

Emmanuel Macron's extraordinary political achievement

By [Anne Applebaum](#) May 7 at 5:11 PM

Before you do anything else, spend a moment thinking about the extraordinary achievement of modern France's youngest president-elect, [Emmanuel Macron](#). Not since Napoleon has anybody leapt to the top of French public life with such speed. Not since World War II has anybody won the French presidency without a political party and a parliamentary base. Aside from some belated endorsements, he had little real support from the French establishment, few of whose members rated the chances of a man from an unfashionable town when he launched his candidacy last year.

He was, it is true, extraordinarily lucky (luck being the quality that Napoleon said he most preferred in his generals). He benefited both from the [flameout of Socialist President François Hollande](#), who decided not even to contest the election, and from a surprise series of personal scandals that dragged down the [center-right's candidate](#), François Fillon. But Macron was also extraordinarily prescient. He saw that there was an opening in France for a socially liberal, economically liberal, internationalist and optimistic voice. Fillon, like Prime Minister Theresa May in Britain, wanted to repackage nationalist policies into more acceptable language. Macron instead argued openly against the fear, nostalgia, nativism, statism and stagnation on offer from the rest of the political class.

He made no populist promises, he offered no impossible schemes or unattainable riches. And then he won.

Not only did Macron defeat the national socialism of Marine Le Pen, he also defeated what looks like a joint Russian/American attempt to derail him [using material hacked from his campaign team](#) and spread through bots and trolls on both sides of the Atlantic. We'll learn more about the leak in the days that come, including the tantalizing possibility that Macron's own team knew it was coming and [deliberately confused the hackers](#).

But it's already clear that the hack failed largely because the French media, and the French public, refused to let it succeed. Though the leak was published during France's official preelection news blackout, meaning that the French press kept away, disgust with its Russian origins seems to have persuaded ordinary French voters to stay away from it too, despite robust efforts to bring it to their attention on social media. This might represent a real change: Finally, Western voters are beginning to understand that the intent of a leaker is more important than the content of the leak.


The future of Macron's radical-centrist movement — in the rest of Europe as well as France — now depends on what Macron is actually able to achieve. Here is the obvious counterpoint to Macron's victory, one which has been repeated by

gloomier observers all evening: Though Le Pen lost by a greater margin than expected, she still attracted more votes than any National Front candidate ever had before. She represents real dissatisfaction with the economy, with terrorism, with immigration policy and with the privileged political class, though of course she is a part of that class herself. Macron will now have to address these issues. His center-left supporters may have to accept Thatcherite reforms; he has no party in the legislature right now to support him. The strength of his far-right opponents may grow.

Macron can only succeed if he accepts that this is now the essence of politics in Western democracies: An open fight against the toxic appeal of false promises and divisive, nativist nostalgia. There is no point mourning the “normalization” of populism, or in trying to silence Le Pen and her many like-minded colleagues in Europe and the United States. They are here to stay, and they will only be defeated through open confrontation, a growing economy and better security, not censorship and shocked faces.

Macron’s first step in that direction came Sunday evening, in his first videotaped address after the election. May used her first major speech to jeer at her opponents as “citizens of nowhere,” the American president used his inaugural address to attack “American carnage” and underline his country’s divisions. Macron instead offered a “Republican salute” to Le Pen and her voters — and addressed himself to “all of you together, the people of France.”

It’s not a solution, but it’s the start of one.

Anne Applebaum writes a biweekly foreign affairs column for The Washington Post.  Follow @anneapplebaum

