

Is the French presidential election a referendum on EU membership ?

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Executive Summary

- > European issues are traditionally poorly addressed in French political debates. They are all the less present in 2017, due to the campaign's main focus on current legal cases and the ongoing political reconfigurations.
- > However, Europe is one of the fundamental dividing lines of the campaign. The majority of the 11 candidates have developed a highly Eurosceptic discourse. Only Emmanuel Macron (EM), François Fillon (LR) and Benoît Hamon (PS) have adopted a moderate position on the matter.
- > This rejection of EU integration is above all a reflection of the rise of populism. The arguments behind this rejection appear weak.
- > Abroad, the French election is worrying observers because of its uncertain character, judged to be a form of referendum on France's EU membership.
- > Nevertheless, the presidential election is only the first step in a longer electoral sequence: it will be followed by equally uncertain legislative elections.

European integration has never been a central theme in French political debates, let alone during the presidential election campaigns. Paradoxically, while foreign policy - and therefore European policy - is largely the President's responsibility, the candidates are not very loquacious on the subject. However, this year, European issues have emerged as the backdrop of the campaign, in a context of rising populism and euro-scepticism on a continental scale. France's

relationship with the EU leads to little clearly argued discussions or precise proposals, but it created a fundamental dividing line amongst the candidates, in a globally Eurosceptic context.

The reasons behind the candidates' lack of interest in the EU

The European issue is generally less prominent in the founding countries of the European Community than in the more recent member states: EU membership appears obvious to them, and public action seems to be irremediably Europeanized. In France, however, European issues are not particularly present, and especially not during campaigns for the presidential elections. The presidential function is directly linked to the idea of French sovereignty: the President is considered as the leader of a major actor in international relations, sitting on the UN Security Council and owning nuclear weapons. It is therefore difficult for the candidates to admit that the country is closely intertwined to a supranational structure whose influence is felt in most areas of public action, and that France may be required to respect EU institutions' decisions, even when French representatives were opposed to them. This acknowledgement of powerlessness is usually confessed later by the President-elect, when it seems appropriate for him to explain why 'Brussels' prevents the fulfilment of certain electoral promises.

The two main French political families are also reluctant to take a stand on European issues. On the right, the conservatives [RPR, then UMP and today Les Républicains (LR)] have always been divided between a sovereigntist wing, attached to a Gaullian – and thus intergovernmental – conception of European construction, and a more liberal wing, accommodating the Community method. This political cleavage has led to deep divisions at certain moments in history, such as the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty (1992) or the

Constitutional Treaty (2005). On the left, the French Socialist Party (PS) has always been divided on the European issue. In the European Parliament, since the early 1950s, the French PS members have regularly been among the most critical. François Mitterrand imposed a 'pro-European' line in 1983, but the Socialist Party's united front had already been cracked during the referendum campaign on the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty and then shattered to pieces with the referendum on the Constitutional Treaty.

Since then, the PS has been deeply divided between the partisans and opponents of European integration. The former, often referred to as 'social-liberals', are in favour of the EU's institutions and policies. The latter, who have opposed François Hollande's policy since his election, have a critical approach to the Union, which is considered too liberal and too prone to limit public spending. In both parties, the European issue thus provokes cleavages which can only be overcome by silencing it. The other parties do not have this difficulty. France thus presents a political spectrum where virulent Euroscepticism reigns at the extremes, as well as on the left and on the right, where the centre (Left Radicals, Greens, Modem, UDI) is strongly Pro-European, and where the two main political parties (PS and LR) each ensure, through their internal divisions, a form of continuity between pro- and anti-European.

An unclear electoral campaign

Beyond the candidates' limited interest in European issues and the lack of appetite of French journalists for the subject, the 2017 presidential campaign left only a limited place for a substantive debate on the major political themes. This campaign has indeed distinguished itself by its great confusion.

The legal troubles of two main candidates have largely mobilised the media. Indeed, François Fillon (LR) has been the subject of various charges relating to the fictitious employment of his relatives, and Marine Le Pen (FN) has been sued for the misappropriation of staffing resources allocated her political group by the European Parliament.

On the left, the situation was no less confused: the primary elections which led to the designation of Benoît Hamon (PS), has indeed aroused irreconcilable divergences. Some of the PS militants and elected officials chose to rally the candidacy of Emmanuel Macron, the former Minister of Economic Affairs, who runs as an independent candidate (En Marche!), with a centrist position. Other members of the PS turned to

Jean-Luc Mélenchon (La France Insoumise), the candidate of a more radical left. This situation explains the harsh criticisms between the three main left-wing candidates throughout the campaign, and did not allow them to focus on their programmatic options.

Lastly, the April 2016 amendment to the presidential election rules did not reduce the number of contenders, which is in line with previous elections. In addition to the five candidates already mentioned, there are another six candidates from marginal groups : Nicolas Dupont-Aignan (Debout la France) proposes a conservative and a sovereigntist direction; Nathalie Arthaud (Lutte Ouvrière) and Philippe Poutou (Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste) embody two nuances of the extreme left; Jacques Cheminade (Solidarité & Progrès) is in the wake of American politician Lyndon Larouche, with an 'altruistic protectionist' program that is difficult to classify; Jean Lassalle (Resistons!) is a centrist candidate, with an atypical profile; finally, François Asselineau (Union Populaire Républicaine) is a nationalist and radically anti-European. The rules designed to ensure an equal access to the media for all candidates adds to the confusion, by placing on equal footing representatives of political parties with hundreds of parliamentarians, and those of small groups, sometimes having no real political presence.

Europe in the prism of populism

Europe has, nevertheless, had its place in the presidential campaign, but in a rather peculiar way. It should first be noted that all the candidates, with the exception of Emmanuel Macron, had spoken out against the ratification of the Constitutional Treaty. Moreover, for those who were already in politics, they had also rejected the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty. Criticism towards the EU thus appeared as a kind of constant in the campaign. During the televised debate which brought together the 11 candidates on 4 April 2017 (BFMTV and CNews), the EU was therefore subjected to an outpour of hostile statements.

No less than five of the 11 candidates defend positions implying explicitly or implicitly a French exit from the EU in the name of restoring France's sovereignty, and rejecting the EU vision of the economy or of society. These five candidates are: François Asselineau, Marine Le Pen, Philippe Poutou, Nicolas Dupont Aignan and Jacques Cheminade. The other six are less radical, but not necessarily less critical. Nathalie Arthaud denounces, like Philippe Poutou, European integration as a system in the hands of the financial powers, but contemplates the possibility of a reversal of logic,

notably within the framework of an alliance between France and southern European countries. Jean-Luc Mélenchon and Benoît Hamon share the hope that European integration can be reoriented towards recovery through growth and investment. Mélenchon has long condemned the excesses of liberal European integration and called to reject austerity policies and leave the Euro. Hamon said he was in favour of European integration and benefited from the withdrawal of Yannick Jadot, the candidate representing the green pro-European 'Europe écologie/Les Verts' party. However, he dismissed the Maastricht Treaty as well as the Constitutional Treaty and promotes a treaty aimed at the "democratization" of the EU which draws a stern assessment of its functioning. François Fillon also said he was in favour of European integration. He nevertheless comes from the EU-critical branch of his political family and advocates a very intergovernmental approach, relying heavily on the interactions between heads of state and government. He also focuses on security issues, and makes the reform of the Schengen agreements a priority. The centrist candidate Jean Lassalle refuses to take on the federalist heritage of his political family and, on the question of Europe – as on others – deploys a relatively confused discourse. Only Emmanuel Macron presents himself as clearly pro-European, and is convinced that the EU is the solution to the difficulties that the countries facing, not their cause. Among all the candidates, he is also the only one to openly praise the virtues of the single market and of free movement for the French economy.

A rejection of Europe's populist essence

The Eurosceptic feel that dominates the campaign is not specific to France, but reflects a rise of populism in all advanced democracies. In recent years, parties, movements or candidates have emerged throughout Europe, claiming to speak for the people and to flatter them by proposing radical and simplistic solutions to complex problems, and by designating the persons responsible for the evils that strike contemporary societies. This outbreak is not a coincidence: it results from a context of poly-crisis, but also from a loss of ideological benchmarks. Many citizens are now obsessed with fear of social, economic, political, cultural and environmental decline for themselves, their children and their country, and they no longer believe in a better future. Populist leaders are distinguished by their way of appealing, not to reason or ideology, but to feelings: fear of the future, hatred of foreigners, rejection of elites and institutions, and an

exaggerated exaltation of the nation. The EU is accused of being the cause of immigration, of deindustrialization and social decline, the Trojan horse of globalization and multiculturalism, the promoter of absurd austerity and the dismantling of the welfare state.

The success of the Eurosceptic and populist movements is not only a product of citizens' anguish facing the future: it also results from the government parties' inability to answer to citizens' expectations, to renew their frameworks and discourses, and to surpass the narrow horizon of egotistic quarrels. The current campaign is a striking illustration of this, with, on one hand, the implosion of the PS, worn out by the exercise of power and its inability to resolve its ideological ambivalences, and on the other hand the announced defeat of Les Républicains, victim of conflicts of leadership and the hazardous ethics of its candidate.

Throughout the campaign, populist and Eurosceptic candidates identified the EU as the main source of the difficulties that France has encountered in the economic, social, industrial or budgetary field. They have multiplied references to Brexit and the election of Donald Trump, and have presented the exit from the EU as a disruptive political event likely to give back a voice to 'the people' against 'the establishment'.

With this campaign, France has also entered the era of 'fake news' and 'alternative truths'. The criticisms of the EU pronounced by candidates of all stripes are based largely on fantasies, truncated arguments and invented figures. A high point was reached during the debate on 4 April 2017, bringing together the 11 candidates, during which the most EU-critical multiplied these sort of claims – without ever being contradicted by their rivals or the journalists.

Beyond rejection

If one analyses more closely the candidates' remarks and propositions, three constants emerge:

- Europe is considered, by all, to be the solution or cause of the difficulties facing France, whether it be identity, economy, employment, defence, terrorism, migration, foreign trade or foreign policy more generally. Many candidates are animated by a kind of yearning for a time before globalization and European integration. Marine Le Pen and Jean-Luc Mélenchon, and the small left-wing and extreme-right candidates, want to leave the Union but also NATO and free trade agreements. Emmanuel Macron and François Fillon refuse nostalgia and retreat, and consider

that France must instead follow the example of its neighbours in order to reform and open up to the world. Benoît Hamon also advocates openness, but has declared, as a precondition, the necessity for a deep democratic reform of the European institutions.

- Dialogue with Germany is a second point of common concern for all candidates: it is considered essential, even by those who advocate the withdrawal from the EU or who have developed a hostile discourse towards this key partner accused of imposing its migration policy, promoting budgetary austerity or pursuing a selfish economic and commercial policy.
- The euro is a final subject of common interest and deep divisions. Eurosceptics believe that the euro is responsible for many of France's troubles (relocations, unemployment, deficit, weak growth...) and therefore propose to leave the single currency. Hamon, Fillon and Macron, on the contrary, believe that the euro must be retained, but propose to change the euro zone governance.

Conclusion: the campaign seen from a European perspective

If European issues do not seem very central in the campaign, everywhere in Europe it is considered that the French presidential election will have a decisive impact on the future of the EU. More than ever, European integration is a two-level game whose dynamics are strongly conditioned by the vagaries of national political life.

Among the federalists and in Brussels, the election of Emmanuel Macron is perceived as the possible first step towards a revival of European integration. They are led to hope that his election would be followed by the arrival of Martin Schulz at the German Chancellery in September, and that together these two leaders would take the major initiatives that the EU needs to get out of the rut. A possible success of François Fillon is apprehended as having less impact, as he is considered a man who has already been prime minister for five years. The comments relate more to his legal problems, and to what these say about French political life. The very critical positions of Jean-Luc Mélenchon are worrying, and it is surprising that a 'Communist' may have a chance of winning.

But it is the possibility of the election of Marine Le Pen that attracts the most attention. In many countries there are concerns about the consequences of such an event, with the belief that it would stop European

integration. Even if Mrs Le Pen does not have the political means to launch a formal withdrawal procedure from the EU, her ferocious euroscepticism would mark a halt to its functioning. While abstaining to interfere in the campaign, many European leaders have indicated that they refuse to meet the candidate. On the other hand, Brexit supporters were pleased with the possible success of the FN, hoping that a 'Frexit' would facilitate the negotiations of withdrawal of their own country.

The possible success of the FN also raises concerns for domestic reasons, as many EU members are faced with the rise of populist or extremist parties. In Germany, the anti-refugee and eurosceptic AfD (*Alternative für Deutschland*) party could join the Bundestag in September. In Italy, there is a concern about the influence of the anti-system 'Five Star Movement' and the anti-immigration party 'Northern League'. In the United Kingdom, there are worries that the nationalism that inspired the Brexit and the hard line of Theresa May's government are paradoxically leading to the dismantling of the country. Watching Marine Le Pen fail – as we witnessed with Geert Wilders in the Netherlands and Norbert Hofer in Austria – would be a way of warding off the threat.

The concern about Le Pen's score also stems from the fact that in countries that have a proportional or a one-round majority system, the candidate who leads the first round is expected to win. This is not necessarily the case with a two-round majority vote, and Marine Le Pen has concretely little chance of being elected. In any case, the French presidential election is interesting as well as worrying because it is perceived as a referendum on France's EU membership, given the almost certain presence of at least one Eurosceptic candidate in the second round.

However, the presidential election is only the first step in a longer electoral sequence: just as its results are surrounded by uncertainty, with four candidates neck-and-neck as we grow closer to the first round, the future president, whoever it is, will find it difficult to get a majority in the legislative elections that will follow. France will probably discover the joys of negotiating a coalition government agreement. In this context, European issues could become central – as a rallying point for several parties to the future President – or, on the contrary, be placed completely aside – as a theme that creates irreconcilable divisions.

Further Reading

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