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Onwards to the new political frontier: Macron's electoral populism

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Abstract

This speaking out article argues that populism is not only a phenomenon that characterizes extremist figures such as Farage, Trump or Le Pen. Drawing on Laclau's conceptualization of populism, we show how French President Emmanuel Macron developed in 2017 a form of anti-extreme electoral populism relying upon (1) the creation of a new political frontier between 'progressive reformers' and 'backward-looking conservatives', and (2) a number of key empty signifiers, such as 'Revolution', '(The Republic) onwards' and 'and at the same time'. These discursive levers allowed Macron's campaigns to incarnate a gradually larger plurality of demands, modulating the openness of equivalential chains over three successful electoral steps: the presidential first round, the presidential second round and the parliamentary elections. In parallel, his movement gradually moved from emergent organizing through a partial organization to a bureaucratized and hierarchized party. Thus, our analysis illuminates how Macron organized his own populism, based on a completely new movement: Macron's electoral populism exploited the middle space left vacant by all other candidates, it relied on its own anti-establishment discourse, and in doing so it succeeded in unifying much more demands than other populisms, leading to a landslide win in the French parliamentary elections.

Keywords

Empty signifiers, equivalential chains, Laclau, Macron, populism

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Introduction

Emmanuel Macron's electoral victories in the French presidential and parliamentary elections have been associated with a rejection of populism (e.g. Lubben, 2017). In this speaking out article, drawing on Laclau's (2005) conceptualization of populism, we instead argue that Macron's (2017) electoral success was largely attributable to his own brand of populism, organized through the creation of a new 'political frontier' (see, for example, Nyberg et al., 2013), the leveraging of a number of key 'empty signifiers' (Smolović Jones et al., 2019) and formal moves of 'political organization' (Husted and Plesner, 2017) taking his movement from emergent organizing to a bureaucratized and hierarchized party. Thus, our aim is to provide an analysis of how Macron's populism was discursively organized and how that process of discursive organizing was enabled by organizational changes in Macron's movement over time.

Mouffe (2018) argues that we are experiencing 'a "populist moment" [as] the dominant hegemony is being destabilized by the multiplication of unsatisfied demands' (p. 11). In the French context, the 2017 elections were held in an atmosphere of anti-elite '*dégagisme*' (meaning something like 'let's get rid of them [the ruling elites]'), which gave Macron massive political space to occupy in the centre of the French political spectrum. Record-low popularity of President Francois Hollande and Manuel Valls' government led to a radicalization of the political offer for the presidential elections, not only in the extremes (the anti-immigrant and anti-European populism of Marine Le Pen and the 'left-sovereignist' and anti-globalization populism of Jean-Luc Mélenchon) but also in the two traditional ruling parties. Indeed, for both *Les Républicains* (conservatives) and the *Parti Socialiste*, the primaries rewarded those candidates who managed to leverage certain popular, rhetorically unifying streams among their 'less centrist' electorates. On the one hand, the conservative Christian movement *Manif pour tous* ('demonstration for all'), described by some international commentators as a sort of 'French Tea Party' (e.g. Stille, 2014), was successfully co-opted by *Républicain* candidate Francois Fillon. And on the other hand, the *revenu universel* ('universal income') idea was presented as a return to truly socialist reforms by Socialist candidate Benoît Hamon. While these less centrist positionings led to large wins for both Fillon and Hamon in their respective primaries, they also left a huge space in the centre for Macron, who was thus alone as the liberal centrist candidate, in the footsteps of Tony Blair and Justin Trudeau, and seemingly the closest to the political status quo – that is, the centrist politics of both traditionally ruling parties until then.

Ironically, this position closest to the status quo did not prevent Macron from using a rhetoric of *Révolution* (Macron, 2017 [2016]), from packaging his drive for reform as a project of complete 'transformation' of the country (see Carrère, 2017; Macron, 2017 [2016]: 57–67), from calling for a return to the true spirit of a common French heritage (*la République qui libère*, 'the liberating Republic') and from expressing the need for an extensive renewal of the establishment. Thus, his populism does share many surface characteristics with other contemporary populisms.

But let us now move beyond the surface level and analyse the idiosyncracies of Macron's populism in more depth from a Laclavian perspective (Laclau, 2005). In Laclau's conceptualization, populism is not necessarily about the rejection of rational and liberal politics with an emphasis on national preference and protectionism in the name of defending a lifestyle or standard of living (for such a normatively loaded understanding of populism, see, for example, Reynié, 2016, 2017), nor does it necessarily entail demagoguery or opportunism (De Cleen et al., 2018). As Laclau (2005) notes, when theorists attribute what is idiosyncratic in populism to particular elements such as 'resistance to economic modernization or manipulation by marginalized elites', their argument is inevitably flawed as there will always be exceptions (p. 117). Instead, populism to Laclau should foremost be understood as a 'political logic', not a clearly defined *type* of movement but simply a movement which succeeds in creating a people from a diversity of demands

through an equivalential chain (Laclau, 2005: 7). With Laclau, our aim is to use populism as a concept that is ‘analytically useful’ as such, in that it is characterized by ‘a set of formal discursive qualities’, which makes it possible to study it from a perspective that is not necessarily ‘normatively inflected’ (see De Cleen et al., 2018: 650–651).

The two main, interrelated formal discursive qualities of populism in Laclau’s (2005) conceptualization are (1) the constitution of a political frontier (see also, Nyberg et al., 2013), which divides society into two camps, ‘us [the people] vs. them [the elites / the establishment]’, and (2) the unification of a plurality of demands in an equivalential chain and the consolidation of this chain through the construction of a popular identity – ‘empty signifiers’ play a key role in these processes (Smolović Jones et al., 2019). It follows that for Laclau (2005) – and for Mouffe (2018) – populism is not necessarily something that is problematic (see also De Cleen et al., 2018). If sincere and driven by progressive values (itself contingent upon how different political movements might define social progress, of course), populism can be a way forward, and the ‘othering’ of the establishment it entails can lead to positive changes: describing Macron’s approach as ‘populist’ does not *per se* aim to discredit it, nor does it equate it with an ‘extreme’ or dangerous project. Instead, the Laclavian conceptualization of populism makes it possible to go beyond traditional, normatively inflected understandings of populism where the radical transformation of the political scene is understood to be brought about by extremists. It is true that over the years, Marine Le Pen’s *Front National* was quite successful at unsettling the traditionally governing parties of the centre-right and centre-left by conflating their acronyms (then UMP and PS) into ‘a same political mafia which is called UMPS’ (Le Pen, quoted in Ivaldi et al., 2017: 359). However, the most decisive recent blows – those leading to the now moribund state of *Les Républicains* (the former UMP) and PS, which received less than 15 % of the votes between them (with both below 8.5%) in the 2019 European elections – were inflicted, we argue here, by Macron’s successful establishment of a new political frontier between the forward-looking progressives and the conservatives.

Below we study how Macron discursively organized his idiosyncratic brand of populism for electoral purposes (we do not include an analysis of how he has been governing since becoming President and getting a parliamentary majority), mainly through a thorough reading of his book *Révolution* (Macron, 2017 [2016]) but also through a variety of additional sources referring to other key moves during his electoral campaigns (presidential and parliamentary elections). We analyse this populism by looking in turn into (1) the new political frontier it establishes, (2) the equivalential chain it relies on and (3) the emergent organizing of this electoral populism and its organizational evolution over time. In all three sections, we discuss the roles of key empty signifiers mobilized by Macron.

The new political frontier: progressive reformers vs backward-looking conservatives

In his book *Révolution*, in a chapter entitled ‘What I believe’, Macron (2017 [2016]: 37–45) establishes the new political frontier that matters from now on in such a way that all his opponents are in the camp of *conservateurs passésistes* (‘backward-looking conservatives’), while he is the only true *progressiste réformateur* (‘progressive reformer’) among the presidential candidates. In the past, he explains, the left defended the interests of the workers and the right those of the owners. He then lists a number of key contemporary political questions: the relationship to work, environmental and digitalization issues, new inequalities, the French relationship to the world and to Europe, and the protection of individual freedoms in a society that is both open and characterized by an abundance of risks. In relation to these questions, he argues, the left and the right are internally divided. Thus, his

first targets are a ‘conservative’ left, which defends established interests of those who have jobs while promoting the closing of borders and an exit from the Eurozone, and a far-right, which supports a rigidly closed idea of French identity and accuses Europe of all social ills (Macron, 2017 [2016]: 43). These are the clearest ‘enemies’, the clearest ‘them’ he opposes to his ‘us’.

But beyond those left and right ‘conservatisms’, the two ruling parties are also targets, mainly by virtue of having been in charge in France for so long and of being responsible for a lack of renewal of the political class. Thus, the ‘revolution’ that Macron posits is one against the established rules of French political life, against a ‘*conformisme de caste*’ (‘cast conformism’; Macron, 2017 [2016]: 38) which he argues characterizes how French society is organized by its elites, whose members he calls *dirigeants* or *gouvernants* and can be understood to be not only politicians but also high-ranking civil servants. In criticizing these rules, he exaggerates his positioning outside the establishment – as if he was not himself also the product of the *Ecole Nationale d’Administration* and the technocratic elites that *de facto* govern the country – and emphasizes the ‘modest backgrounds’ his parents came from (Macron, 2017 [2016]: 17), his youth (less than 40) and his ‘newness’ in the context of electoral politics, as his public political career arguably started in 2014 when he became Minister of the Economy as a relative unknown and he never ran for office before running for President in 2017. Thus, to a large extent, what has made it possible for Macron to argue that he is on the side of a ‘revolution’ (a powerful empty signifier in the French context if ever there was one) is the assimilation of backward-looking conservatives with the ‘old guard’ in the political class (especially in the two traditionally ruling parties) and among high-ranking civil servants. Interestingly, it should be noted that Macron never really includes big business as part of the failed elite; his onslaught is mainly directed at the political class, including those most supporting business interests, such as right-wing neoliberal candidate François Fillon.

The promise Macron made of a renewal of the political class was certainly instrumental in his presidential win, and arguably even more in the subsequent landslide of his new party *La République en Marche!* (LaREM; ‘The Republic onwards!’) in the parliamentary elections 1 month later. The alignment between this powerful rhetoric of renewal and the characteristics of the candidates from this entirely new political party (some of them virtually unknown, others known previously as part of ‘civil society’, such as mathematician Cédric Villani or judge Eric Halphen) helps explain the extent of the success in the parliamentary elections.

Thus, ‘revolution’ was one of the key empty signifiers he famously mobilized (through the title of his book) to establish a new political frontier and attempt to create an equivalential chain among all those who might see themselves as the progressive ‘us’ versus the conservative ‘them’. The empty signifiers ‘Onwards!’ (*En Marche!*) and later ‘The Republic onwards!’ played a key role in marking this progressive identity for the movement, and we now turn to how these and other empty signifiers contributed to creating and consolidating an equivalential chain.

The equivalential chain: right-wing and left-wing at the same time

Laclau (2005) explains that equivalential chains always at the same time (1) are articulated as a challenge to a political normality and thus propose to ‘break with the status quo’ (Laclau, 2005: 122) and (2) are meant to constitute and/or consolidate an order. In the case of Macron, the *gouvernants* and their old ways to deal with new problems are what the ‘revolution’ is against. At the same time, where globalization leads to a dislocation of previous political normality (Macron, 2017 [2016]: 57–67), Macron claims he can bring back order by getting France to ‘master its destiny’ (Macron, 2017 [2016]: 74) through more emphasis put on *innovation*, *individual responsibility* and *decentralization*. In drawing on these various empty signifiers, Macron made a strategic use of vagueness in his presidential campaign because he had to unify competing demands and make an explicit connection between

national sovereignty and reclaimed agency for ordinary people, in order to stand a chance to win. Vagueness was explicitly desirable for Macron, as he writes in *Révolution*: ‘I do not believe that multiplying propositions in a presidential campaign is the right solution. The moment we live is one that requires a profound refoundation’ (Macron, 2017 [2016]: 73). As Laclau (2005) notes, ‘vagueness and indeterminacy are not shortcomings of a discourse about social reality, but, in some circumstances, inscribed in social reality as such’ (p. 67). In other words, a programme with specific propositions would be more of the same, and the ‘profound refoundation’ requires a much more general discussion, an abstract discussion with very few specific policy prescriptions. Surprised by the complete absence of a concrete programme in Macron’s *Révolution*, Hazareesingh (2017) points out that ‘it is inconceivable that candidates for the highest office in any other major democracy would express themselves ([so vaguely]’. In fact, Macron only published his programme less than 2 months before the presidential election so as to preserve ambiguity until as late as possible and be able to aggregate more demands to his movement much later than his opponents. In other words, the modulation of vagueness was part of Macron’s discursive strategy in order to carry out his electoral populism. Closing down discursive vagueness at the last moment – and after his opponents – allowed Macron to better respond to contradictory demands and articulate them to his populist equivalential chain.

The unification of plurality provided by Macron is conveyed by the empty signifier ‘and at the same time’ (*‘et en même temps’*; see Carrère, 2017; Marcetic, 2017) which was often used by him in order to convey the idea that conflicting views could be combined. In particular, the fact that right-wing ideas could be combined with left-wing ideas was connected to this empty signifier. For example, Macron argues that the right-wing interpretation of history celebrating the *Ancien Régime* and an idealized version of French identity can be kept ‘at the same time’ as the left-wing interpretation emphasizing the French revolution and equality: ‘One is unable to construct France. . . if one does not incorporate its history, its culture, its roots, its figures: Clovis, Henri IV. . . Danton. . . the soldiers of Year II’ (Macron, 2017 [2016]: 173–174).

In addition, the empty signifier ‘and at the same time’ makes it possible to unify the demands of entrepreneurs and of workers, as though there were no conflicts between them. Macron (2017 [2016]) frames entrepreneurs as ‘heroes of the Republic’ (p. 174). However, he also provides a humanist critique of organizational life and of capitalism: ‘In too complex companies, nobody knows who decides and who obeys. Those who work, employees, managers, seem to be put in motion by an invisible system that nobody controls. This dehumanization, this maximal “optimization” race can lead to tragedies’ (Macron, 2017 [2016]: 176). Interestingly, Macron depoliticizes his critique of capitalist logics in organizations as managers, and employees are held equally as victims and no one is deemed responsible for organizational alienation.

In addition, Macron articulates a softer version of the French approach to secularism (*‘laïcité’*) which would be more open to Muslims, but in return would demand that they integrate along the lines of Macron’s populism. Macron dialectically writes that he will ‘help Islam construct its place in the Republic; but[at the same time] yield nothing on our principles and fight all communitarianisms’ (Macron, 2017 [2016]: 173). Radical Islam and Muslim communitarianism are rejected, but so are stricter versions of secularism/*laïcité*. In order to associate people from ethnic minorities to his populism, Macron has put emphasis on a number of successful entrepreneurs from these minorities, such as Mounir Mahjoubi who was appointed (at 31 years of age) Secretary of State in charge of Digital Affairs (Cuny, 2017).

The empty signifier ‘and at the same time’ ultimately allows Macron to co-opt moderate sensibilities from both the left-wing and the right-wing. In relation to this, while he claimed, when he launched the *En Marche!* movement in April 2016, that he was neither left- nor right-wing, in March 2017 he reformulated this position by instead affirming being ‘both right- and left-wing’ (see Haddad, 2017). During a TV show on 13 March 2017, he elaborated that he believes in ‘progress from the left, right

and centre', and he added, 'I bring together people from the left, centre and right who want to work together. I am a progressive politician and I am both right-wing and left-wing' (Quotidien, 2017). Thus, the emphasis on being a progressive reformer has made it possible for Macron to claim to incarnate the more desirable option from both a centre-right and a centre-left perspective.

This progressive emphasis, as we have mentioned, was expressed from the beginning through the empty signifier '*En Marche!*'. After the presidential election and before the parliamentary elections, the creation of the party LaREM consolidated Macron's alleged monopoly on progressive politics through what Laclau and Mouffe (1985) might have called a 'hegemonic intervention'. While the conservative right had attempted to hegemonize the French Republic by calling themselves *Les Républicains* in 2015, they got trapped by a similar trick when Macron named his own party based on the same nodal point – certainly the most unifying French political signifier there is – and associated it with his 'onwards' project involving both centre-right and centre-left 'progressives'. It was made all the easier for Macron to incarnate the French Republic as, for the second round of the presidential election, he had found himself the candidate of the 'Republican front' – a coalition of all the self-proclaimed 'reasonable' parties that has tended to form to defeat *Front National* when the need has arisen in electoral second rounds (most famously in 2002 with Jacques Chirac's presidential win over Jean-Marie Le Pen). Now, the Republican front involves a robust equivalential chain, that is, one that articulates a large number of different demands, as it brings together all those who believe it is worth opposing *Front National*. Standing as the candidate of the Republican front made Macron's positioning before the second round easier while allowing him to remain consistent with his progressive credo: during the TV debate against Le Pen, he described his opponent as belonging to the past and himself as the only candidate to propose a way forward (Chrisafis, 2017). He claimed to be more inclusive in relation to French people, arguing that she would be more divisive, given her 'hate-filled speeches' towards minorities (Chrisafis, 2017). Thus, Macron's populism succeeded in articulating a large chain of demands for electoral purposes – and he won the second round with approximately two-thirds of the cast votes (admittedly much less than Chirac's 83% in 2002).

Electoral populism and emergent organizing

The success of Macron's electoral populism was grounded on emergent organizing, in particular within the framework of *En Marche!*. This operated on two complementary levels during the presidential and the parliamentary campaigns. First, the emergent organizing was left discursively ambiguous until very late so as to keep aggregating additional demands to the equivalential chain. Second, the *En Marche!* movement gradually evolved from a partial organization (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2011) to a more formal organization, that is to say a bureaucratized and hierarchized political party – LaREM. The two functioned in symbiosis.

As discussed previously, Macron deliberately left a great deal of ambiguity in his communication during the presidential and parliamentary campaigns so as to articulate elements of both the centre-left and the centre-right. In the beginning, he made points about defending free-market ideas and liberalism by promoting further labour market deregulation – including the possibility to work on Sundays – in the aftermath of the law he passed as he was still Minister of the Economy in the summer of 2015. Then, after the start of the campaign in October 2016, he mentioned a number of ideas about his political programme but without much specification (e.g. Macron et al., 2016). At that point, his discourse was very open and still vague enough to potentially aggregate demands from both sides. February 2017 marked a key moment, when important demands became associated with his candidacy: (1) those of centre-right potential candidate François Bayrou, calling for a 'moralization of politics' law and a 'major cleanup of France's political life' (Willsher, 2017), and joining Macron along the objective of renewal of the (corrupt) political class; (2) some of those of the anti-colonialist

left and Muslim minorities, appealed to through Macron's speech in Algiers, characterizing colonization as 'a war crime' which France should apologize for (Berdah, 2017); and (3) those of prominent green politicians, such as Daniel Cohn-Bendit and François de Rugy who joined Macron's movement. Turning what had initially been a weakness into a strength, Macron went on to complete an impressive symbolic 'environmental turn' just after the presidential elections (and crucially before the parliamentary elections) by convincing Nicolas Hulot (the most popular ecologist in France, who had rejected ministerial appointments under the presidencies of Macron's three predecessors) to become 'minister for the ecological and inclusive transition' and by making a spectacularly viral tweet and video entitled 'make our planet great again' (Henley, 2017), responding to Trump's withdrawal from the Paris conference agreement.

While Macron's opponents in the presidential campaign from the traditionally ruling parties had to position themselves – and move relatively far from the centre – in their respective primaries, Macron was able to remain open to aggregating new demands to his movement all the way until the parliamentary elections. By the time of that latter campaign, a key advantage he had was that he could select ministers for his government in ways that associated important political families and projects to his winning team. In the centre-right, this meant not only moralization and renewal with Bayrou, Minister of Justice, but economic orthodoxy with Bruno Le Maire, Minister of the Economy, and Gérald Darmanin, Minister of Budget, whereas in the centre-left it meant a new emphasis on environmentalism with Hulot, ranked second in the hierarchy of ministers behind Socialist Gérard Collomb, Minister of the Interior, and just ahead of Bayrou. Finally, the symbolic renewal of the political class was expressed through the appointment of many ministers from civil society who had not been involved in party politics until then.

In parallel, this discursive organizing of openness was connected to the emergent organizing of the movement *En Marche!* which changed gradually from a partial organization with almost no elected politicians to a formal organization, that is to say a powerful political party with a bureaucracy and a high number of elected politicians. The first collective that was created to support a potential campaign of Macron was the *Jeunes avec Macron* (youth with Macron), first only a Facebook account and then an online group of a few thousand members in autumn 2015. In March 2016, this group founded a small think tank, *La Gauche Libre* (The Free Left), with the implicit intention to put pressure on the French Socialist party from the outside (Rose, 2016). Then, the *En Marche!* movement was launched in April 2016, while Macron was still a minister, leading to speculation that he might have presidential ambitions for 2017 already. He resigned from the government in August and in October announced his candidacy for the presidential election. An additional degree of formalization was then reached as it became legally possible to raise funds and develop recruitment of members for an actual campaign. Acquiring membership was very easy, as it was free and based on online registration only; this made the movement much more flexible than a formal party with new members having to physically join a local branch and pay a membership fee. The many meetings organized by Macron from July 2016 became moments of sedimentation of the organization by allowing the members to meet Macron.

On the victorious day of the second round of the presidential election, *En Marche!* was transformed into a formal political party, LaREM. Unlike *En Marche!*, LaREM does not accept members of another political party. In addition, while *En Marche!* comprised local online-constituted committees with no formal hierarchy and almost no established politicians, LaREM now can boast of having 309 MPs in addition to a formal hierarchy comprising an executive bureau and national council. However, when preparing for the parliamentary elections, the organization still looked very open as it launched a call for candidacies, in which literally anyone could send their CVs for consideration as potential LaREM candidates (Dupont, 2017). The idea was to promote MPs from civil society, as opposed to professional politicians. After the parliamentary elections, LaREM

seemed to become a fully bureaucratized and hierarchized political party, giving its members only limited capacity to participate democratically in its governance – as in the ‘election’ of lone candidate Christophe Castaner as party leader (De Boni, 2017). In other words, the organizing of openness entailed a gradual move from partial organization – the mainly digital *Jeunes avec Macron*, followed by the *En Marche!* movement with rather loose membership rules, much more members and resources to organize meetings during the presidential campaign – to the bureaucratized organization of LaREM with a formal hierarchy. The latter organized closure in order to meet the needs of the exercise of power – such as making sure that MPs would be ‘disciplined’ in voting for the government’s bills – whereas the former was an emergent movement more adapted to support a new candidate with no assistance from a traditional political party. In contrast with ‘The Alternative’s version of opensource politics [that] oscillates back and forth between openness and closure’ (Husted and Plesner, 2017: 665), the evolution from *En Marche!* to LaREM unfolded more as a gradual movement from openness to closure.

Some organizational conclusions

We argue that Macron’s populism can be understood as a (successful) organizational endeavour, in the sense that a consistent, elaborate discursive strategy structures it. In fact, the contributions that our article brings to (1) understanding the Macron phenomenon, (2) Laclau’s conceptualization of populism and (3) organization studies come from combining an analysis of the distinct discursive features of Macron’s electoral populism with an understanding of the emergent organizing that made it work in forming a broad equivalential chain.

First, the creation of a new frontier dividing society into two camps – the backward-looking conservatives and the progressive reformers – is undeniably a pragmatic, strategic move that helped Macron make space for his populism in the traditionally difficult (in the French context) centrist political position. This involved not only disqualifying protectionist and Euroskeptical positions as ‘conservative’, but also, and more importantly, disqualifying the two traditional ruling parties as part of the failed, old-guard elites. While there was luck involved in this process too, it is difficult to overstate the extent of the success of this strategy: Macron succeeded in transforming the long-established (arguably since the French Revolution, but at least since the advent of the Fifth Republic in 1958) French right-left *clivage* and in imposing his new ‘progressive versus conservative’ frontier based on a completely new movement. In this sense, what Macron achieved is much more than just being the French Blair, Obama or (Justin) Trudeau, as all three were elected representing powerful established parties in their respective countries. Macron’s populism not only made possible the victory of a novel centrist strategy based on a completely new political party, but it also provided a large-scale redrawing of the French political map.

Second, Macron managed to modulate the broadness of the equivalential chain, in three steps. For the first round of the election, his refusal of a right-left opposition and instead his positioning as right-wing and left-wing ‘at the same time’ (while remaining very vague about his programme for as long as possible) made it possible for him to attract voters from both centre-right and centre-left, enough to get through to the second round quite comfortably. Then, in the second round, he unsurprisingly took the role of representative of the Republican front, with the equivalential chain at its broadest, and won easily. This set the stage for the parliamentary elections.

But before that stage, the nominations of ministers in the government were as many opportunities to aggregate more demands to his successful movement; in particular, a brilliant move was getting Hulot as minister of the environment, thereby aggregating a strong environmental promise (combined with the ‘Making our planet great again’ PR move) which surely seduced more ‘progressive’ voters. In parallel, the name and implicit mandate of his new party LaREM acted as a successful

hegemonic intervention, leading to a landslide win for his candidates. Organizationally, this meant continuing to organize openness (through a broad call for candidacies from people from civil society before the parliamentary elections) but through an increasingly formal party, with a strong move towards closure right after the parliamentary elections, in order to ‘discipline’ the freshly elected MPs in line with the new party’s need for a reliable majority. Thus, the idiosyncratic organization of Macron’s electoral populism serves as an illustration of how the openness that is required by the objective to create and broaden an equivalential chain can be organized through a movement that first remains open as long as possible, aggregating as many demands as possible until as late as just before the parliamentary elections, and then towards the final stages of the conquest of power closes itself to enable a functional exercise of power.

One important question is, ‘Does the reliance of populisms on empty signifiers make them by definition indistinguishable?’ This is where it is important to bring back signification to the articulatory practices of populism: the use of empty signifiers is there to articulate new political frontiers, and in doing so a clear othering of ‘enemies’, on which each populism is contingent. To illustrate differences between populisms, let us look at the three most prominent French populisms of the 2017 elections: the far-right populism of Marine Le Pen (*Front National*), the left populism of Jean-Luc Mélenchon (*La France insoumise*) and Macron’s populism. We notice that all three of these populisms foregrounded not one, but two main ‘enemies’. In their campaigns, all three presented their projects as revolutionary against the elites in place, the establishment. But Le Pen’s other central enemy was immigrants, Mélenchon’s was Front National and Macron’s was the extremes, in which he included both Le Pen and Mélenchon. This makes Macron’s populism ‘anti-extreme’, which makes it clear that it is substantively different from most of the populist ‘offering’ available in various parts of the world at the moment. Theoretically speaking, then, what makes populisms substantively different relates to the political frontiers they draw and how they use empty signifiers and equivalential chains to that effect. Thus, to understand both populism in general and particular varieties of populism, it is necessary to analyse the specific political context in which their political logic is deployed.

The substantive distinctiveness of Macron’s anti-extreme populism leads us to another important implication. Against conventional wisdom on populism, Macron’s populist achievements – getting elected, obtaining an overwhelming parliamentary majority *and* establishing a new political frontier – show that centrist, liberal political actors can in certain circumstances willingly contribute to radical transformations and new polarizations in the political scene that might turn out to be dangerous for liberal democracy. The establishment of the new frontier between progressives and conservatives has seemingly allowed LaREM to crush the formerly governing centre-right and centre-left parties, but it appears to be at the cost of having to accept the far-right as main political opponent – of accepting a liberal versus illiberal frontier. This leads to a potentially dangerous current duopoly of French politics between LaREM and the far-right (as per the 2019 European elections results).

In analysing how Macron’s populism has been ‘discursively organized’, we need to acknowledge a few caveats. First, not everything in the emergent discursive organization of Macron’s electoral populism can be proven to have been down to purposeful organizational action. Our claim here, however, would be that at least some of these characteristics (such as the new frontier between conservatives and progressives or the hegemonic intervention of *The Republic onwards!*) have been clear strategic moves, aligned with structural organizational changes. Second, and relatedly, our aim here is not to idealize the success of Macron’s populism. On the one hand, Macron was undeniably very lucky with the circumstances in which he ran for President, and his success cannot be explained by the seduction of his populism alone. On the other hand, while we found some of Macron’s progressive promises appealing, we are both far from supporting the ideological

substance of Macron's politics. This speaking out piece is limited to those characteristics of Macron's populism that help understand his stunning electoral success in 2017; for now, we leave the critiques of Macronism as ideology outside of this analysis.

But even so, it is important to note that the progressive promise of Macron's populism has turned out to be problematic, because that promise largely has been betrayed since the elections, in relation to aims such as renewing the political elites (Rosanvallon, 2018), redressing social inequalities (Pietralunga, 2018), making immigration policy more humane (Berger et al., 2018) or prioritizing environmental issues over industry lobbies (Bock, 2018). Thus, the main problem with Macron's electoral populism, taken on its own terms, is not that it was seductive – and extremely successful electorally – but lies in its clear failure to deliver on its progressive promises, at least until now. And such betrayed promises are likely to contribute to a further 'multiplication of unsatisfied demands', that is, to intensifying the contemporary 'populist moment' (Mouffe, 2018: 11), as in the recent hyperconcentration of animosity onto the figure of Macron expressed by the 'Yellow vests' (*Gilets jaunes*) movement.

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Note

1. Unless specified differently, all translations are the authors' own.

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