Article

Technocratic Populism *à la Française*? The Roots and Mechanisms of Emmanuel Macron's Success

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Abstract

This article focuses on the roots and mechanisms of Macron's success, arguing that in 2017 two conditions were essential in Macron's rise—the implosion of the established system of the French Fifth Republic in which the two main parties were alternating in power; and the rise of anti-establishment populist challengers on the right and on the left (cf. Stockemer, 2017; Zulianello, 2020). It was anti-establishment appeal that put Macron on the map, but the appeal to technocratic competence that won him the presidency. Technocratic populism transcends the left–right cleavage and, as a result, has a broader appeal than its left- and right-wing counterparts. Emmanuel Macron was an insider taking on the (crumbling) system and positioning himself as an outsider—refusing the traditional labels, including centrism, elite recruitment patterns, and mediated politics. Instead, Macron and *La Republique en Marche* attempted to create new forms of responsiveness by 'giving voice to the people,' while relying on technocratic competence as a legitimation mechanism. In power Emmanuel Macron attempts to balance responsiveness and responsibility (cf. Guasti & Buštíková, 2020).

1. Introduction

Commentators consider the French presidential election in May 2017 as a disruption (Perrineau, 2017) in the long tradition of French politics. The dramatic changes include failure of the mainstream candidates on the right and the left in the first round of the presidential elections, the use of social media, and a relatively high abstention rate. The most significant change was the winner of the election himself: Emmanuel Macron, a young newcomer. Macron was elected at the age of 39, the youngest elected President of the Fifth republic before him was Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, elected at the age of 48. This youth was also a part of the newness and freshness.

Before the Presidency, Emmanuel Macron never held an elected office. Even though he was Minister of Economy, Industry, and Digital Affairs in Manuel Valls' government (2014–2016), Macron successfully presented himself as an outsider. Macron cultivated the image of a (moderate) challenger of the old system, the only one able to transcend the stale establishment of French politics and reform France, the only candidate to overcome the old sterile French cleavages.

This election seemed to fulfil the idea of a successful third way, neither right nor left, breaking the traditional cleavage typical for the last seven decades of French politics. Emmanuel Macron won both the first and the second round of the presidential elections, even

though it was his first election. This victory of a newcomer was confirmed by the general election results a month later. Macron's new 'party' *La Republique en Marche* (The Republic on the Move, LREM), gained an absolute majority. It enabled Macron to form a Government able to enact Macron's ambitious plan to transform French politics and society. Like their leader, the majority of the new parliamentarians were newcomers and had never held elected office before (LREM lost a part of its deputies quite rapidly, and in the spring of 2020, it lost its absolute majority; Momtaz, 2020). This was seen as evidence of the promise of the renewal of French politics (Surel, 2019).

As in other cases of successful personalist populist parties founded by outsiders and disrupting difunctional party systems (Berlusconi's Forza Italia in 1994 and Babiš's ANO in 2013), Emmanuel Macron's rapid 'march to the power' started officially almost a year before, without clear electoral support, with a relatively weak program and blurred campaign funding (Kuhn, 2017). Berlusconi and Babiš both combined populist and technocratic appeal to broaden their electoral chances. Both have been studied through the lens of technocratic populism, used initially to study Latin America (Buštíková & Guasti, 2019; Castaldo & Verzichelli, 2020; de la Torre, 2013; Havlík, 2019). As Emmanuel Macron shares many of their characteristics, this article applies the technocratic populism perspective to test whether Macron is a technocratic populist.

This article proceeds as follows. In part two, we clarify some of the terminology and concepts (focusing on technocratic populism) used to show how and why Emmanuel Macron (as a leader) matches these categories (as a charismatic leader claiming technocratic competence, against the established political elites). In part three and four we explain how and why Macron's success was possible and to what extent he is a technocratic populist in power, mainly by focusing on the ways he governs.

2. Varieties of Populism and the Technocratic Populism

The debate on the conceptual definition of populism and the terminology is still open (for instance, see Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018).

Some of the commonly used criteria to define populism are 'thin ideology', people vs. elites, specific political rhetoric and style, or strategy. Populism varies across time and space and has many faces beyond the classical (extreme) right-wing (Norris, 2020; Zulianello, 2020). In order to classify whether and what type of populist Emmanuel Macron is, we draw on classical scholars of populism (Canovan, 1999; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018), a contemporary contribution (Buštíková & Guasti, 2019), and theoretical scholarship on similarities and differences between populist and technocratic critiques of party democracy (cf. Bickerton & Accetti, 2017; Caramani, 2017).

Using the literature on varieties of populism (Caiani & Graziano, 2016; Zulianello, 2020) and the case of France, we show the vast differences among various populisms present on the French political scene and the long and rich history of populism in France—for instance, the boulangism (1885–1889) or the poujadism in the 1950s (Birnbaum, 2012; Surel, 2019). We can identify Marine Le Pen and her National Rally (ex-National Front; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018) and Jean-Luc Mélenchon and his France Unbowed (*La France Insoumise*; Ivaldi, 2019; Norris, 2020; Rosanvallon, 2020; Surel, 2019) as populist (Zulianello, 2020). Both represent different populism types, as the host ideology diverges—the National Front is a radical right-wing populist party and France Unbowed, on the contrary, is a radical left-wing populist party. The disparities in terms of leadership, style, rhetoric, and above all in terms of programs are quite significant. However, they share some similarities (like the positioning against the EU; cf. Halikiopoulou, Nanou, & Vasilopoulou, 2012).

At first sight, Emmanuel Macron has nothing in common with Marine Le Pen and Jean-Luc Mélenchon. The Chapel Hill Survey (2019) shows that Macron's LREM is quite far away from the positions of both right-wing and left-wing populist parties, especially on the EU (LREM is broadly pro-European), protectionism, and other policies. Most importantly, compared to the National Front and France Unbowed, Macron's LREM also scores relatively low on anti-elite salience. However, while Emmanuel Macron and his LREM position themselves as the representatives of a moderate part of the French political arena, LREM scores higher on anti-elite salience than other moderate French parties. According to CHES experts, LREM is a moderate, non-populist party. However, for Norris and Inglehart (2017, p. 12), Emmanuel Macron is a centrist populist leader. As Pippa Norris mentioned:

> Despite often being labelled 'radical right,' in fact, populist parties are also distributed in the other quadrants....There are also a few populist parties scattered in the other quadrants, such as President Macron who campaigned for *La République En Marche!* as an anti-establishment outsider, while advocating moderate economic policies and a pro-EU stance. (Norris, 2020, p. 15)

The core of Macron's populist appeal relies on the critique and rejection of intermediate bodies, combined with a robust anti-establishment discourse and a specific call to the French people. Macron has already been classified as a populist by political scientists (Ivaldi, 2019), sometimes in a specific way ("populist from the extreme-centre," Godin, 2016; "antipopulist populist," Bordignon, 2017). To some extent, the rise of Emmanuel Macron should be seen as an effect of the Fifth Republic system, but in a new populist logic dominating the French political landscape.

The adaptability of populism to various ideologies is not new (Mudde, 2004; Taggart, 2000). One of our primary hypotheses is that populism, mainly as a discourse and a style, is not limited to the political extremes on the left and the right and should not be reduced to a democratic threat (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018; Stavrakakis & Jäger, 2018). The concept of centrist populism has been used to describe parties neither on the left nor on the right. It is based on an assumption of an ideal political space, an in-between, rejecting the ideological extremes.

Mattia Zulianello (2020) has significantly contributed to conceptualizing this residual category into a new type. Valence populist parties compete predominantly, if not exclusively, by focusing on nonpositional 'valence' issues, such as the fight against corruption, increased transparency, democratic reform, and moral integrity, while emphasizing anti-establishment motives. There is no ideological positioning on the difference between the mentioned centrist populist and the claim of competence and performance (Zulianello, 2020). Historically, valence populist parties emerged mainly in Central and Eastern Europe (Haughton & Deegan-Krause, 2015; Učeň, 2007).

We argue that the concept of valence populism (Zulianello, 2020, p. 329) is a good starting point to capture Emmanuel Macron and his LREM for two reasons. First, Emmanuel Macron rejected being positioned in the center—for him, the left, the right, and the center are obsolete categories. Second, using the flexibility of valence populism enables us to identify Macron's key valence issue—technocratic expertise. Emmanuel Macron presents himself as an expert in both the public and private spheres. The concept of valence populism captures both Macron's refusal to be positioned on the left–right continuum and his self-presentation—founding his legitimacy in his career in the state apparatus and the banking sector.

Focusing on Macron's self-identification as an expert and his career as a technocrat also resonates with the concept of technocratic populism. Technocratic populism as a 'thin ideology' is based on the rejection of the traditional political parties and on the promise of apolitical expert solutions that benefit the 'ordinary people' (Buštíková & Guasti, 2019) As showed by Buštíková and Guasti, "it combines the ideology of expertise with a populist political appeal to ordinary people," "technocratic populism uses the ideology of numbers and the ideology of expert knowledge to appeal directly to the voters using an anti-elite, populist rhetoric" (Buštíková & Guasti, 2019, p. 305). Interestingly the technocratic populism undermines the principle of horizontal and vertical accountability, as Caramani showed (Caramani, 2017; Guasti, 2020).

Two key features of Macron's appeal match this conceptualization. His strong rhetoric against his former Socialist party and broadly against all the French political elites—an anti-establishment strategy. Second, the use of personal competence as a form of legitimation and a strategy to distinguish himself from his anti-establishment competitors, especially his main competitor in the second round of presidential elections, Marine Le Pen.

Nevertheless, let us summarize some criteria of the technocratic populism: A charismatic leader calls for the fight against the political establishment in the name of the people, denouncing the intermediate bodies (in a broad sense, including parties), and communicating directly with the people. Technocratic populism does not only appear as an alternative to the ideology of liberal democratic pluralism (Havlík, 2019) but also when the traditional party system is exhausted, and stale mainstream parties are unable to effectively react to new challenges (cf. Caiani & Graziano, 2016). Under these conditions, a weakened party system creates an opening for newcomers (cf. Aprasidze & Siroky, 2020; Buštíková & Guasti, 2019; Castaldo & Verzichelli, 2020; Ganuza & Font, 2020).

3. The Origins of Macron's Technocratic Populism

3.1. The Social and Political Frame of Macron's Technocratic Populism

In explaining the rise of populism to power, it is essential to consider the appeal and strategies of ascending populists and the political context. To some extent, they are the product of their time and, above all of the society from which they arise and which allows them to win elections (on the long-term changes in politics and society in Western Europe, see Lynch, 2019; on populism and crisis, see Caiani & Graziano, 2016). The rise of Emmanuel Macron is both the result of his charisma, political acumen and successful strategy, but also of the state of French politics.

The initial roots of Macron's success seem to be in the economic and financial crisis in the late 2000s when the French government's attempt to find a solution seemed ineffective. Nevertheless, we have to look at its deeper roots in French history. The main change we have to point out is the progressive disappearance of the clear left–right cleavage. This cleavage is linked to the beginning of the French Revolution after 1789 and the confrontation of 'two Frances.' In the second half of the 20th century, we can see that for the first time, this cleavage was suppressed by the rise of the French Fifth Republic under the leadership of Charles De Gaulle and the beginning of 23 years of 'dextrism' (the government of the right).

The French Fifth Republic was confrontational. While the right was in power, the left alternative was clear and sharp (but also divided between the declining Communist party and the growing Socialist party). The shift from right to left occurred in 1981 after the success of Francois Mitterrand in the presidential election. It was seen as a revolutionary or a catastrophic moment (depending on the analyst).

After some years, the leftist policy showed its limits, and Mitterrand decided to turn in 1983–1984. The government began to take a much more liberal line. This historical change (practically the abandonment of a long-term program of the French left) was not successful. After the 1986 general elections, France experienced, for the first time, the cohabitation of the left and the right, and the reverse policy of privatizations.

The ideological rapprochement of the left and its embrace of the liberal paradigm blurred the traditional differences between the left and the right—both were practically calling for the same solutions and became indistinguishable, especially on economic issues. What remained was a vast difference between the moderate right and the moderate left regarding social positioning (identity issues). The economic and financial crisis brought the political compromise about the liberal paradigm to the fore and engendered the anti-establishment critique of Jean-Marie Le Pen, who denounced both the left and the right as 'bonnet blanc et blanc bonnet' or, in other words, the plot of the collusion of political elites that were seemingly in opposition.

In the years leading to the 2017 presidential elections, the moderate right lost an essential part of its electorate to the radical right. Yet, its electoral failure is a result of the scandals of the Republican candidate François Fillon. Macron presented himself as the only real alternative to the old, and delegitimated the political establishment from both sides, moderate right and left. The key to Macron's rise was the breakdown of the Socialist party, which made the shift of the left-wing electorate to LREM possible. This new situation appears clearly if we compare, for instance, the results of the Socialist's candidates in the first round of the presidential elections in 2012 and 2017 (Hollande 28.63% and Hamon 6.36%, respectively). We can make here a parallel with the situation in the Czech Republic, where the technocratic populist A. Babiš won a large part of the left-wing electorate in 2013 and 2017 (Buštíková & Guasti, 2019; Stauber, 2019) or to the rise of Igor Matovič in Slovakia (Buštíková & Babos, 2020).

Due to the failure of the mainstream parties on the left and the right, Emmanuel Macron was seen as the sole candidate likely to defeat Marine Le Pen in the 2017 presidential elections. He was also seen as the representative of young modern France—a leader proposing a genuinely modern vision and reforms necessary to save France from its long-term social and economic difficulties.

3.2. A Specific Career of a Technocrat

Emmanuel Macron is a classical product of the French technocracy that appears after the Second World War. The reform of the state was driven by the idea of a professional depoliticized administration. The new model, which persists today, has at its top the National School of Administration (*Ecole Nationale d'Administration*, ENA).

ENA still forms the elite of the French civil servants. Macron (who studied at Sciences Po Paris before ENA) ranked fifth in his group at the end of the cursus, thus demonstrating an extraordinary competence.

For a long time, ENA has been criticized as a form of elite reproduction. The first systematic critic of this school and the elites it produced appeared in the late 1960s (Mandrin, 1967). Very little has changed since, and the critique can be considered just as relevant today. ENA is an elitist and technocratic school. It produced generations of high civil servants, who made a career not only in the French high administration but also in politics and the private sector.

Emmanuel Macron is a typical product of ENA. After ENA, Macron had a short career in the Inspectorate General of Finances and then moved to a multinational investment bank and financial services company Rothschild & Co. Some of the first information about Macron to appear in the French media, in Summer 2014, emphasized his "impressive curriculum vitae" (Chabas, 2014). We can recall here the words of Paul Taggart: Populism "requires the most extraordinary individuals to lead the most ordinary of people" (Taggart, 2000, p. 1; see also Mudde, 2004).

Macron turned against this form of elite reproduction, as a consequence of the 2019 debate. Macron—part of an elite—turned against the elite and espoused anti-elite discourse. In the aftermath of the November 2015 terrorist attacks, he said: "The elites, not the society, bear a responsibility" ("Radicalisation: Macron juge les élites," 2015). Emmanuel Macron was a high technocrat with experience in both the public and the private sectors. In 2015 he turned populist, but his technocratic competences (and efficiency) remains the source of his legitimacy. Macron was the right man at the right place in the right time—technocratic populist at the critical juncture of French politics marked by the breakdown of left–right cleavage. The second round of the 2017 election was Emmanuel Macron or Marine Le Pen—technocratic populist palatable for many, or radical right leader, unacceptable for the voters of mainstream parties (cf. Stockemer, 2017).

3.3. The Rise of a Charismatic Technocrat

From the beginning of his successful electoral campaign, Emmanuel Macron presented himself as the champion of the fight against the political system. He introduced himself as an outsider—a new politician who is not linked to the establishment and the old-fashioned parties and elites. He vowed to abandon outdated ideological discourses and practices and focus on practical and effective solutions to contemporary economic and societal problems. In a 2016 debate with Columbia University students, Macron embraced anti-establishment rhetoric and reiterated the refusal to be placed on the LR continuum by his opponents (Robequain, 2016). Macron saw himself as fighting the

old and ineffective model of French political competition; as somebody who transcends the more than 200-year-old left–right cleavage.

During his brief career as a minister, Macron identified as a Socialist. But in 2016, he rejected this 'label' along with the 'centrist' label, preferring at that time 'man of the left' or 'liberal' (Macron, 2016). He also started to cite a broad list of references (mixing Pierre Mendès-France, François Mitterrand, but mainly Charles de Gaulle). Nevertheless, his policies could certainly be seen as centrist in the French context (Barlow, 2017). His positioning between the oldest (formerly) dominant parties (the Socialist party on the left and the Republicans on the right) is seen in France as evidence of this. To some extent, Macron and the LREM symbolically pushed the old-fashioned 'centrists' from the Mouvement Démocrate to the right.

The ability to attract media coverage is crucial to understanding the speed of Macron's political rise. Emmanuel Macron succeeded in portraying an image of a political outsider taking on the old dysfunctional establishment that did not match the reality—with his past career within the system he criticized since the beginning of his path to the French presidency. The changes in French society, namely its de-ideologization and de-politicization (Perottino, 2016), contributed to the appeal of an apolitical technocracy (cf. Putnam, 1977).

Macron's 2016 arrival on the political scene as a presidential candidate is simultaneous with the profound crises of the French establishment political parties on the left (Socialists) and on the right (Republicans). In the second round of the 2017 elections, Emmanuel Macron also presented his new movement (LREM) as the only alternative to the extreme right populist Marine Le Pen's National Front (today National Rally). The alternative to the exclusionary populism of Marine Le Pen was Macron's new formula mixing anti-establishment populist discourse with an appeal to technocracy and expertise.

Sofia Ventura showed that, during his campaign, Macron denounced the political elites and the gap between the elite and the people: "They no longer speak for the people, they speak for themselves" (Ventura, 2018, p. 95). In his book, Macron rejected at that time the French political elite as a whole (Macron, 2016). Finally, in November 2018, in front of the French mayors, Macron presented himself and LREM "as real populists, we are with the people, every day" (Jublin, 2018). By doing this, Macron draws a line between populism and demagogues (i.e., Le Pen).

The populist appeal of a former Minister and technocrat remains counter intuitive. Nevertheless, Macron was described as a populist (Bordignon, 2017; Godin, 2016; Norris & Inglehart, 2019) and embraced the label himself (Jublin, 2018; Macron, 2016). This article aims to question both these premises and demonstrate the extent to which Emmanuel Macron can be described as a technocratic populist. To do that, we analyze the French specificities and show how this new reality matches the ideal type of technocratic populism.

3.4. Macron as the Only Possible Solution

As we already stated, one of the key factors of the Macron's success was (and still is) the failure of the well-established parties of the moderate left and right (cf. Castaldo & Verzichelli, 2020, for parallel development in Italy). These parties were alternating in power since the 1970s, dominating French political life. Their domination progressively eroded due to the growing electoral success of the anti-establishment radical right National Front, which challenged the political establishment. However, the progressive weakening of the establishment parties was mainly due to internal causes (incapacity to select competent elites or corruption; Perottino, 2016). As the establishment eroded, and the radical right remained unpalatable for mainstream voters, a window of opportunity opened for Macron, who successfully used it.

Macron started his political career with the Socialist Party (he was a ranking member of this party in 2006–2009; "Emmanuel Macron n'est plus encarté," 2015). However, he rose in the ranks thanks to his professional technocratic career, competence, and networks (social capital). His legitimacy claim was to be an outsider, even if he was one of the essential ministers before running for President (Pietralunga & Bonnefous, 2016). This (relative) newness was also underlined by his age and largely contradicted the 'normal' way to enter politics in France. Once again, Macron was the insider-outsider product and a part of a system he denounced: "Faced with the system, my will to transgress is strong" ("Emmanuel Macron: Face au système," 2016).

Macron refused to play the game of the left and declined participating in the presidential primaries de facto organized by his former party. This refusal was quite logical as Macron refused to be seen as a part of an ending world and to risk losing his main advantages without gaining anything. He was criticized for his weak ideological anchoring, and a blur program. Macron's approach and action can be seen as returning to what Maurice Duverger called the 'swamp' (*le marais*; see Elgie, 2018). As mentioned by Mayaffre, Bouzereau, Ducoffe, Guaresi, and Precioso (2017, p. 135): "Emmanuel Macron's speeches cultivate dynamics more than they work on themes; they rely on the modalities of politics and action (bringing together, setting in motion, building consensus) more than on the political program itself.''

Emmanuel Macron entered the political world as a technocrat, not through the classical electoral path. He never ran at any level of the French political system. His legitimacy was only technocratic, as a high civil servant and as a top bank manager. Macron's two years engagement as a minister gave him a high capacity to show his know-how and provided necessary credibility

as a social-liberal. His private sector career equipped him to present himself as more transparent and efficient than his fellow ministers in the Socialist government. While the government was facing strong critiques, part of the opposition presented Macron as a 'good minister doing good things.' During his time as a minister of economy, Macron's signature legislation was the Law for growth, activity and equal economic opportunities (French Republic, 2015), known as Macron Law (broad law composed of measures concerning a large part of the economic activity, changing numerous rules, for instance, the work at night or on Sunday, the taxes or liberalizing coach transport). Macron's capacity to harness support for the law among both left and right was evident, foreshadowing his capacity to establish LREM as a movement logically bridging or transcending the left and the right.

Hand in hand with the changes that occurred in the French society during the last three or four decades, Emmanuel Macron as a minister and as a presidential candidate practically embodied the modern spirit, dominated by the (neo)liberal discourse. In other words, he appeared the contrary of the old elite: Young, modern, uncorrupted, competent, and fulfilling the ideal of the technocrat from both public and private sectors. During a 2017 TV debate with Marine Le Pen, Macron's competence, knowledge, and effectiveness were evident, and he successfully outperformed Le Pen, demonstrating his qualities.

4. Technocratic Populist in Power

Macron's undeniable personal competence, culture, and charm made him a charismatic presidential candidate. On 7 May 2017, the 39-year old disrupter became the youngest President in the history of France. In his inaugural speech, Macron combined an appeal to the people, with the promise of competence and renewal—highlighting the redemptive politics of populism (Canovan, 1999):

> My dear fellow citizens, a new page in our history has been turned this evening. I want it to be that of renewed hope and confidence. The renewal of our public life will be a requirement for everyone as from tomorrow. Raising moral standards in our public life, recognizing pluralism, and democratic vitality will be the bedrock of my action from the first day. I will not let any obstacle get in my way. I will work with determination and with due respect for everyone, because through work, school and culture, we will build a better future. (Macron, 2017b)

For Macron, the sui generis candidate, the election was a turning point, as he faces the choice between three archetypal presidential postures. First, the 'partisan President'—ideological, engaged in everyday politics and deeply unpopular (Hollande). Second, 'performative president'—highly active and visible known as the 'hyperpresident' (Sarkozy). And third, a 'Jupiterian president'—detached from everyday politics above 'the political scrum' and beloved by the people (de Gaulle). Macron, a long-time admirer of de Gaulle, embraces the latter symbolically and in his presidential posture—his official presidential photograph prominently features de Gaulle's war memoirs opened on President's desk (Boudet, 2017). As a President, Macron communicates less, leaves everyday politics to the government, while engaging on the global scene. This detached style enables Macron to maintain support and deflect critique for unpopular aspects of reforms ("Macron ne croit pas," 2016; see also Cole, 2018). It also enables him to distinguish himself from the highly political presidents of the Third and the Fourth Republic (Cole, 2018). Macron largely maintained this de Gaule-inspired hands-off style until the Covid-19 pandemic when he became more involved (Pietralunga, Zappi, & de Royer, 2020).

4.1. Responsiveness: The Leader Giving Voice to the People

The vehicle for Macron's rise was his movement LREM. Multiple versions of the party's name existed over time, the initial *En Marche!*, with an emphasis on the EM acronym, evolved into today's LREM. LREM, a broad movement, enabled Macron to form a base and societal support "the raison d'être of LREM is to gather goodwill (and support) around a positive ambition for our country" (En Marche, 2020). The LREM founding myth is that it was formed from the bottom-up, from the "desire to rebuild from below" (En Marche, 2020). However, LREM is a top-down movement—part communication strategy, part political organizing—but Emmanuel Macron, his advisors and staff, 'give people the voice' (En Marche, 2020). It is Macron who enables the people to express their will through the unmediated relationship with him (cf. Caramani, 2017). At the core of LREM is technocratic populism. Macron outlined his agenda before the first round of French presidential elections in 2017: "A France which goes beyond the old divisions to put in place the solutions that work, and which finally leads to a real moralization of its political life" (Macron, 2017a). Technocratic populism best captures this mixture of populist and technocratic appeals.

En Marche started in May 2016 with a large door to door campaign. In the 'Great Walk,' 4,000 volunteers surveying 100,000 citizens, providing the basis for LREM's program. The aim of the 'Great Walk' was to project responsiveness and competence—LREM surveyed the will of the people and processed this will into a 'unified interest of the country.' In reality, this was an effective campaign using techniques and staff with experience working on the campaigns of Francois Hollande and Barrack Obama. The survey was processed and analyzed by 200 experts and spin doctors (Dryef, 2017; Strudel, 2017).

The main innovation (compared to campaigns run by political parties), was 'giving voice to the ordinary people' to draft the party program. LREM drew historical parallels to the letters of grievances (*Cahiers de doléances*, drawn up in 1789), but using experts' competence to aggregate the answers into a coherent electoral program. The collection of people's grievances was a way to create a direct linkage between the people (everybody can participate) and the leader, eliminating intermediate bodies (including political parties' role as 'transmission belts'; cf. Sartori, 1976).

Facing the Yellow Vests protest in 2018, Emmanuel Macron scaled the 2016 'Great Walk' to the national level. In December 2018, the Great National Debate, a 'listening tour' comprised of more than 10,000 local meetings, generated more than two million proposals on four topics: energy transition, economy (including taxation, retirement age, pensions), democracy, and citizenship (including immigration, 'political Islam,' and reform of state and public services—including the role of elite schools such as ENA; "Key points of Macron's plans," 2019). Emmanuel Macron, whose popularity decreased significantly between 2017 and 2018, participated personally in dozens of these sessions, promising to dedicate the second part of his mandate to "putting citizens at the center of his agenda." The debates coincided with the beginning of the electoral campaign for the European parliament elections, and Macron's critics viewed it as a political strategy to improve the President's image—highlighting the exaggeration of the number of participants, as well as the fact that the government is still to take up the proposals.

As a follow up to the 2018 Great National Debate, a Citizen Assembly was organized between 2019 and 2020. In October 2019, 150 randomly selected citizens participated in debates focused on climate change. The debates were broad and democratic, producing a large set of proposals. However, similarly to the Great National Debate, reservations prevail about the future of the proposals—in contrast to the initial announcement, the President decided to dismiss some of the proposals. Furthermore, the draw method for random selection was unclear (the Harris Interactive polling institute selected the 150 citizens), and the Parliament was excluded from the process.

All three procedures for engaging citizens—the 'Great Walk,' the 'Great National Debate,' and the 'Citizens Assembly' represent new forms of direct linkage between the people and the reader. They bypass traditional representative institutions and do not offer any form of clear accountability. Unlike the institution of referenda, which has previously destabilized presidents' positions (1969 and 2005), these new democratic innovations combine the appeal of responsiveness, without accountability (Macron has full control over the implementation of outcomes). The debates 'give voice to the people' as the President 'listens,' politics is unmediated and personalized, and the leader remains unconstrained and has experts on his side to help him decipher the will of the people (cf. Caramani, 2017).

4.2. Responsibility: The Reforms and the Limits of Technocratic Populism in Power

Historically, French pension reforms trigger backlash—popular mobilization and strikes—and can lead to the fall of government (1995 pension reform). In fall 2019, Macron's government initiated major pension reform. In contrast to 1995, Macron's government has a more efficient communication strategy—combining populist and technocratic appeals of 'us vs. them'—the clash of the old and the new systems, experts vs. ideologues, the necessity of reform vs. the irresponsible status quo. Unlike in 1995, the contemporary opposition was unable to formulate an understandable critique, trade unions were weakened, and the society was depoliticized.

Like in 1995, the 2019 reforms led to large-scale protests. While the reaction to the 2018 Yellow Vest protests was populist responsiveness, the reaction to the 2019 protests marked the return of technocratic populism. Emmanuel Macron portrayed himself and his government as the representatives of modernity, promoters of expert solutions, and the legitimate voice of the people. He denounced the protesters as illegitimate, imprudent, promoting illegitimate social gains for few (protesters, strikers, trade unions) at the expense of the many. In the case of the Yellow Vests, instances of violence during some demonstrations were instrumentalized to delegitimize the movement and its grievances. The pension reform protest was delegitimized on the grounds of lacking the competence to understand complex issues.

Similarly to the pension reform, the Covid-19 crisis also follows the technocratic populist playbook (cf. Buštíková & Babos, 2020; Guasti, 2020). During the pandemic's initial phase, the President was mostly absent, and the government in charge. As the critique of the government intensified, Macron changed his approach and took the lead. The President became personally engaged, not in drafting and implementing solutions; instead, Emmanuel Macron set out to search for the best solution. This included a personal visit to the proponent of hydroxychloroquine and media darling, Professor Raoult in Marseille, to personally discuss the potential of hydroxychloroquine as a cure. Professor Raoult was at odds with the other experts, but the President presented himself as 'open-minded' and searching for effective solutions.

The reaction to the 2019 protests show the complicated relationship between technocratic populism and the will of the people—when people reject his politics, Macron delegitimizes their voices because they are outside of the unified will of the people he embodies and because their knowledge is inferior to the expertise of the President and his advisors.

5. Conclusion

In 2017 Emmanuel Macron transformed French Politics. He emerged when the embattled traditional party system imploded, and populism rose (radical left and radical right). This article argues that Emmanuel Macron's presidential bid succeeded because he combined populist anti-establishment appeal with a technocratic appeal to competence. He was able to transcend the exhausted politics of the left and the right, while simultaneously fending off radical populist competitors (especially the National Front) using technocratic populism.

Emmanuel Macron was an insider taking on the system and positioning himself as an outsider. He refused the traditional labels, including centrism, elite recruitment patterns, and mediated politics. Instead, Macron and LREM attempted to create new forms of responsiveness by 'giving voice to the people,' while relying on his technocratic competence and that of his expert advisors. Macron success highlights the exhaustion of the left–right cleavage and the appeal of the new politics.

Technocratic populism in power attempts to balance responsiveness and responsibility (cf. Guasti & Buštíková, 2020). In terms of responsiveness, Macron initiated new procedures for engaging citizens, forming a new direct linkage between the leader and the people. These procedures create an alternative to the traditional representative institutions, unmediated politics without accountability. The unified conception of the will of the people combined with the belief in experts' superior knowledge does not allow for dissent. Opposition (such as the 2019) protests are delegitimized as uncivilized and/or uninformed.

After reaching power, Emmanuel Macron sought to distance himself from everyday politics. The Covid-19 crises forced him to reengage. In power, Macron is no longer an outsider 'taking on the system.' Nevertheless, he continues to use the same anti-establishment and (selectively) anti-elitist discursive strategy of bringing the 'people' back. Some aspects of Macron's technocratic populism remain salient—competency (partly showed during the Covid-19 crisis), the necessity to reform France (the Covid-19 crisis has simultaneously delayed reforms, but made them more salient), the denouncement of the intermediate bodies, or the rejection of the old elites (against their comeback to power). The power of Macron's technocratic populism has weakened, but it remains an effective strategy against his mainstream and populist competitors.

The contribution of this article to the study of populism is threefold. First, it provides a systematic analysis of Macron's rise. Second, it highlights an important condition for the rise of populism—the implosion of the established party systems (cf. Caiani & Graziano, 2016; Castaldo & Verzichelli, 2020; Ganuza & Font, 2020; Guasti & Buštíková, 2020). Third, it illustrates that populist rhetoric is not limited to the extremes on the right or the left (Norris, 2020).

Emmanuel Macron was undoubtedly a formidable candidate. Both charismatic and credibly competent, he stood in stark contrast to both the established parties and their populist challengers. Macron combined the redemptive promise of populism—to rejuvenate the country with the technocratic promise of competent governance (cf. Canovan, 1999). LREM also sought to build a new, direct link with the people by introducing democratic innovations as a way to map people's grievances.

Two conditions were essential in Macron's rise: The implosion of the established system of the French Fifth Republic in which the two main parties were alternating in power; and the rise of anti-establishment populist challengers on the right and on the left (cf. Stockemer, 2017; Zulianello, 2020). In was his anti-establishment appeal, which put Macron on the map, but the appeal to technocratic competence won him the presidency. Technocratic populism transcends the left–right cleavage and, as a result, has a broader appeal than its left- and right-wing counterparts.

Finally, the rise of Emmanuel Macron and LREM demonstrates that populism does not necessarily imply a threat for liberal democracy and cannot be automatically linked to illiberalism (cf. Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Populist rhetoric and thin-centered ideology can be found in other 'quadrants' than on the extreme right and extreme left (Norris, 2020). New forms of populism include valence (cf. Zulianello, 2020) and technocratic populism (cf. Buštíková & Guasti, 2019).

Future research should focus on the analysis of the LREM. Beyond its leader's technocratic populism, it would be essential to analyze this new' party's institutionalization and programmatic orientation. Furthermore, comparatively, LREM could be analyzed in the context of similar party-movements such us the Italian Five Star Movement, Spanish Podemos, Czech ANO, and Slovak Party of the Ordinary People. The recent dissent of a large part of LREM's MPs, decline in support for Emmanuel Macron, and LREM MPs' defections hint at the degree of volatility these disrupters of the established political order face. The Covid-19 response and subsequent elections will test the competence and lasting appeal of technocratic populists.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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