

It's a bird! It's a plane! It's Emmanuel Macron.

 politico.eu/article/emmanuel-macron-superhero-president-france-election-2022

March 25, 2021

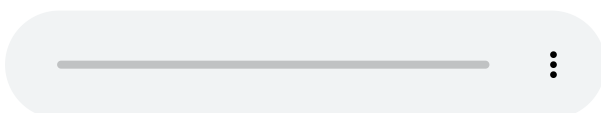


Illustration by Liam Brazier for POLITICO

By [Rym Momtaz](#)

March 25, 2021 4:00 am

Press play to listen to this article



Voiced by [Amazon Polly](#)

PARIS – Listen to Emmanuel Macron’s entourage talk about the French president’s handling of the coronavirus, and you might come away thinking he’s Superman. Or Clark Kent. Or both.

There’s the Macron who, according to his advisers, boldly brushed off the predictions of French epidemiologists and decided based on his own reading of scientific studies to brave the third wave without imposing harsh lockdowns.

Then there’s the Macron who, like the average, powerless spectator, is frustrated with the sluggish vaccination rollout and routinely gets angry with subordinates for not pushing through his policies fast enough.

With the next presidential election just over a year away, Macron’s aides and advisers have been playing off both music sheets, trying to convince French voters that their president is the most capable option for shepherding them through the crisis — but is simultaneously not to blame for any of the failings taking place along the way.

It’s a delicate trick to pull off — one not made easier by Macron’s penchant for centralized decision-making and his habit of putting himself at the center of the narrative.

Each new phase of the pandemic has featured a now-familiar national soap opera. For days, the entire country, including lawmakers, is on tenterhooks waiting for Macron to make up his mind about tightening or loosening up restrictions, usually at the very last minute.

Other countries in Europe have struggled just as much with the unpredictable ebb and flow of the pandemic, but few other leaders have been so deliberately cast in such a pivotal role. That’s in part because of the enormous power of the president under the French constitution, but it’s also a consequence of Macron’s governing style and how crucial his handling of the crisis will be in his bid for reelection next year.

“He has increasingly made the choice of personally overseeing certain issues related to the pandemic,” said a government minister, on the condition of anonymity to speak more freely.

“He goes over the daily vaccine deliveries, looks at all the charts,” the minister added. “He knows the pandemic will be a major issue in the upcoming presidential campaign.”

Superhero

Super-Macron was on full display at the end of January.

In the morning, the French president sat down with a small group of foreign correspondents at the Elysée Palace around a large conference table to allow for proper social distancing. One of the questions was about the vaccine produced by AstraZeneca.

Though he acknowledged that he didn’t have enough data and was waiting for health agency advice, he confidently declared that the jab seemed “quasi-ineffective” on seniors. He repeated the claim more than once. (That afternoon, he was contradicted by the

European Medicines Agency which recommended the vaccine for use across all age groups.)

PRESIDENT EMMANUEL MACRON APPROVAL RATING

For more polling data from across Europe visit [POLITICO Poll of Polls](#).

A few hours later, he convened the small team of government officials he meets with weekly to scrutinize the progression of the pandemic, and, going against the advice of his prime minister and his health minister — a medical doctor — told them he would not be ordering a lockdown as the country was headed into a third wave. Rather, he wanted to try to get through it with a different kind of approach.

Macron's entourage portrays this not as rash decision-making but as a nearly superhuman ability to tackle the science. "He has this ability to challenge the health minister and the director general of health [both trained in medicine] over medical studies," a ministerial adviser said admiringly.

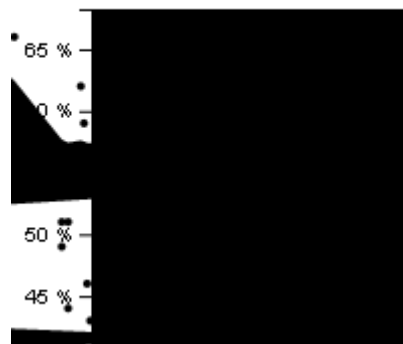
Though Macron has no formal training in medical sciences, aides say he has been poring over the scientific literature, educating himself about clinical trials and new therapeutics, as well as epidemiological models of how the pandemic is spreading.

"He's going to turn into an epidemiologist," is how one anonymous government minister put it to the news site [France Inter](#).

The ministerial adviser tried to justify that line by pointing out that Macron's parents were trained in medicine. (By contrast, aides of German Chancellor Angela Merkel and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, who are both trained in the sciences, have rarely pointed to their bosses' diplomas to burnish their credentials for managing this crisis.)

Nevertheless, some of Macron's bolder decisions have yielded results. He kept schools open more than most other European countries, and he managed to preserve France's sacrosanct summer and winter holidays, even as experts — wrongly — warned they would turn into catastrophic clusters.

He's also pragmatically adjusted his fiscally conservative philosophy to deal with the crisis. At his direction, the government has continued to provide some of the most generous economic aid, in essence nationalizing a large part of salaries to limit layoffs.



But it didn't take Macron himself catching COVID to reveal that there's no cape in his closet — and that behind closed doors he is not as decisive as he is sometimes portrayed.

As the pandemic has dragged on, and social fatigue and economic costs have risen, Macron has become increasingly resistant to lockdowns. So much so, that Professor Jean-Francois Delfraissy, the head of the scientific council Macron set up at the beginning of the pandemic, now refrains from recommending restrictive measures “because he feels like the more he tells Macron he should lock down, the less he will do it,” according to a high level official at the health ministry.

His resolve to inventively avoid lockdowns has further isolated him in his decision-making.

Last week, as cases mounted across France, the country spent four days on edge, hanging on every new rumor about potential new coronavirus restrictions: A full lockdown? A weekend lockdown? Some sort of hybrid? No one could give any clarity, including government ministers who were meeting with Macron.

“He's still thinking,” an Elysée adviser texted Thursday, hours before Prime Minister Jean Castex emerged to announce new restrictions in a press conference.

And despite his vaunted interest in the science, Macron has also given in to political pressure.

That was on display last week when he decided to suspend use of the AstraZeneca vaccine in France. It wasn't because of a medical study he had read. The EMA and World Health Organization repeatedly said there was no reason to. According to a minister, it was in large part to avoid a political controversy after health authorities in Germany declared they would stop using the jab.

Like many leaders, Macron's decisions haven't always worked out. At first, it seemed like his plan to brazen through the third wave without a lockdown would pay off. But six weeks later, cases have sharply risen, hundreds of people are dying every day and hospitals are overstretched — forcing him to shut all nonessential businesses in the Paris area, and a few other regions, for at least four weeks just as spring was starting.

This too has been portrayed as a mark of leadership.

“In the face of this unprecedented crisis, one should have the humility to try things,” said the adviser to sum up Macron's approach. “The unprecedented situation forces you to dare things. He knows he wasn't successful at everything.”

Officials close to Macron have continued to defend his call not to lock down at the end of January, even as the government reverses course on his decision. At his press conference last week, Castex spent several minutes arguing the decision to leave France open in January was right, despite the fact that Delfraissy had correctly predicted at the time that the so-called English variant of the virus would lead to a sharp rise in severe cases by mid-March.

Rule by leak

As France tips back into crisis mode, Macron has preached humility but struggled with simply recognizing when a policy choice of his has failed, as other leaders have.

“The master of time is the virus, unfortunately,” Macron, who has often referred to himself as “the master of clocks,” said at a press conference Monday.

“We have to look at the unpredictable and hard reality of this virus, and so we need a lot of humility,” he added.

Like other countries dealing with an unpredictable pandemic, France’s response to the coronavirus has been peppered with mistakes — big and small — especially when it comes to its ability to deliver vaccines. But when things have gone wrong, instead of a clear mea culpa, Macron’s entourage strategically leaks his “anger,” blaming the state apparatus for not implementing his decisions fast or well enough.

At the beginning of the year, when the country was only vaccinating a few hundred people a day, compared with thousands in neighboring countries, Macron’s office made it known he was angry about the situation. They neglected the fact that it was the president who approved France’s vaccination strategy, which the government said had been conceived to first focus on the very vulnerable elderly, and — because of that — was slow by design.

His team resorted to the same tactic before he decided not to lock down again. They made it known he had told his Cabinet that “as long as there are jabs in the fridges I am not locking down.”

If Macron has next year’s election in mind, however, there’s little evidence his dual-faced strategy is working. The French have taken note of his shortcomings. Sixty percent say they do not trust the executive branch to handle the pandemic, according to a February [poll](#) by Odoxa.

The leaks, intended to make the commanding leader seem more in touch with the worries of average people, have instead given many an entirely different impression.

“People in my constituency didn’t understand this anger; it is devastating,” one MP from the ruling majority said, speaking on condition of anonymity to speak more freely. “They thought it showed he can’t lead or get things done.”

There are no signs Macron intends to change his method. At the end of October, when Macron ordered the second lockdown, an adviser said the president had warned his government: “I won’t order a third one, figure it out.”

Critics say he hasn’t left his government much leeway to do that.

“Ministers in this government are reduced to less than junior associates who do as they are told,” an adviser to a high-ranking minister recently said.

Unlike Superman, Macron hasn’t put together his own Justice League.