

# Ethnic nationalism was the real winner in the French presidential election

*Emmanuel Macron's reelection as French President has been presented by some observers as a victory for liberalism against the populism of Marine Le Pen. Eric Taylor Woods, Marcus Closen, Alex Fortier-Chouinard, Catherine Ouellet and Robert Schertzer write that while Macron may have retained the presidency, the real story of the election was the prominent role played by ethnic nationalism.*

The 2022 French presidential election is over, and many liberal observers are collectively sighing with relief. In a remarkable repeat of the 2017 election, moderate incumbent Emmanuel Macron won the presidency in the run-off by beating far-right, ethnic nationalist challenger Marine Le Pen.

This was no doubt an impressive result – Macron is the first sitting president to win a second term since 2002. Does this mean that moderation has triumphed over extremism, [as some observers have suggested](#)? Should we now expect [a return to “normal” liberal politics](#), against an insurgent ethnic nationalist political programme that was always too extreme for French political culture? In our view, this interpretation of Macron's win is naïve at best. Le Pen may have lost the election, but ethnic nationalism looks set to remain a potent force in mainstream French politics.

## Ethnic nationalism in France

Ethnic nationalism poses a problem for liberal democracies because it argues that the nation should be restricted to people who share the same history and culture. In its most extreme version, ethnic nationalism depicts foreigners and ethnic minorities as dangerous threats to “our” way of life who should therefore be excluded. This is a defining feature of Marine Le Pen's politics.

Le Pen and her party – National Rally, formerly National Front – have long been the flag-bearers of ethnic nationalism in French politics. Her father Jean-Marie, who led the party from its founding in 1972 until his departure in 2011, was known for his anti-Semitic, racist and anti-immigrant positions [based on a deep-seated ethnocentric worldview](#).

When Marine Le Pen took over in 2012, she began a [process of “de-demonising” the party](#) to broaden its appeal. Despite this stated goal, her presidential campaigns in 2012 and 2017 were still anchored by an ethnic nationalism with strong anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim positioning. In 2017 Le Pen promoted her ethnic nationalism [through a “national republicanism”](#) that argued the values of equality and liberty are uniquely French traits being threatened by migrants and Muslims.

Much has been made of Le Pen's purported [approach of playing down her ethnic nationalism even more in 2022](#), focusing on economic issues instead of immigration. But we need to keep in mind that despite these shifts, the core of Le Pen's supporters know exactly who they are voting for – and what policies and positions she has been promoting for the past decade in French politics.

More to the point, while slightly tempered, ethnic nationalism remained a core ideology of Le Pen's manifesto. It notably [included a proposal to ban the wearing of the hijab in public spaces](#). More overtly, she proposed holding a referendum to “drastically” reduce immigration, [because in her view the election was](#) “about our civilisation,” and so she asked “will France remain France, or be brushed aside by the uncontrolled torrent of massive migration flows that will wipe out our culture, our values, our way of life?”

It is for this reason that we argue ethnic nationalism just had its best showing in a French presidential election. Le Pen increased her vote share in the second round from 33.9% in 2017 to 41.4% in 2022. But this rise alone is not why we think ethnic nationalism is on the rise in France. First time candidate and media personality Eric Zemmour – [an overt ethnic nationalist](#) – garnered 7.07% of the vote in the first round with a campaign that focused on the defence of *La France douce* against the perceived threat of an impending Muslim majority. Perhaps more tellingly, Macron has been [increasingly adopting ethnic nationalist ideas](#) in his attempts to head off the rise of Zemmour and Le Pen, [notably through his support for fighting “Muslim separatism.”](#)

## Deep roots

What is going on here? Why is ethnic nationalism so attractive in France – the self-proclaimed birthplace of liberal democratic ideals? As in the United States, which has also experienced its resurgence of ethnic nationalism, most analysts point to the growth of inequality in recent decades, [which has made people who have been “left behind” particularly susceptible to the ideas of ethnic nationalism](#). This explanation is partly true. But it fails to explain why it is *specifically* ethnic nationalism, and not another ideology, that is proving to be so attractive. Of course, we have also seen socialism become more prominent, but as the election in France showed us so dramatically, it is nowhere near as potent.

In [a recent book](#), we argue that to understand ethnic nationalism’s appeal in France, and across the countries of the West, we need to recognise that it is a longstanding and core part of their political cultures. Ethnic nationalism is not something that only happens “out there” in countries outside of the West. It is also not simply an aberration that happens in exceptional times of crisis. Ethnic nationalism is so attractive as an ideology because its ideas about who “we” are – framing the core of the nation as white, native-born, native-speaking, Christians – are deeply rooted.

Until recently these ideas were tempered by a desire to forge more inclusive societies following the horrors of the second world war. However, Le Pen’s, and others’, willingness to give voice to ethnic nationalism is returning it to the political mainstream. Furthermore, this trend appears to be gathering pace. As the interim president of the National Rally [stated following the election](#), “if we gain 10 points every [presidential election], next time we’ll win.” In order to confront this dangerous ideology, we need to start by recognising that it is a part of who “we” are.

***For more information, see Eric Taylor Woods and Robert Schertzer’s new book, [The New Nationalism in America and Beyond: The Deep Roots of Ethnic Nationalism in the Digital Age](#) (Oxford University Press, 2022), which builds on their work leading a transatlantic research team exploring the rise of ethnic nationalism in the West.***

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*Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [Anthony Choren](#) on [Unsplash](#)*

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