

In and out: Emmanuel Macron's anti-populist populism

blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2017/04/28/macron-anti-populist-populism/

2017-4-28

*Emmanuel Macron has cultivated an image as a political outsider, but some of his critics accuse him of being more closely integrated with the French establishment than he claims. **Fabio Bordignon** characterises Macron's candidacy as 'anti-populist populism', suggesting that despite appealing to the political centre and being staunchly pro-EU, Macron has adopted a form of 'soft populism' to capitalise on the current anti-establishment political climate in France.*



Emmanuel Macron, the great favourite of the French presidential race, is the ideal target for populists. He embodies everything that populists detest. A graduate of the *École nationale d'administration* (ENA), an investment banker from the "global" Rothschild, he clearly belongs to the cultural, political, and economic elite. A former minister in the socialist government, and former member of François Hollande's presidential staff, he is in many ways an incumbent. And he believes in Europe(!), the great enemy of populist rhetoric. Yet, he could win. Indeed, he is the likely winner of the run-off vote on 7 May. How could it happen, in this populist age? And what kind of "anti-populist lesson" does Macron's message suggest?

According to some observers, Macron is living proof that "the system" can resist the populist wave. More and better, he is living proof that a political leader can oppose populist insurgents, like Marine Le Pen, using opposite arguments and opposite recipes. But Macron's profile and words tell, at the same time, a different story: quite the opposite, in fact. If we analyse Macron's discourse and project, we find all the symptoms that mark today's democratic malaise, and populists' responses to it.

Macron has been able to present himself as an outsider. The French candidate is not a professional politician. He is young: an *enfant prodige*. His political machine is a brand-new personal movement, created from scratch a few months before the elections. Despite having its roots in well-known cultural organisations, *En Marche!* can be described as an *anti-party party*, or a *non-party*, as the Italian Beppe Grillo would call it. Like Grillo, Macron thinks that political parties, with their 'continuous, imperfect compromises', 'are dead'. Furthermore, Macron places his political creature beyond the traditional left-right political spectrum: an 'old division which no longer allows us to face the world's and [the] country's challenges'.

Taking advantage of an anti-establishment political climate, fuelled by political scandals, Macron pushes mainstream parties – 'Always the same persons. Always the same discourses. Always the same arguments' – out of the system. In so doing, he breaks the traditional bi-polar scheme. Actually, he breaks the rules of the Fifth Republic. For all these reasons, he can be described as an anti-system leader. The French candidate presents himself *in* and *out* of the system: he is part of it, but he wants to 're-found' it.



What about the European system? The *new man* of French politics has been repeatedly described as a pro-EU leader, a Europeanist: but what kind of Europeanism is Macron's? Macron writes that we need (more) Europe, for example enhancing a European defence system. At the same time, he says we need to 're-found Europe' as well. He does not suggest dumping the EU or the euro, as Marine Le Pen and other hard populists do, but he thinks the European project should be re-written in 'democratic conventions', to be launched in Autumn 2017. This process will involve governments and citizens, and will be followed by a European referendum. Because 'Europeanists have had too much fear of democracy so far. We cannot advance Europe without the peoples'.

And here we are at the heart of the populist question. Populism, in all its different expressions, plays on the contradictions of democracy. As Marco Tarchi puts it, populism can be best described as the 'uncomfortable guest' of democracy. It evokes the myth of an *ideal democracy*, conceived as the self-governing people. And it stresses the flaws of *real democracy*, denouncing its oligarchic deviations: hence, the need to bring the people back in, to democratise democracy. That's why a distant and self-referential, unintelligible and unaccountable Europe – in the eyes of many European citizens – has become an easy target for the populists. In this sense, Macron's approach to the EU can be described as the expression of *Europeanist populism*. In a broader sense, his populism can be seen as a case of *soft populism*, a homeopathic remedy to the *hard populism* expressed by his competitor: an *anti-populist populism*.

A few weeks ago, another European leader, Mark Rutte, described his electoral success as a victory over the 'wrong populism' (represented by Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom). Undoubtedly, the Dutch Prime Minister, in the last weeks of the electoral campaign, ventured into populist territory with his strong statements about migration and the Islam issue. Macron is in favour of an open society, even though 'protect the French' is a central chapter in his manifesto: *Révolution*. Nevertheless, his project can also be seen as a different attempt to interpret some of the populists' 'reasons': to propose a 'better populism' which can beat populism using its own weapons.

Will he be able to preserve this (ambiguous) *soft populist* profile in the future? The French semi-presidential system might favour Macron's rise to the Élysée. The French *republican front* – the traditional barrier against radical forces – might help him stop the populist threat represented by Marine Le Pen. Nevertheless, as Marta Lorimer has written in [this blog](#), "while the presidential race is crucial in determining who will head France, it may not determine who will govern it". It's still uncertain whether the next French President will have a coherent parliamentary majority after the legislative elections in June. This holds for Marine Le Pen, the leader of a radical – hence, isolated – political force. But the risk is high also for the leader of a new-born (non)party, like Macron. In this highly fragmented political landscape, the 'government epidemic' described by Anna Bosco and Susannah Verney in a [recent article](#), could

affect France too, “shaking the process of government formation”, and thus “undermining the stability of the executives”.

Of course, the first-month honeymoon effect might favour the electoral performance of *En Marche!* In any case, Macron’s centrist position could make it easier for him to build a parliamentary coalition: an anti-populist coalition. But this may come at a price: he will be forced to compromise with the traditional political parties.

This unprecedented kind of cohabitation between a party-less President and the parliamentary majority might produce very different effects on Macron’s profile and the future of his leadership. Maybe, it will allow the President to preserve his outsider/insider profile: someone who is, simultaneously, part of the establishment and against it. But it could also foster Macron’s fast normalisation, making him, once more, the ideal target for hard populists. Such a process has perhaps already begun with the endorsements Macron received from the traditional party-leaders. Will they help his rise to the Élysée?

Please read our comments policy before commenting.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics. Featured image: [Gouvernement français](#) (CC BY SA 3.0).

About the author

Fabio Bordignon – *University of Urbino Carlo Bo*

Fabio Bordignon teaches Political Science at the University of Urbino Carlo Bo. He tweets [@fabord](#).



-