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Macron's national debate on immigration plays into the hands of the French far right

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The French president is trying to beat Marine Le Pen and her National Rally party at their own game. He can only fail.

Nearly halfway into his rocky first term as French president, Emmanuel Macron has concocted a new plan to bolster his flagging approval ratings: a sweeping national debate on immigration. Starting on Monday, the French parliament is slated to begin a wide-ranging discussion of [French and European migration](#) policy. It comes just weeks after Macron told legislators from his party, La République En Marche, that he believes immigration to be a major concern of working-class people – something they apparently “endure”, along with poverty and unemployment. “The question,” [he told the parliamentarians](#), “is whether we want to be a bourgeois party or not.”

It's unclear what exactly will come of the debate. Just in case legislators are looking for inspiration, though, the president has floated a handful of his own ideas – and they give a sense of where this is headed. He has suggested that state medical aid for undocumented immigrants is too generous, that some are abusing the [right of asylum](#), and that deportations sometimes take too long to process because of legal challenges. “France cannot host everyone if it wants to host people well,” Macron said on Wednesday.

“The National Rally will try to drag the discussion into an escalating showdown over who can promise more deportations”

The debate taking shape is a dangerous one. But it's also based on a phoney premise: France is not “hosting everyone” seeking refuge and asylum. It's not even coming close. Since taking office more than two years ago, Macron has criticised the brutal [migration policies of countries such as Italy](#) and Hungary, while France has maintained a hardline stance of its own. Over the past four years, since the peak of the refugee crisis, France has approved far fewer asylum requests than neighbouring Germany. According to government figures, it [granted asylum to just 33,000 people](#) in 2018. That's a slight increase on previous years, but still represents only a quarter of all requests.

What's more, the share of France's population that was born overseas has hardly increased over the past four decades. Immigrants currently make up just under [10% of the French population](#) – only two percentage points more than in 1975.

By framing immigration as a problem for the working class – a scourge on the same level as unemployment and poverty – Macron is echoing the classic narrative of the far right. The Front National – which [rebranded as Rassemblement National](#) (the National Rally) last year – has long charged France's ruling class with abandoning the country by allowing in too many foreigners. According to its warped logic, immigrants and elites share responsibility for France's social decay and ongoing ills. With the complicity of top politicians and civil servants, the story goes, immigrants

have driven up unemployment and racked up a costly welfare tab, depriving the native-born working and middle classes of much-needed work and state aid. This is the very essence of the National Rally's brand of xenophobic populism – its ideological bread and butter.

But the notion that low-income French people are simply crying out for the government to deport more immigrants or deny them benefits is spurious. It is true that a wide-ranging annual opinion study found that nearly [two-thirds of French people](#) said there were “too many” foreigners in the country. However, when asked to identify their top political priorities, people ranked environmental protection first, followed by the future of the welfare state and questions linked to purchasing power, such as wages and taxes.

These are all issues at the heart of the [gilets jaunes](#) (yellow vests) protest movement. A near-perfect incarnation of France's working-class anger and sense of abandonment, the yellow vests have called for the reintroduction of the wealth tax on assets above €1.3m, which was repealed by Macron's government; a hike in the minimum wage; and more investment in public services such as schools and hospitals. Yet rather than address any of these pressing issues, Macron has instead opted to tackle something that nobody, except National Rally sympathisers, is asking for.

It's also a dangerous gambit politically. By steering the national debate toward issues such as the cost of healthcare for undocumented immigrants, Macron is aiming to beat the National Rally at its own game. If the past is any guide, though, such an approach risks only further legitimising the ideas of Marine Le Pen and the rest of the far right. In 2009 the then-president, Nicolas Sarkozy, launched a [widely panned national debate](#) on French immigration and identity. It was based on many of the same faulty premises as next week's debate – designed, in part, to neutralise the growing threat of the Front National. Instead, the ensuing media circus gave credibility to the myth that ordinary people's suffering is tied to the presence of foreigners or insufficiently integrated citizens. Three years later, in the presidential election, the [Front National had its best ever result](#) in terms of vote share (although it would do even better in 2017).

Now, the National Rally is likely to dismiss whatever Macron's party proposes as not going far enough. It will try to drag the discussion even further into its preferred terrain: an ever-escalating showdown over who can promise more deportations, more restrictions on welfare and more rejections of asylum requests. This is a debate only the National Rally can win. In a likely preview of the looming immigration battle, [Le Pen has already preemptively slammed Macron](#) for preparing to take “small measures that won't fix the problem”.

If the president doesn't back down soon, [France](#) can expect far more of this muscle-flexing. That would be bad news for the millions of people of foreign origin who live there, citizens and non-citizens alike.

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