

# *The* American Conservative

## France Turning Back To Nationalism

Will Emmanuel Macron hold off Marine Le Pen for president?

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By all rights French President Emmanuel Macron should easily win reelection on Sunday. Positioned in the political center, he should draw from the left to outpace Marine Le Pen, whom he beat soundly five years ago. Since then Macron has kept France at peace while asserting French international leadership.

However, he has struggled to relate to working class voters. Moreover, as in America, foreign policy typically wins few votes. And his policies have fallen short. Frenetic activity in Africa and the Mideast has not arrested declining French influence in those regions. His efforts to woo Russia have also come to little.

*Bloomberg* columnist [Therese Raphael](#) noted that after Ukraine: “There is also a sense that Macron’s grand vision of Europe has taken a hit. He defined France’s mission as restoring Europe as a great, singular civilization, with a leadership role for France. He wanted a security doctrine that built Europe’s ability to balance other powers and gain strategic autonomy.” The continent now feels under threat from Russia and even more dependent on America.

More ominously for Macron, the French political system has shifted in a broadly nationalist and radical direction. Macron, who declared late and refused to debate before the first round, only won among over 60-year-old voters, a shrinking share of the electorate; he came in third among the 18–24-year-old cohort.

More than half of first-round ballots went to the most extreme candidates, two on the right and one on the left. Voters essentially wiped out the moderate right and left, Republicans and Socialists, respectively, the traditional governing parties that ruled the fifth republic until Macron’s rise atop an entirely new party. Together, they gained less than 7 percent, compared to 56 percent a decade ago and 26 percent five years ago. Neither received the 5 percent necessary to win government reimbursement of their electoral expenses. The Greens also fell short. A new rightwing candidate, a professional journalist who formed his party just three months ago, humiliated the establishment parties by receiving 7.1 percent.

Macron is making populist appeals and is still favored to win—the *Economist* gives him a 93 percent likelihood of victory, for instance—but the margin is expected to be narrow. Five years ago he won the run-off with about two-thirds of the vote. The latest poll aggregates show Macron with about 56 percent.

Several factors make the race closer. Le Pen eliminated the overt xenophobia and antisemitism that characterized the earlier incarnation of the National Rally party founded by her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen. She also downplayed previous criticism of the European Union and instead focused on pocketbook and other populist issues. Among them, the cost of living, public services, “social inequalities,” Macron’s proposed pension reforms, a job and service preference for French citizens, and, most unusual, national referendums, to stage what she termed “a revolution by referendum.”

Moreover, the left has soured on Macron—who moved rightward once in office. Critics complain that he now “is chasing voters on the right by focusing on law and order, promising to double the number of police on the streets.” Yet some leftwing nationalists will back Le Pen to upend the status quo. In an echo of the 2016 U.S. presidential race, in which some Bernie Sanders voters supported Donald Trump, polls indicate that Le Pen will pick up a significant share of the hardline leftwing vote which went to Jean-Luc Melenchon in the first round. In conceding he criticized Le Pen, but so far has not endorsed Macron.

The possibility of a Le Pen victory has unnerved the Eurocratic elite that dominates Brussels and most European governments. Although such a result once was seen as inconceivable, in 2016 the British public shocked even many Brexit backers by voting to leave the E.U. And she is running much closer to Macron than in 2017.

France has a strong presidency, which would give Le Pen a sizable platform. And she would hold that position when continental leadership was weak, following last year’s departure of Germany’s Angela Merkel. Although Berlin has been France’s traditional E.U. partner, today it is still adapting to an ungainly tripartite coalition and thus would have a more difficult time restraining an assertive Le Pen. Moreover, Le Pen’s victory would revive the morale and political prospects of nationalist groups across the continent.

To the chagrin of those seeking a consolidated continental state, Le Pen would pose a major threat, much greater than previous E.U. bete noires, including Austria, Hungary, Poland, and the United Kingdom. (In her Frenchness, she even promised to reduce the dominance of English in E.U. proceedings!)

Although she moderated her formerly hostile stance toward the E.U., she would limit its authority: “Nobody is against Europe. We want to reform the European Union from within. The more we free ourselves from the straitjacket of Brussels while remaining in the EU, the more we will look to the wider world.”

Critics warn that her program would conflict with the E.U.’s aims. Eurasia Group’s Mujtaba Rahman insisted that “A Le Pen victory on April 24 would have disastrous implications for the European Union.” He explained: “Though Le Pen now claims she does not want to leave the EU,

almost all of her economic program, and much of her social and migration policy, depends on breaking EU laws.”

Rahman dismissed Le Pen’s new positions as a political ploy. He fears that she intends Frexit by stealth—or at the very least, to mimic “Hungary’s policy of disruption and disobedience,” which he believes “would make the union unworkable and raise the prospect of its collapse.”

A Le Pen victory also would widen European divisions over Russia. Vladimir Putin’s attack on Ukraine put Moscow’s friends, such as Hungary’s Viktor Orban, on the defensive and discouraged them from obstructing aid to Kyiv. During the campaign Le Pen also downplayed past praise of Russia and Putin. However, though supporting intelligence and other defense aid for Ukraine, she opposed weapons transfers, warning that “the line is thin between aid and becoming a co-belligerent.” She also criticized sanctions with a major domestic economic impact.

Her victory would embolden other opponents of the E.U. campaign against Russia, who were cowed by the explosion of popular support for Ukraine. She very likely would block further restrictions on energy purchases from Russia. Finally, she urged improving relations with Moscow once the Russo-Ukraine war ends. Said Le Pen: “As soon as the Russian-Ukrainian war is over and has been settled by a peace treaty, I will call for the implementation of a strategic rapprochement between NATO and Russia.”

However, France’s influence reaches well beyond Europe. One of only nine nuclear powers and five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, Le Pen wants France to be a country that “still counts.”

Which means explicitly moving away from Germany, NATO, and the U.S. She dismissed “French blindness toward Germany,” contending that the two nations’ interests clashed. She explained: “Germany casts itself as the absolute opposite of the French strategic identity, founded on independence, nuclear dissuasion and a model army.” Thus, she continued, “Taking account of these fundamental differences, we will put an end to all [military] co-operation with Berlin: the future fighter aircraft, the future tank, and continue with our own programs.”

Le Pen also would resurrect the Gaullist position toward the transatlantic alliance, pulling out of NATO’s integrated command structure. She said she “would place our troops neither under an integrated NATO command nor under a future European command.” She has said less about U.S.-French relations, but opposed “subjection to an American protectorate.”

Not all Le Pen’s positions are at odds with more conventional U.S. and European opinion. For instance, she noted that “Allowing Russia to create a superpower with China is the worst idea.” A number of Americans have made the same point.

Moreover, many of her populist themes resonate beyond France, including in America. Wrote the *Wall Street Journal*’s Gerard Baker:

Here is the cultural alienation from a progressive hegemony in the West's major political, academic, media and artistic institutions; anger at the vast economic inequalities produced by globalization; a loss of morale from reversals in foreign wars and the rise of alternative civilizational models; unease at an officially sanctioned uncontrolled immigration that changes the character of nationhood and citizenship; frustration at the failure to address the rot exposed by the global financial crisis; resistance to the new religion of universal climate-change compliance with its costly implications for energy consumers; and, most recently, seething fury with the little autocrats in government and health bureaucracies decreeing lockdowns, masks and vaccine mandates.

Still, whatever Macron's failings, the new and improved Marine Le Pen deserves skepticism. Her party's unsavory history cannot be easily bleached away. Her newly claimed moderation looks more convenient than heartfelt. Her economic program is a political mishmash. However, the unexpectedly close run-off highlights popular frustration with France's governing elite, which has failed to address the concerns of many French voters. If Macron wins, he would be wise to prioritize not foreign affairs or E.U. policy, but the interests of his countrymen.

History has not ended in France. The traditional governing parties have crashed and burned as the hard right has risen. Marine Le Pen has an opportunity to break multiple glass ceilings. Even a near miss would demonstrate that populism remains a potent force across Europe.

If she triumphs, the continent is likely to see a popular explosion even larger than that which greeted Brexit. And the U.S. will face another serious challenge to its leadership, this time from one of its traditional allies.

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