The 2022 French presidential election: A campaign based on "European issues"?

Call for papers for the "L'Europe en réflexion" column of the Research Group on the European Union (GrUE) - in partnership with The Conversation

In aTV address broadcasted on 9 November, French President Emmanuel Macron put Europe at the heart of the presidential election campaign, stating: "The stakes are so high, in the clash of continental powers that is taking place before our eyes, that only a European entente, based on solidarity and determination, can bring each of our European countries a source of support and strength.” The beginning of the year 2022 also coincides with the French Presidency of the Council of the European Union, the start of which has sometimes been marked by heated exchanges following President Macron’s recent speech to the European Parliament. Beyond the expectations it raises and the themes put forward and embodied by the motto "Recovery, Strength and a Sense of Belonging" ('Relance, Puissance, Appartenance'), some candidates question the interplay between these two events, accusing Emmanuel Macron of political recuperation for his re-election. These two episodes, therefore, confirm a trend already observed during previous presidential elections: these can be played out on 'European issues' (de Vries, 2007), which are regularly mobilised by the candidates in competition to assert a political position that they hope will be profitable to them at the time of the vote.

Candidates from all political parties are thus involved in what could be seen as a form of Europeanisation of the election. Even in the sovereignist camps, the position on European integration has evolved: most candidates still denounce EU institutions, which would threaten national sovereignty; but leaving the EU or the euro, which used to be central for some of them, is no longer at the heart of their manifestos (Le Monde). Transnational dialogue is being organised and the "eurosceptic" presidential candidates are competing to forge alliances with other European leaders (Le Monde). In this respect, Marine Le Pen, alongside Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, criticized "the EU's will to enslave member States" (Le Monde). These attitudes are framed in a context of increased distrust in Europe, and particularly in the East - f.i. the Polish positions challenging the supremacy of Community law (Baraggià & Ragone, 2021) over national law - one of the main effects of which is to contribute to the reconfiguration of the traditional political cleavages that have already begun. Now, the competition is also driven by a clear division between the supporters of the EU and its critics, who are not always the ones we would have expected. Even in the more centrist circles, the unsuccessful candidate in the LR primary and former European Commissioner Michel Barnier has taken unexpected positions by expressing the wish to "regain legal sovereignty " (Politico) on the issue of migration.

Such a level of tension seems to indicate that the European Union - as a geographical space, as a decision-maker, or as a political project - is likely to be at the heart of a campaign such as the one that is starting in France. In this regard, this call for papers aims to encourage and bring together researchers to shed light on the place and form that this new Euroclash (Faure & Chopin, 2021) is likely to take in the context of this presidential campaign.

The question of whether the European integration process and its related issues can influence the course and/or the outcome of a 'first-order' election has long been central to the debate in political science. While some insist on the low salience of such issues in French electoral debates (Harmsen, 2005), others point out that European integration is a vector for
blurring partisan cleavages that are no longer solely guided by a left-right divide (Grunberg & Schweigsguth, 2003). About voting, research also varies between highlighting an indifference to European issues and highlighting their importance (Van Ingelgom, 2012) - often relative - in electoral choices (Schoen, 2008). Broadly speaking, these dimensions should be articulated to recall that the influence of attitudes towards Europe on voting varies not only according to the level of political socialisation of citizens but also according to the national context, the salience of the European issue at the time of the election or the parties' proposals regarding this issue (Bélot, Cautrès & Strudel, 2012). According to the same authors, however, European issues do not seem to represent a factor of disruption of national political hierarchies, which more often tend to 'absorb' them and make them an additional element articulated to historical cleavages.

Can the context of crisis - whether of health, economic or migratory nature, depending on the moment and the label assigned to it - in which the 2022 campaign is taking place change the situation? At the very least, it invites us to extend these questions to understand what is at stake when Europe is used in an electoral period. Several questions, not exclusive of proposals for contributions dealing with other themes, could be investigated:

1. The consolidation of a pro/anti-European cleavage: in several Member States, criticism of Europe and the reaffirmation of political and legal sovereignty at the same time tend to reinforce a cleavage between supporters and opponents of European integration. The question is when and to what extent the French campaign can be the recipient or, on the opposite, the vector of this reconfiguration of the political game (on a national level or beyond). Contributions on other European countries and comparative analysis are welcome.

2. How is the European integration process generally viewed in national elections? If the EU is now being discussed more in the light of the difficulties it generates, how has this been the case in previous elections? What might be the effects on the future of the European integration process if from now on a negative consensus is formed against it, or if indifference towards European issues prevails? What role can the campaigns play in this respect, and who, on the other hand, is trying to foster a positive perception of it? But also, considering the French Presidency of the Council of the EU: to what extent does it have an impact on the elections? Does and how is Macron's political party (LREM) relying on this presidency in the campaign? Does the fact that the incumbent President is campaigning have an impact on the French Presidency of the Council of the EU itself?

3. Finally, the ongoing pandemic invites us to question the place occupied by the term 'crisis' in the way in which European issues are now grasped and shaped by the candidates running for office. Do the critical situations recently experienced contribute to the emergence of new positions or topics, likely to surpass the pro-/anti- divide, in the way the European integration process is promoted or fought?
How to submit proposals

Proposals for articles should be sent to europeanreflexion.grue@gmail.com. They should be no longer than 15 lines and should specify the topic and the material used. After acceptance, the authors will be invited to submit a short article of 12,000 characters (including spaces) maximum, which will go through a double evaluation process. It will then be published on the website of the online media The Conversation.

The column is edited by members of the Research Groupe on the European Union (GrUE). The contributions published consist of analyses of European news using the conceptual tools of social sciences. They may be based on empirical research (e.g. preliminary results of ongoing research) or integrated into the theoretical debates of European studies. The coordinators are Lola Avril (EUI), Vincent Lebrou (Université de Franche-Comté, CRJFC), Anne-Laure Riotte (Université de Paris II Panthéon-Assas, CERSA) and Florian Tixier (Institute of Journalism Bordeaux Aquitaine, MICA & Université libre de Bruxelles, LaPIJ).