

A pro-European president for France

Reformist, pro-European leader Emmanuel Macron beat far-right leader Marine Le Pen with 66% of votes in the French presidential elections on 7 May. Voters had a stark choice to make between two radically different visions of France and its place in the world: reinvigoration of the French economy and the European project versus France's removal from the euro, protectionism and drastically curbed immigration. Despite growing populism, 39-year-old Macron appealed to people's hopes, not fears, and won. Although Brussels has been a scapegoat in recent decades, Macron was unabashedly pro-European in his campaign. He intends to reform France for itself, not for either Brussels or Ms Merkel, even though Le Pen tried to portray him as "Ms Merkel's Vice-Chancellor" or as an agent of financial globalization. In a world of profound change (digital, energy and environment, demography,...), he aims to implement economic reforms to encourage risk taking and innovation, seen to be key to raising France's growth potential and creating jobs. He envisions to free energies, fight obstacles and statutes, in order to recreate mobility (geographic, professional, statuses), while securing professional careers from job to job, education to job. He has also stood apart for his youth and his determination to challenge the political establishment, calling for renewed practices in a context of decomposing mainstream political parties. In this age of western populism, France is suffering more profoundly from a triple crisis: a crisis of identity, a lack of shared prosperity and a crisis of democracy. French people are afraid of globalization, they fear their children will not be better off. In such a context, populist Le Pen pretended to have heard the people's voice and to be the people. She called for direct democracy and the modification of the constitution by referendum. This would be a negation of democracy, since it forbids compromise – and democracy is a succession of compromises starting with the preoccupations of the citizens.

Yet, French populism symbolized by Ms Le Pen is unlikely to be defeated for good. Populism and extremism are being increasingly "un-demonized". In 2002, when Marine Le Pen's father reached the second round of the presidential elections, Jacques Chirac won with 80% of votes. This time, one third voted for Marine Le Pen, further "legitimizing" the far right, while abstentions hit 25%, the highest level since 1969.

The new president will have to heal and reconcile a fractured France. Fractures reflected by the four blocks in the first round of the presidential elections; although Macron came first (26%), Le Pen was close behind (21.3%), as were Fillon (right wing, 20% despite the scandals overshadowing his campaign) and Mélenchon (far left, 19%). Emmanuel Macron won on a reformist platform, but 41% of voters backed two anti-euro candidates: far-right Le Pen and far-left Mélenchon.

The stars aligned for Macron, but more challenges lie ahead. Over the last four decades, mainstream political parties have failed to tackle massive unemployment, sluggish growth and rising public debt. Macron's presidency will be challenging. The culture of compromise and reform is not broadly shared in France. Emmanuel Macron's "En Marche" movement, created one year ago, has to secure a presidential majority in the upcoming legislative elections scheduled in June, with candidates arriving from civil society in half of the legislative districts. The mainstream right-wing party, defeated despite five years of unpopular socialist presidency, still hopes to recover in the legislative elections. Whatever the result, resistance to his pro-business, labour market and state overhaul reforms may arise in factories, the public sector and the streets.

He will need to reinvigorate the French economy and the European project, both are linked. He has to demonstrate to his European partners that France is genuinely reforming to regain credibility in Europe and obtain reforms to the EU. This will be a challenge, but there is also growing awareness in some

parts of the German government that failure to do so will ultimately be disastrous for all, including Europe. He will also have to reenergize the desire for Europe among the French people and has vowed to launch “democratic conventions” involving citizens and civil society in different regions to debate what type of future they want for Europe.

The stars will have to align again over the next five years, otherwise populism and extremism may next time win.

Anne MACEY

CONFRONTATIONS EUROPE'S CEO