



'France is the foreign country Trump has visited the most – that says a lot'

The US Ambassador to France is no grey-suited career diplomat. Among her previous jobs, she was CEO and co-owner of the Los Angeles Dodgers baseball club. She tells Joanna York of her long love of France (and cooking) and her hopes for the election

JAMIE McCourt, American ambassador to France since 2017, has a longstanding love for the country and its culture.

She took her first degree in French and has studied at the Sorbonne and in Aix-en-Provence. She also has a law degree – she has worked as a lawyer – and an MBA.

Another of her passions is baseball. She was the most senior woman in the sport in her former position as CEO of the Los Angeles Dodgers.

She co-owned the Dodgers, which she bought with her ex-husband Frank McCourt, owner of French Ligue 1 football club Olympique de Marseille, for €430million in 2004.

US ambassadors are not career diplomats but are hand-picked by the president.

Ms McCourt was a vocal and financial supporter of President Trump in the 2016 election. In 2020, she believes he is still the best candidate for the job.

As she sees it, President Trump "stands for everything that is the American dream".

She says: "Without someone who understands it, lived it, believes it, supports it and is going to try to make it possible for people to have it, we will have a real problem with our country. That means a worldwide problem for democracy."

She points to Mr Trump's "day-to-day" experience in the business world and his "understanding of how to build things".

"We need a major infrastructure project to get people back to work," she said. "And who's the right person to do that?"

Ms McCourt, who owns a vineyard in Napa, California, and studied culinary arts in Aix-en-Provence, says it is a love of food in particular that has influenced her love of France.

She said: "I've always loved to cook and I've always loved to eat and I've always loved to have

Connexion Interview US Ambassador to France Jamie McCourt

people around the table. I was here at a young age and that just stayed ingrained.

"When I used to interview people [at the Dodgers], I would do it over a meal because I could tell everything about someone after one meal with them.

"It's an insight into who people are. You can learn so much about people at your table, whether it's through their conversation, or their habits."

Becoming the US ambassador has been "the most amazing experience", she says.

Partly, she says, because President Trump has visited France several times. "A lot goes on and you get to see a lot."

Mr Trump's visits include attending the 2017 Fête Nationale military parade, the Armistice memorials in 2018, the 75-year anniversary of D-day in 2018, and the G7 meeting in Biarritz last year.

He often stays at Ms McCourt's official Paris residence.

"We've had a lot of face time with this president and he is very direct. It's always clear what he wants to talk about."

France is the foreign country Mr Trump has visited the most during his presidency, something the ambassador credits to two factors.

First, "it shows how profound and important the Franco-American relationship is".

Secondly, she says: "Trump and Macron have a wonderful relationship, and their wives have a wonderful relationship, which also makes it easy. From every standpoint, it's probably one of the best relationships



Photos: US Embassy / Sylvain de Gelder

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This has only got stronger with the Covid-19 crisis, Ms McCourt says, "because the two presidents, who always spoke frequently, speak even more frequently about everything, given that there's economic considerations, travel considerations, and everything that's going on."

Despite this, travel between France and the US has remained heavily restricted since March.

The difficulties this presents for those with loved ones in either country and the uncertainty of the Covid-19 crisis are the predominant issue the US Embassy is dealing with.

"Nobody's losing passports, as there's no travel," said Ms McCourt. Instead, the number one question being asked is "how can I get people to come to France?" It does not look likely that easy answers will be coming

soon. "I've been living here so long that even I am saying *c'est compliqué*," she said. "But it is."

This is something that the ambassador, who has four adult sons, feels personally.

"It's so sad on a personal level for everyone. Whether people are having babies or have lost people, or have people in hospitals, or things that they really want to be celebrating, or sick parents... you name it. I find that to be devastating."

As for whether Americans in France should make plans to travel home for Christmas this year, she says: "Your guess is as good as mine... We can't control who the French will say 'OK' to, or 'not OK' to [with regard to returning to France afterwards]. "With Covid, what everybody's allowing are humanitarian exceptions, business exceptions, people with visas, people who have jobs, or kids, and relatives of French citizens."

If the ambassador continues in her role after the election, economic recovery in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic will be one of her top priorities.

The predominant focus of the US Embassy is on national security and the protection of American citizens, but she says: "Assuming that's always there, what's the next focus? It would have to be economics.

"Recovery is going to be a challenge. We all will make it happen but on both sides of the pond we have to figure out how to work together as quickly as possible."

Beyond that, Ms McCourt's "personal focus", coming from a Jewish family, is on antisemitism in France, which she describes as "not in a good place right now".

She says: "Our job is to try to stem the tide on that and really keep it at everybody's awareness level. Because it's very easy to pretend it's not important."

However, first the American public must elect their leader for the next four years and Ms McCourt is a "political" ambassador, not a career diplomat.

When Trump took on the presidency in 2017, he replaced all of Obama's political ambassadors with his own appointees. If the US president changes this November, the US Ambassador to France – one of the most sought-after diplomatic roles – can be expected to change too.

As such, for Ms McCourt, November 3 holds political and deeply personal significance.

Traditionally, the ambassador hosts an event in the residence to see in the election results.

"It's like football in America," she said. "It's an event to watch but with Covid I cannot see how this is going to be possible this year."

Get your postal vote in before mid-October

THE AMBASSADOR has this advice for Americans in France in the run-up to the US election on November 3: Get your vote in early, and certainly before October 13, as then it is guaranteed to arrive.

Overseas voters, of which there are three million, have long relied on the post system to send in their ballot papers but this year more Americans are expected to vote by post due to the pandemic.

This has caused controversy, with claims that the new head of the US postal service, a Trump ally, has made cuts and changes likely to slow the service down. A survey showed Democrat voters were more likely to vote by post.

The president himself has criticised postal voting, saying "there's tremendous fraud" and the system is a "disaster".

This uncertainty may dissuade overseas voters more than others. The Federal Voting Assistance Program estimates only around 9% of the 169,037 eligible citizens in France voted in the last US election. Globally, only 6.9% of overseas citizens voted.

Nonetheless, Ms McCourt recommends voters in France maintain faith in the process.

"We have a proven process and we have to let the process get carried out," she says.

"Then people should peacefully abide by the result. That's why their vote counts so much."

For voters still concerned about sending ballots by post, there are dedicated postboxes outside the US Embassy in Paris and US consulates in Marseille and Strasbourg.

Election results may be delayed this year due to more demand for postal votes.

"My hope, for all Americans, is that we have an answer on the evening of the election, so we have clarity going forward," Ms McCourt says.

What are the issues for US citizens living in France?

DEMOCRATS: Democrats Abroad France sees government accountability, voting rights, civil rights and due process of law – "basic things" which they feel are "under threat" – as key issues, says national chairwoman Ada Shen.

Healthcare is another, and is especially important to Americans in France, who see the benefits of a universal system here, especially in these times of the Covid-19 crisis.

Climate change is also important. "Many have been appalled by the Trump administration's attitude and want to see policies which reflect the gravity of the situation according to the science." Concerning postal voting, Ms

Shen said: "There was a big backlog because of Covid and the changes made by the Trump administration, but it seems OK and I do not think that there will be problems."

She acknowledged that the Fatca act brought in under Obama, which complicates banking for Americans in France, is a problem. She said Democrats Abroad has been trying to address it, but they have been hampered by the lack of a cross-party consensus on what should be done.

However, she did not think this would be a deciding factor for most voters.

Democrats Abroad France has around 1,200 members, she said.

REPUBLICANS: Donald Trump's commitment to law and order will be a deciding factor for many Americans, says Randy Yaloz, president of Republicans Overseas, France.

"It is the one issue everyone is talking about, and at the moment the Democrats are losing votes on it," he told *The Connexion* in late September.

"They look at the rioting in the streets, and the damage done to businesses just when the economy needs all the help it can get to recover from Covid and they want strong action."

Another vote-winner will be his tough position towards China, he said. The Fatca law also works in the

favour of the Republicans, he said.

"As Republicans Overseas, we have been active in challenging it in the courts, against the IRS [American tax office] and even moved in Congress to try to get the law changed, but we were blocked by not having a Democrat join and sponsor the bill."

Mr Yaloz said Republicans Overseas has "several hundred" supporters in France, with almost all voting by post.

Despite controversy (*see above, right*), it does not "seem to be a problem", he said. "I got my papers this week and my son has his, so there is plenty of time to post by the end of September or early October to reach the States."