in a political age of rapid-fire social media and emotional exchange, and the visuals of politics – particularly of summitry – raise expectations of momentous change.

The meaning of Macron (I)

For his part, President Macron's position is specifically designed to accommodate personal power, and he has shown every intention of deploying this arsenal to the full.

A combination of good luck, timing and tactics won him the 2017 French presidency in an unprecedented manner, lending him an air of exceptionality. In power he is an iconoclast, ducking those who seek to pigeonhole him using customary labels of left, right, liberal, or other.

In the 2017 contest, Macron fought off the notorious populist, radical right politician Marine le Pen with his own brand of positive populism. Campaigning from the grassroots up, he side-stepped and wrong-footed traditional political parties. He picked policy issues that trend – gender equality, energy transition, artificial intelligence. Nothing is off his radar; nothing, it appears, is sacrosanct, although he is no outsider, nor stranger to French political culture.

It is hard enough to capture political leadership using the standard tools of academic analysis in normal times, let alone when a Macron (or a Trump) brings something novel to the spreadsheet. The human factor simply defies scientific rigour, however hard political scientists try to classify and categorise individual traits.

We shy away from the 'great man' theory of leadership, for obvious reasons, and

'heroic' leadership is rarely attainable in democratic systems where leaders are contained, and deliberately so, by institutional checks and balances. [Any sensible approach](#) to understanding leadership must avoid claims to read leaders' minds, and set the personal against the institutional (the political system), the conjunctural (the immediate context and its challenges), and the structural (the wider environment).

However hard the task and however imperfect the results, analysing political leadership matters, if only to offer up something to temper popular expectations of individual leaders that are unrealistically high, and opinions that are correspondingly and predictably low when fast results fail to materialise ([president Macron's ratings](#), by the way, dipped sharply in the summer of 2018).

The idea of disruption

One notion that has found its way into daily conversations about politics in general and leaders in particular is that of disruption. Pascal Perrineau, veteran analyst of French party politics, entitled his edited volume on the 2017 French elections, no less, [Le vote disruptif](#) – the vote of disruption.

Earlier the same year, I compared and contrasted Macron's election as French president with the UK's 2016 vote by referendum to leave the EU as moments of political disruption. The comparison was inspired by a [BBC Radio 4 trio of short conversations](#) with disruptor and disruptee (those disrupted) alike in three of the UK's infamously hidebound markets: [property, banking and death](#). In each case (getting a mortgage and buying a property; opening and managing a bank account; planning a funeral, respectively), the disruptor emphatically rejected business as usual. In each case, the disrupted (the mortgage brokers, the estate agents, the high-street banks, the funeral directors) had a choice of how to respond to the challenger. Sometimes, business turns out to be usual for a reason, and disruption could harm the customer; sometimes not, and technological innovation can only improve matters.

Disruption theory comes to us from the [academic literatures of business management](#) and merits a closer look if we are to use it to get a handle on political leadership. The theory distinguishes market incumbents from new entrants. Incumbents' ability to correctly diagnose genuinely disruptive innovation is crucial to their survival: there are win-win scenarios, when markets expand. There are also unseemly crashes. New entrants' chances of truly up-ending the status quo reside in the novelty of their business model: disruption is primarily process, not merely product (or service). Disruption has come to connote success in the business world, but it can just as equally fail: high risk is

built into the very nature of disruption. Successful disruptors target the 'overlooked': the customers who the incumbents have, for one reason or other, neglected.

The meaning of Macron (II)

President Macron has not just divided attention: he has provoked remarkably bilious criticism that on occasions can come across as hatred or prejudice. Bile currently runs close to the surface in politics, and not just in France: we are living in sensitive times and the stakes, domestic and geopolitical alike, are uncomfortably high.

Emmanuel Macron's election manifesto promised a Révolution. Perhaps the incumbents of French politics should have taken him at his word. He was a new entrant in the literal sense, forming his Obama-like political movement En Marche! only a year before the 2017 campaign, and to the surprise of the incumbent parties. He notably outplayed the other would-be disruptors of the French political scene, Jean-Luc Mélenchon and Marine le Pen, in both cases partly by luck. France's traditional, incumbent parties lay in tatters once the political typhoon of 2017 was spent, their resilience now depending on a correct diagnosis of the nature of the threat of this new entrant.

If Macron is to be a successful disruptor of French politics, then his constitutional reform will have to stick, his party La République en Marche (LREM) will have to cohere, his policies will need to bear fruit, and the 'overlooked' will need to consider themselves better served by the new kid, and commit their support.

Even where the levers are accessible to president Macron, the signs are not good, and own goals have already been scored in this first half of the 2017-2021 presidency. The parliamentary discussion of the constitutional reform bill was postponed while the French presidency scrambled to contain the [Benalla affair](#). That scandal raised ethical questions about the conduct of the presidential inner circle, damaging Macron's self-image as a president with integrity.

LREM is showing its cracks, including over the content of the proposed constitutional reform itself. Macron's government has seen resignations and departures, and a reshuffle is imminent at the time of writing. Macron has been explicit that policy reform is a slow burn process, and that his eyes are fixed on a 10-year horizon, but today's politics demands the instant fix, and his mandate is a short five years.

Macron has succeeded in passing certain labour law reforms but is struggling to shake off an image as elitist and friend of the rich. Those who felt overlooked by the system and who turned their backs on the established parties are not all Macron fans: far from it. He barely squeaked into the second round of the presidential election ahead of Mélenchon and le Pen, and his voters in the second round run-off are a disparate collection from across the generations and social classes, not a stable electoral base.

Not only incumbents but also disruptors can misread the 'market' – the political climate. Perhaps Macron is ahead of his time, or perhaps he is a fake disruptor in the first place, a one-man machine for the sort of hypermasculine occupation and projection of political power that is all too familiar to us. And perhaps the theory of disruption has no place in politics. Voters are not consumers, nations are not markets, and political parties are not businesses. Politics is a human endeavour at heart, and political leaders are flawed humans. These flawed humans must, in today's democracies at least, operate alongside substantial organisational inertia.

A rival theory from the business world argues that successful disruption requires 'architectural innovation' – the remaking of the organisation itself. Contemporary France – the 'organisation' in question here - is a country with a very strong narrative of self, making the stakes of disruption particularly high. Perhaps an early lesson from the case of Macron is that in politics, disruption will fail, absent a Révolution.

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