

Three Challenges for a Macron Presidency And Two Recommendations for Germany

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A Macron presidency could be the last chance for liberal-minded politicians to reform France and the EU. Failure to do so may pave the way in five years' time for a far-right or far-left president who would then begin undoing the EU.

If Sunday's French presidential election brought relief to Berlin and other European capitals, it also marked a political earthquake that will reverberate across the entire continent.

Before that first round of voting, nervous Europeans feared the worst: a possible run-off between two extremist candidates, Marine Le Pen on the far right and Jean-Luc Mélenchon on the far left. So the fact that the pro-European, independent candidate Emmanuel Macron won the largest share of votes provided some consolation. Interestingly, however, Marine Le Pen's strong finish in second place caused comparatively little public concern.

Times have changed. Back in 2002, the unexpected success of Le Pen's father in the first round of the presidential elections sent shock waves through the European Union and France. People took to the streets in spontaneous demonstrations, brandishing signs that read "J'ai honte" (I am ashamed).

Nothing of the sort happened this week in France. Commentators and observers concentrated on the newcomer Macron. This shows just how entrenched the Front National has become in France. Indeed the party's anti-European positions overlap with those of Mélenchon and other far-left and far-right candidates, who together won about 45 percent of the French vote.

If elected, Macron will be the youngest president in French history, with little previous governmental experience. And even if he already commands respect abroad, notably in Germany, the former economics minister will

face an immensely challenging political job in his home country. There are at least three reasons for this, which in turn explains why France needs to stay high on the German and European agenda.

A Political System in Disarray

First, if Macron is elected, he will take over a country whose political system is in turmoil and could turn against Europe. France's two formerly mainstream parties, Les Republicains and the Socialists, suffered tremendous defeats on April 23. With only 6.4 percent of the vote going to the Socialist candidate Benoît Hamon, his party is likely to crumble further.

Macron attracted moderate and progressive socialists, but many other Socialists were drawn to the ex-Trotskyist Mélenchon, who came from behind to gain a remarkable 19.6 percent of the vote. France's far left has not to date had much impact on France's Europe policies. This may change, however, if the traditionally pro-European Socialist party disintegrates and leaves the field to the anti-EU far left.

The center-right is in a similar dilemma. The absence of a conservative from the run-off marks an historic first. The Republicains will now put both their leadership and their positions under serious review. François Fillon

was seen by many as the only other Europe-compatible candidate in the first round, after Macron, but his platform did not always show the strongest commitment to Europe.

Granted, it was Fillon's personal scandals rather than his policy positions that cost him a place in the second round of the elections. All the same, the party's reflexive instinct to stress the importance of national sovereignty may become even stronger as the party feels the rising pressure from the far right. We are likely to see future Republicanists arguing far more stridently for French interests and privileging intergovernmental agreements over the decision-making powers of the supranational institutions in Brussels.

In short, the two main parties that once carried the European message to French citizens – ensuring their broad support for the idea that a strong Europe is in France's interest – will probably not be up to this job in the future. The trend in fact started much earlier. That the political elite was losing command of public opinion on EU issues first surfaced in the referendum vote on the Constitutional Treaty in 2005.

National policy makers will have to re-connect to French citizens who are either not interested in or are hostile to future European integration and cooperation. The EU's political system does not have the capacity to achieve this, as European parties and strong trans-European movements have yet to emerge. Whatever the political composition of the parliament and government after this summer's legislative elections, France's new leaders will have to engage in an intense two-way conversation – one that brings both the European message to France and French interests to the debate on the future of the EU. Macron has a particular commitment in this regard. He stands for the renewal of politics and a movement that claims to renew political participation.

Healing a Divided Country

Macron's second challenge if he is elected would be to heal a bitterly divided country. In a pattern reminiscent of last year's Brexit referendum and Trump's victory in the US election, the first round of the French election showed a new degree of radicalization, calling into question even France's openness to the world. Some 45 percent of voters chose either a far-right or a far-left candidate, and the electoral map shows a France divided into rural and urban areas. The anti-establishment vote was huge.

If elected, Macron may have a hard time proving that he is not part of the system and that he listens closely to the people. Yes, he has cast himself as an outsider; but

he is also the product of elite universities and a former investment banker and a minister. Populist parties will use that against him.

The question of how France engages the EU of the future must be understood as one aspect of a much deeper set of identity questions. The populist candidates, and particularly Le Pen and Mélenchon, touted a nationalistic, illiberal, inward-looking France that they would “liberate” from European, international, capitalistic – and yes, also German – constraints. It will be daunting but deeply necessary to engage those who see this model of France as their future in a debate on European and Franco-German cooperation.

Third, if Macron wins the presidency he will need to make clear that the reform of France goes hand in hand with progress in Europe. In a speech he gave at Berlin's Humboldt University last January he showed that he understands this connection. But to deliver on his promises, he needs parliamentary support and a cooperative government at home. And he needs support in Europe.

Recommendations for Germany

These challenges are reason enough for Germany to want to work closely with the new president. One of Berlin's major tasks is to listen closely to the concerns that prevail in the French domestic debate. Pro-European French have claimed over the years that the EU needs to be in a better position to protect European (read: French) interests. This message is likely to reemerge. Even if the narrative of protection runs against German intuitions about a single market Europe and a free-trade world, ignoring such French concerns would carry tremendous political costs. The “No” campaign against the EU Constitutional Treaty in 2005 amply demonstrated the extent to which France's deeply rooted anti-liberalism can fuel anti-EU sentiment if offered the right “points of attack.”

Germany will also need to help the new French leader to enact domestic reforms by making a credible European argument for increasing growth, investment, and employment. While it is surely true that France needs to reform if it is to perform well under the conditions of the single market and European Monetary Union, Europe and Germany must avoid being perceived as a bully, which would only feed the Germanophobic stereotypes spread by French populists.

For Germany, this implies that if Europe is to move forward with France – even under the leadership of a new, pro-European president – something has to give. Berlin should review its partially rigid stances on euro-area issues to enable a compromise that minimizes the risk for

Germany and, at the same time, enables more growth-sustaining policies. It should also seek more coordination with France in foreign policy and defense.

These are controversial subjects in Germany. But to keep France on its side for the sake of Europe, now is the time to make hard decisions.

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