

## Attalus Augustus

### Did Macron just nominate the Next President of the French Republic?

Victor Warhem



At just 34, Gabriel Attal becomes the youngest Prime Minister of France since the beginning of Republics, in 1792. Emmanuel Macron wants to use his "energy" and "commitment" to implement his "rearmament" and "regeneration" project imagined for the second part of his second term in office. His mission will be a difficult one: he must lead the government and the presidential majority through a new electoral cycle (European and municipal elections), get laws passed in the Parliament without any absolute majority, keep on getting along with President Macron, but also strengthen the country sufficiently such that the far right does not win the 2027 presidential elections. Not to mention the surprises that are bound to happen. If he succeeds despite all these pitfalls, he will then have a chance of becoming the next President of the French Republic.

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## 1 A political and economic context justifying the President's boldness

Macron appoints Gabriel Attal as Prime Minister during a period in which France - like Europe - is experiencing an increasingly difficult economic situation: inflation has been very high in 2022 and 2023 and will probably remain above 2% in 2024; unemployment began to rise again in 2023; and growth is not expected to exceed 1% this year. Despite this, public expenditures must stop their expansion, with the return of relatively restrictive European budgetary rules and given the deteriorated state of French public finances. Moreover, the migratory wave is intensifying, making many French people even more upset.

In this situation, the French are not far from accepting the arrival of Marine Le Pen as President of the Republic and Jordan Bardella as Prime Minister in 2027. Indeed, a poll last autumn showed that 48% of French people were in favor of Bardella's appointment as Prime Minister ... even though he is only 28 years old. Finally, after the adoption of the immigration law last December, which was allowed by the votes of Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National, the majority began to waver. Hence, this highly problematic political and economic context convinced President Macron to appoint Gabriel Attal Prime Minister. But why such a young talent?

Coming from the Socialist Party like Macron, he seems capable of endorsing the shift to the right that the French president has been implementing since the start of his second term, with an unpopular pension reform and a reform of immigration policies. Given the tough decisions Attal took when he was Minister of Education, such as banning abayas - Muslim clothing - from schools, expelling pupils who failed to observe the one minute silence following the murder of a teacher in Arras, and the measures taken to combat harassment in schools, he is likely to emerge as a figure who can win back voters who are tempted by the far right. He also seems capable of bringing together the members of the presidential majority in the National Assembly thanks to his energy and interpersonal skills. Macron probably sees in him a profile just like his own.

## 2 The rise of Gabriel Attal

However, the two men's backgrounds are quite different. Gabriel Attal comes from the Parisian haute bourgeoisie - his dead father was a prominent film producer - whereas Macron is the son of a provincial hospital doctor. Attal was educated at France's most renowned school, the École Alsacienne, in the 14th Parisian district. Then, He joined Sciences Po Paris – the university which many French Presidents joined, including Macron or Chirac -, before deciding to join the Socialist Party at a time when the country was governed by Nicolas Sarkozy. When François Hollande became President, he was recruited as an adviser of Marisol Touraine, Minister of Health, even before he had finished his studies at Sciences Po Paris. Marisol Touraine's daughter, whom he knew well, gave him access to this position, although he was extremely young. He did not get to enter the École Nationale d'Administration (ENA, now INSP – Institut National du Service Public), the school for French high-level civil servants, like Emmanuel Macron did, and has never been a civil servant as such.

Nevertheless, he was a Macron supporter from the start. He joined Emmanuel Macron's party, En Marche!, in 2016, and quickly took on responsibilities, eventually becoming the movement's spokesperson. In 2017, he was elected deputy for Hauts-de-Seine - a very wealthy département bordering Paris - and in 2018, as he was just 29, he was appointed Secretary of State in charge of setting up the universal national service.

His next position really revealed him to the French public: from 2020 to 2022, throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, he was the government spokesperson and enjoyed a great deal of media exposure. At the time, he put on a string of impressive audiovisual performances.

As his reputation grew, he was appointed in 2022 Minister Delegate for the Budget, a crucial position in the government, and finally, in July 2023, Minister of Education. His rise to prominence was meteoric, and the position of Minister of Education finally put him at the top of the list of the French people's favorite government figures, thanks to several emblematic decisions mentioned above. He is now on an equal footing with Edouard Philippe - the first Prime Minister Macron chose in 2017 - in terms of public opinion approval.

Looking closer, it seems Macron has been orchestrating this rise, at least since 2022, in order to make him his heir for 2027. In fact, the position of Prime Minister gives him the opportunity to "test his mettle" and gain final legitimacy and credibility in the eyes of the French.

### **3 A difficult road to 2027**

But in this context, Attal will have to win many battles, which could also wear down his political capital. Given the current economic instability in Europe, and with little economic growth expected for the next few years, he is going to have to deal with pervasive social discontent. The Gilets Jaunes movement, calmed down by the subsequent crises of the covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, is still on people's minds, and the return of a constrained fiscal framework in 2024 and 2025, which will stop the expansionary fiscal policy of recent years, could reignite its boldness.

Politically, Attal's job will be equally difficult. He will have to navigate the National Assembly and the Senate to get laws passed. This means finding "project majorities", both with moderate left- and right-wingers. After the passing of the immigration law, this strategy could be even more difficult that it was already with Elisabeth Borne, which could lead him to use and abuse from the constitutional provision of the article "49-3", which states that the government can ask for a confidence vote to pass a law in the National Assembly, instead of directly voting the law. This trick is judged as very anti-democratic by the French public opinion. Finally, he will have to remain valuable in the eyes of the President Macron, although both his excessive success or failure could lead the President to get rid of him.

Moreover, as far as his personal relationship with the French is concerned, his bourgeois background, the idea that he benefited from shortcuts to the highest functions, his disdain for the people denounced by his former colleague of the École Alsacienne, Juan Branco - who also was Julian Assange's lawyer - and - in the eyes of a conservative France - his open homosexuality could ultimately damage him in the eyes of public opinion through prolonged exposure.

Nevertheless, if he avoids making too many mistakes, or falling into too many traps - and there will be many -, he will have all the legitimacy and credibility to be the heir of Macron in 2027. This is probably the gamble of President Macron, who is blocked by the Constitution of the Fifth Republic and cannot stand for a third term. Like Julius Caesar adopting Caius Octavius - the future first Roman emperor Augustus -, Macron seems to have chosen his political son with Gabriel Attal.

## 4 ceperspective: Attalus Octavius

Given the explosive political and economic context, Emmanuel Macron is not doing Attal any favors, just like Caesar did not with Octavius. But even if his enemies are political and economic in nature, Attal would do well to learn from Caesar's adopted son: After Caesar's assassination, Octavius had to use all his tactical acumen to eliminate the enemies threatening his power, starting with Brutus and his allies, and finally Mark Antony. Once his opponents had been defeated, Octavius could finally become Augustus, the founder of the Roman Empire.

During his handover speech on January 9, 2024, in the coldest weather France had experienced in six years, Attal trembled, as if he could already see the pitfalls on the horizon. But his voice remained firm. In his own words, he will devote his time to "audacity and movement", "youth", "freeing up potential", but also to "controlling social spending", "security", "authority" and "French and European sovereignty". He wants to "enable France to take control of its destiny", a France that always rhymes with "leap forward and greatness".

In his speech, Attal repeatedly reiterated his loyalty and allegiance to Emmanuel Macron. The words eventually remained humble. As if Attal knew words would help him less than deeds, if he was meant to become Augustus and thereby perpetuate Macronism.

Did Macron just nominate the future President of the French Republic?

**Author:**

Victor Warhem, Policy Analyst Centre de Politique Européenne | PARIS  
[warhem@cep.eu](mailto:warhem@cep.eu)

**Centre de Politique Européenne** PARIS

17, rue Saint Fiacre | F-75002 Paris

Tel. + 33 1 88 80 72 00

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