

# Macron presidency is a welcome experiment

France's pro-science leader has many challenges ahead, but his win is encouraging.

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*Joel Sagat/AFP/Getty*

Emmanuel Macron has promised change, including reforms of France's universities.

The election of 39-year-old Emmanuel Macron as president of France signals a transformation in one of the world's key scientific powers. Macron is resolutely forward-looking, pro-science and pro-education and has stood out with his staunch commitment to the European Union and international openness. But how much he will be able to do depends on whether his movement can win a majority of the 577 seats in next month's parliamentary elections.

If it does, France's new leader promises the country's biggest radical shake-up in decades. He has pledged sweeping economic reforms, as well as efforts to simplify stifling bureaucracy and outdated

structures. This, he hopes, will liberate energy and innovation in society, helping universities, companies and entrepreneurs.

He also promises to make education and university reform a central plank in tackling France's high unemployment and social inequality, and in spurring innovation. A proposed 5-year, €50-billion (US\$54-billion) investment plan would go partly towards energy efficiency and renewables, as well as modernizing agriculture and making it more environmentally friendly. Macron has committed to implementing the Paris agreement on climate change, and to fighting attempts by other countries to weaken it.

His vision is to make France great again, but not by turning away from progress, embracing fear or closing the country off from the international flow of people and ideas. It sounds vague, and it is. But the mood and psychology of a nation and its leadership can set the tone for what follows — just witness the impact on the United States of the election of Donald Trump.

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France is sometimes self-flagellating, a national mood that nourishes pessimism and defeatism. This produces inertia and either deadlock or half-measures on long-standing problems, from university and research reform to chronic unemployment. Disillusionment with politics in part explains the rise in support for the far-right Front National, a nativist, nationalistic and anti-European party whose leader, Marine Le Pen, received one-third of the votes in the final round of the presidential elections but lost to Macron. The immediate danger has been averted, but this disillusionment must be addressed, and fast. Universities and researchers can help to fight extremism and ideology by coaching the young in the critical and constructive thinking that is the best defence against obscurantism.

Macron deserves credit for trying to tackle the threat head-on, by engaging with social problems at their root. He has also run on a spirit of conquest, an optimism that says problems can be tackled and overcome, while preserving the country's social model. *Oui, on peut!*

The parliamentary elections will determine how far this vision can go. At the very least, they are an opportunity to rejuvenate French politics and usher in a new generation of parliamentarians.

For one thing, many existing members of parliament are choosing to stand down as a result of new laws preventing them from holding multiple elected positions. For another, Macron's party, La République en Marche!, has stipulated that half of its candidates must be women, and a majority from local politics or from civil society, with no previous political experience. It will announce its complete list of challengers later this week.

The full effects of last weekend's vote on French science and higher education, and their role in society, are still unclear. But by electing Macron, France has launched a vast experiment — and the world awaits the results.

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