

A Guide to the Unpredictable French Presidential Election

Written by Benjamin Leruth

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BENJAMIN LERUTH, APR 22 2017

This weekend, French voters will start the process of electing their new president. Current Socialist President François Hollande's track record is catastrophic and he is not running for a second term. Of the eleven present candidates, only three are considered as pro-European, while eight advocate various forms of Euroscepticism. The most recent opinion polls indicate that four candidates are competing to make it to the second round on 7 May: Marine Le Pen (Front National, polling at 23 per cent); Emmanuel Macron (En Marche!, 22.5 per cent); François Fillon (Les Républicains, 19 per cent); and Jean-Luc Mélenchon (La France Insoumise, 19 per cent). Opinion polls have indicated a margin of error of 1.8 per cent. This means that all four candidates could all get around 21 per cent of the results. Who are they, and what do they want for the EU?

Marine Le Pen

Marine Le Pen took over the party leadership from her father, Jean-Marie, in 2011. She has tried to 'de-demonize' the Front National, and to transform it as the main French anti-establishment movement. Her stance on European integration is unsurprisingly critical, and she was among the first to welcome Brexit. However, unlike many international observers believe, the Front National does not explicitly campaign in favour of a 'Frexit'. Instead, the party wants to leave the Economic and Monetary Union, and wants to transform the EU into a 'Europe of sovereign nations'. Le Pen also pledged to hold a referendum on EU membership after renegotiating the terms of membership.

A high level of abstention could help Le Pen secure her place for the second round. However, it is virtually impossible for her to become the next French president, as it is highly expected that turnout will increase with many voters going to the polling stations to prevent her from getting elected. At best, she could get around 8 million votes in the first round. In the second round, she would need to find an additional 10 million voters, who will have mostly voted for moderate, 'mainstream' candidates.

Emmanuel Macron

Often considered as the 'third way candidate', Emmanuel Macron has never held any elected position. In 2014, he was appointed Minister of the Economy, Industry and Digital Affairs, before resigning in 2016 in order to launch his bid for the presidential election. His centrist movement, En Marche!, is considered as a social liberal party. Macron's programme is definitely the most pro-European: he pledged to strengthen the Common Security and Defence Policy, to campaign for a 'Buy European Act' and to create a Eurozone ministry and parliament.

Despite his lack of political experience, Macron quickly became popular and since the revelation of the so-called 'Penelopegate' scandal (more on this below), he emerged as the bookmakers' favourite. His politics appeals to both centre-left and centre-right voters. His political opponents denounced his programme as being empty of any concrete proposals and have attacked Macron by framing him as Hollande's 'heir', given his prominent role in the Socialist government between 2014 and 2016. His chances mostly depend on whether he can be successful in convincing potential Fillon voters to change their mind, but he can be considered as an ideal candidate for those who are looking for a fresh, moderate, social liberal vision of the presidency.

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François Fillon

François Fillon is the only 'traditional' candidate, as he represents one of the two French mainstream parties. The candidate of right-wing party Les Républicains was Nicolas Sarkozy's Prime Minister between 2007 and 2012. Fillon surprisingly won the party's primary election in late 2016, easily beating his challengers thanks to strong support from conservative and Catholic voters. A convinced Europeanist, Fillon wants to strengthen the Common Security and Defence Policy, to reform Schengen and to create a government for the Eurozone. As such, his programme on European integration is fairly similar to the one advocated by Macron.

Many observers saw Fillon as the next French president. However, a series of revelations by French newspaper Le Canard Enchaîné put his candidacy at stake. This so-called 'Penelopegate' scandal led to speculations and pressure over Fillon to step down. Even though he stated that he will not give up and that he will be proven innocent, his popularity has dropped considerably. Still, he might be able to reach the second round (and possibly become the next French President) with the support of his core conservative voters. However, this can prove to be rather difficult for Fillon, given that Macron has been targeting right-wing voters over the past few weeks.

Jean-Luc Mélenchon

Much like Marine Le Pen, Jean-Luc Mélenchon can be considered as an anti-establishment candidate. Over the past couple of weeks, his popularity significantly increased. He took part in the 2012 presidential election, when he ended up fourth with 11% after having polled at more than 17% in the weeks before the vote. Mélenchon is known for his shock statements and his open-air meetings. He took advantage of the Socialist party's poor track record to become the most popular left-wing candidate. His programme calls for a renegotiation of European treaties which, in his opinion, impose austerity measures and hinder public action. In Mélenchon's words: 'The EU, either we change it, or we leave it'.

Yet his experience in the 2012 presidential election might suggest that opinion polls overstate his popularity, despite the clear professionalization of his election campaign. The last few days of the campaign will be crucial in order to determine his chances to make it to the second round. Should he make it to the second round (and this would be a huge coup), his revolutionary, anti-establishment programme is unlikely to convince the majority of voters, much like Marine Le Pen, especially if he was to compete against a more mainstream candidate like Macron or Fillon.

In sum

This French presidential election is by far the most unpredictable of recent decades, with one third of voters still unsure of their decision. All candidates acknowledge that the EU is facing an unprecedented crisis post-Brexit. Accordingly, the EU has been a key issue addressed throughout this campaign. The apocalyptic (though improbable) scenario for the EU would be a Le Pen-Mélenchon run-off, which could mean more problems for the EU on top of the on-going Brexit negotiations. Hollande's track record and 'Penelopegate' offer a window of opportunity for outsiders. However, anti-establishment candidates Le Pen and Mélenchon stand very limited chances if they were to compete in the second round against Fillon or Macron.

But this year in France is not all about the presidential election. The newly elected president will also have to form a government based on the renewed French assembly. Should one of the three non-traditional candidates become the next president of France, s/he will probably have to work with other parties in order to gain enough support within the Assembly. One election after another, the new French political landscape is more fascinating than ever.

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