

French presidential election

Emmanuel Macron offers the patriotic antidote to nationalism

Populism prospers because many of the grievances it has tapped into are real

Philip Stephens



© Christophe Morin/Bloomberg

4 HOURS AGO by: **Philip Stephens**

Discard the familiar labels. Emmanuel Macron has broken the mould of French politics. The En Marche! leader says his second-round presidential contest (<https://www.ft.com/french-presidential-election>) with the National Front's Marine Le Pen presents instead a choice between

patriotism and nationalism. He is right. This insight should resonate well beyond France. The dividing line that now matters in rich democracies lies between [patriots and nationalists \(https://www.ft.com/comment/columnists/gideonrachman\)](https://www.ft.com/comment/columnists/gideonrachman).

Populist insurgents across Europe have obscured the distinction. Citizens, they pretend, must choose between fealty to the nation and a wrecking globalism. The flag waving has destabilised mainstream parties of right and left. Some on the right have sought to ride the nationalist tiger. Hence British prime minister Theresa May's unfortunate assertion that citizens of the world are citizens of nowhere. On the left, the common mistake has been to disavow any display of allegiance as xenophobia.

[Mr Macron \(https://www.ft.com/content/02e61cc4-28de-11e7-bc4b-5528796fe35c\)](https://www.ft.com/content/02e61cc4-28de-11e7-bc4b-5528796fe35c), the insider-outsider of European politics, has met the populists head on. Defying Mrs May's binary choice, he proclaims himself an internationalist and a proud citizen of France.

We have been here before. Surveying the forces that plunged Europe into war during the 1930s, the writer George Orwell saw the same blurring of lines. Patriotism, he wrote, is a positive emotion celebrating national institutions, traditions and values. It is [open and optimistic \(https://www.ft.com/content/bd6cc7da-2a75-11e7-bc4b-5528796fe35c\)](https://www.ft.com/content/bd6cc7da-2a75-11e7-bc4b-5528796fe35c).

[com/content/bbf10244-29b3-11e7-bc4b-5528796fe35c](https://www.ft.com/content/bbf10244-29b3-11e7-bc4b-5528796fe35c)). Nationalism is an altogether darker force, rooted at once in superiority and paranoia.

Patriots have no quarrel with the choices made by others. Nationalists look for enemies, framing international relations as a zero-sum game. The thoughts of the nationalist, Orwell observed, “always turn on victories, defeats, triumphs and humiliations”.

He might have been talking about today’s Europe. Nationalists across the continent have destabilised the postwar liberal order by peddling the politics of exclusion and vilification. Petty tyrants such as Hungary’s [Viktor Orban \(https://www.ft.com/content/52e007d6-2a81-11e7-bc4b-5528796fe35c\)](https://www.ft.com/content/52e007d6-2a81-11e7-bc4b-5528796fe35c) exult in their illiberalism. Poland is in the grip of a nationalist party that openly repudiates the values of the EU — though it of course insists on holding on to its access to generous Brussels funding. Beppe Grillo’s anti-European Five Star Movement in Italy threatens to overturn the ancien regime in collaboration with the far-right Northern League.

Ms Le Pen is as true as any to Orwell’s characterisation. Her brand of nationalism is pinched and tribal. Leading a party long soaked in anti-Semitism she has added Islam, Europe and globalisation to the roll of enemies. France, in this mindset, is a civilisation under siege. The

appeal is to the angry and dispossessed. The supposed remedies — state control, vilification of immigrants, and protectionism — is the familiar snake oil of demagogues.

Populism has had purchase because many of the grievances it has tapped are real. Unemployment is unacceptably high, median incomes have stagnated, welfare systems are under pressure and well-heeled bankers who laid low the world economy continue to fill their boots with cash. There should be no surprise that angry voters are receptive to angry slogans. But the populists have profited also from the complacency and timidity of the old elites. Some, like Mrs May, have tacked to the right. Others have stared at their feet. Parties of the centre-left have stood by idly as their traditional supporters have deserted them in droves.

There are many reasons why the UK voted last year to leave the EU, but the failure over many years of British politicians of any persuasion ever to state the compelling case for close co-operation with the rest of the European continent laid the ground for Brexit. The “hard” Brexit and toughening of immigration controls now proposed by Mrs May speak to a fear of open, internationalist politics. Better, in the prime minister’s mind, to risk serious damage to Britain’s security and prosperity than to stand on

the wrong side of the populists of the United Kingdom Independence party.

Mr Macron is the first serious leader to make the patriotic case — to argue that the interests of France and the security, economic and physical, of its citizens rest on recovering a strong voice on the global stage. He is unapologetic in identifying the French economic interest with that of Europe, and of explaining that some of the biggest challenges facing the nation — terrorism and climate change among them — demand international collaboration rather than French retreat. It will seem odd to some that a leader should attract praise for laying out the simple facts of international independence but that in itself is a measure of how far politics has fallen in the face of the populists.

None of this is to say Mr Macron will ultimately be successful in his endeavour. If, as the polls indicate, he secures a comfortable victory over Ms Le Pen in the second-round runoff on May 7, he faces parliamentary elections in June. En Marche! is a movement rather than a party and will struggle to win large numbers of seats in the assembly.

Nor is the would-be president's prescription of domestic reform and international engagement assured of public support: nearly half of the voters in the first round of the presidential poll

back candidates of the extreme right and left.

That said, Mr Macron has illuminated the only path available to supporters of liberal, open societies. Nationalism, as Europe should have learnt, is always destructive. Patriotism is the antidote.

philip.stephens@ft.com (<mailto:philip.stephens@ft.com>)

Print a single copy of this article for personal use. Contact us if you wish to print more to distribute to others. © The Financial Times Ltd.

Latest on French presidential election

French presidential election

Le Pen ambushes Macron at factory gate

Frontrunner talks to union bosses, while FN hopeful turns up to see workers

FT Data

Macron vs Le Pen: the voters they attract

Analysis of presidential election's first round gives clues for decisive run-off

John Gapper

Macron's halo can bring the London spirit to Paris

France's capital could become a European hub for

Follow the topics mentioned in this article

Columnists

Emmanuel

Macron

George

Orwell

Marine

Le

Pen

Europe

technology and
enterprise

Follow the authors of
this article

Special Reports

Special Report **Future of Fintech** Five areas of fintech that are attracting investment

Chinese companies and the
insurance sector are picking up
on opportunities

Special Report **Youth Employment** Germany's apprenticeship scheme success may be hard to replicate

Other countries look to copy a
training model that keeps jobless
rates low for the young

**Philip
Stephens**

[Take a tour of myF](#)

Latest in Columnists

Simon Kuper

My comeback on Trump, Le Pen, Brexit, climate change...

'We liberals can be
maddeningly smug
(though less so since
2016). That in itself
doesn't invalidate
liberal policies'

4 HOURS AGO

Edward Luce

The creeping influence of nepotism in America

The US
president's
family's grip on
power is
unprecedented in
western
democracy

Anjana Ahuja

Silicon Valley philanthropy's downside



Givers have been criticised for wielding disproportionate power over public life
