

A Canadian ex-pat's reflections on the French election

In hindsight, my move from Canada to France in the fall 2015 was poorly timed. Canada was in the middle of an election campaign and it looked like Canadians would be choosing a young, progressive leader with moderate policies and a desire to re-build Canada's international standing. After taking a hit for over a decade, the country's star seemed to be on the rise.

As my family and I settled into the 11e in Paris, Europe was in the middle of a migration crisis of a scale not seen since the Second World War. A few months after we arrived, terrorists attacked the Bataclan theatre, a concert hall 300m from my front door. Then the UK opted out of the EU. It didn't seem like Europe's finest moment.

I've been following the French elections, which culminate in a run-off vote on Sunday, with considerable interest. While my quality of life in Paris is unbelievably high, many Parisians feel that Europe is on the precipice, and that these elections will either be the final blow from which it can't recover or a rejection of the protest politics that have already washed over the UK and US. It sounds dramatic, but after Brexit and Trump, and witnessing the rise of a racist, anti-foreigner, anti-Europe party here in France, it really does seem like the stakes are that high.

When presidential candidate Emmanuel Macron launched his campaign and new party, En Marche, as an outsider I couldn't help but be excited. With obvious parallels to Justin Trudeau, Macron is a North American progressive's dream and, I thought, exactly what France needed. Yet amongst most of the French people I've spoken with, that isn't a wildly held view. In fact, if he manages to win the second "tour" against the far-right candidate, Marine Le Pen, it will likely be by a frighteningly small margin.

A young (he's 39-years old), intelligent, well-educated, socially liberal, fiscally moderate candidate who rejects affiliation with both the left and the right, Macron has worked in both the public and private sectors, is very pro-Europe, sympathetic to asylum seekers, and pro-gay marriage. He wants to reform the labour code to help with stagnant unemployment, expand unemployment insurance to include entrepreneurs and the self-employed, and drop corporate taxes from 33.3%, one of the highest in Europe, to 25% (a number of businesses in the EU simply move profits to lower tax jurisdictions, like Ireland, to pay less tax). In addition, he understands that, as disappointing as Brexit is, jurisdictions like France stand to benefit from the institutions and jobs that will leave the UK.

An alarming number of French voters are claiming they will abstain. After the first round results, protesters in Place Republique, just up the street from my apartment spray-painted: "ni fasciste, ni capitaliste." Some who voted republican (conservative) are claiming they will vote far right given Macron's socially progressive values, while his past life as a banker is seen by many on the left here as his biggest flaw (in contrast in Canada we criticize our politicians for not having enough financial experience!)

The French have a long history of choosing principle over practical. Thinkers and philosophers have long enjoyed more social cachet than entrepreneurs (and certainly more than wealthy bankers). Ideological ideals of the left and right still play a large role in people's identity. You can buy weekly philosophy journals at the local newsstand, but you can't do it on Sundays because they're still all closed. Whereas I try to evaluate candidates on their blend of policies, values and experience, many here feel that a candidate that is "neither left nor right" has no real values and therefore no coherent identity.

I came to France to research and write about inequality. The reaction to the French elections is a fascinating study in how people react to growing inequality, even in a country that is more equal than most. As with Brexit and the US elections, people lump in anger with elites and vulnerable newcomers with the same global forces that, they believe, have left them worse off. The line between the far left and the far right is razor thin. To many, shutting boarders and kicking out the ruling parties seems like the best way to vent that anger, even if it ushers in a set of policies that promise to make inequality worse and leave everyone poorer.

Almost any moderate that voted for one of the more left leaning candidates in the first round last week that I've spoken to agrees that the problem isn't Macron's policy agenda; rather, it's Macron himself. Where I see an exciting young, moderate, progressive leader, they see at best an opportunist and at worst a traitor who helped to kill the country's socialist party. (It seems a bit excessive to blame Macron for the socialist party's failings given that Hollande, who ran as a socialist and then tried to govern as a moderate, has had approval ratings under 10 percent for several years).

Even if Macron wins, it will be a very difficult period for France. The issues it must reconcile are as challenging as any faced by a western nation in a generation. His party would lack a majority in parliament and both the left and right could block his agenda in order to rebuild their own credibility. Nevertheless, choosing someone who wants to moderately modernize France, help migrants who need asylum and try to make lemonade from the lemon that is Brexit, seems like the clearly superior option to electing a fascist who wants to unwind 50 years of change.

I write this sitting on the bank of the Seine staring at Notre Dame on a sunny afternoon, a striking perch for reflection on the threat posed by this election. Much of France's beauty comes from its past and the nostalgia that the far right is tapping into is understandable, even if the policies that created that beauty were horribly unequal and often cruel. No matter the outcome next week, Paris will still be one of the most beautiful cities on earth. Yet many here will never be able to enjoy it because they still live in poverty. It seems so clear to this outsider what the French should choose, yet frustrating that I have so little influence over the outcome. We keep asking ourselves whether we will leave if Macron loses. I hope it won't come to this, not for our sake — we'll be fine — but for the sake of a country and a continent that has contributed so much to global culture and that still has so much more to do.

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