

# Fading France Could Emerge As Quite a Story

*Will Macron enjoy next year the advantages he had in 2017  
against Marine Le Pen?*

By [MICHEL GURFINKIEL](#), Special to the Sun | March 19, 2021

During his epic campaign in Egypt, Napoleon Bonaparte organized a 400 hundred-man dromedary-mounted regiment and made a point of being portrayed himself as riding the swift exotic animal. It is a sign of the times — and France's fading fortunes — that the present president of France, Emmanuel Macron, was recently depicted on the cover of a respected right-of-centre magazine as riding *un escargot*, meaning, a snail.

What the editors were spoofing was the slow pace of Covid-19 vaccinations in France. As of March 8, but 7.6 % of the French had been vaccinated, against 21 % of the Americans, 36 % of the British, 35 % of the Emiratis and 60 % of the Israelis. And France has been seen as lagging in other respects. Among the United Nations' Five Great Powers, France is the only one who failed to manufacture a national vaccine.

America has produced four, China two, Russia and the United Kingdom one each. Germany cooperated closely with America for the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine. Sweden and Belgium were associated with the UK and US efforts respectively. How did France — otherwise an important player in the global pharmaceutical industry, with such companies as Sanofi, the world's fifth, or Servier — managed to miss the race ?

The Macron administration has been wavering for a year on whether to impose a lockdown or a curfew or neither or whether to make masks compulsory. It fretted over whether to hold elections in the middle of the emergency situation or postpone them. More often than not, it

settled on the least effective course — and has frequently lied to the public on crucial difficulties.

The Macron administration has been comparatively successful in some areas. An overall economic collapse was prevented. It may have used Keynesian measures, as have most Western countries, including America. The French Statist tradition was certainly helpful in this respect. So was the EU. At the end of the day, almost everybody in France is getting a salary or financial compensation or benefiting from a bank or tax moratoria.

The question for President Macron is whether, come the election in 2022, the French will remember his failures or his achievements. Or more accurately, whether his achievements in the coming twelve months will offset his failures in the previous two years. The polls suggest the the election will, as in 2017, pit Macron, the maverick centrist, against Marine Le Pen, the populist rightwinger.

With, however, one a major difference. Macron won by a large margin in 2017. The fight might be much closer in 2021. So close in fact that Le Pen might win — owing in part to the complexities of the French constitution, which mandates two successive ballots for the presidential race. The two candidates who lead in the first ballot are the only ones allowed in the second one : a lot can thus be decided by a thin margin.

In 2017, Macron emerged as the leader in the first ballot, with 24 % of the vote. He was followed by Le Pen, who garnered 21.3 %. A classical conservative, François Fillon, and a leftwing radical, Jean-Luc Mélançon, came third and fourth with about 20% each. In other words, there was only a 2.7 % difference between Macron and Le Pen, and almost no difference at all between Le Pen, Fillon and Mélançon.

The socialist Left, which had won the previous presidential election in 2012, had collapsed to under 10 %. The first ballot, in any event, is about selecting two super candidates (a bit like the American primaries). The second ballot is about building national coalitions (like the American election proper). In 2017, Macron did well in this respect in the second ballot, seizing 66% of the vote.

Macron had two decisive advantages over Le Pen. One was that a majority among the voters had reservations about her political heritage. Her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen, was a Far Right agitator prone to racist and anti-Semitic bad jokes and innuendoes. The daughter took over the

National Front in 2011. Though she set out to turn the party into the cleaner — and re-named — National Rally, she was still seen in 2017 as unreliable.

The second advantage was that Macron, a former minister of the Economy at the age of 39, was able to discuss economic and financial matters in a convincing way, while Le Pen was not. When he asked her how she would withdraw France from the eurozone (a much more difficult gambit than Brexit), she simply did not know what to answer. France, after all, had abandoned the franc as legal tender in 2002.

Will Macron still be enjoying the same advantages two years hence? Perhaps not. Le Pen is gradually maturing into a normal and legitimate politician in her own right. She is now attracting both large parts of the former Left as the “*defender of the simple folks*,” while seducing some parts of the classical Right by a more articulate or more cautious understanding of economic matters.

Moreover, it is Macron’s managerial competence that is now being questioned, particularly after the Yellow Vests protests in 2018 and 2019 and the Covid-19 crisis that has yet to abate. Macron may be convinced that a sizable majority will still support him, and that news of Le Pen’s rise will still stir anxiety and fear among undecided voters. But what if new candidates join the game ?

For now, Macron and Le Pen lead in the polls because the other contenders, so far, are weaker or less charismatic. Things may take a very different shape if stronger personalities enter the race : Xavier Bertrand, the right-of-centre president of the Hauts de France region, might challenge Macron. As for Le Pen, she might face an even more formidable rival in her own camp — say, Eric Zemmour, the Jewish Far Right polemist.

Zemmour sells hundreds of thousands of copies every time he writes a book and dominates TV shows, radio debates, and social media. Neither Bertrand nor Zemmour have formally declared a candidacy: they are nevertheless already being credited, each of them, with a substantial share of the vote. Zemmour is even coming close to 20 %. That’s no small thing for a figure who hasn’t entered the race.

What if, in the end of the day, a Le Pen-Zemmour duel destroys Le Pen? Or if Zemmour is selected on the first ballot to run against Macron? It’s not my intention to make a prediction on the outcome. It’s

too soon for that. It's not too soon to suggest that France could turn out to be quite the story a year from now. We just don't know what sort of beast the winner will be riding to victory.

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