European Elections monitor

Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen running easily ahead in the polls just one month before the presidential election in France

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Analysis

On 23rd April next 46.6 million French voters and 1.3 million living elsewhere in the world are being called to vote in the first round of the presidential election. The two candidates who come out ahead on the eve of 23rd April will face each other in a second round of voting that will take place two weeks later on 7th May. The presidential election will be followed on 11th and 18th June by general elections that will lead to the renewal of the 577 members' seats in the National Assembly, the lower chamber of parliament.

The election that will be taking place in an international context marked by the Brexit and the victory of Donald Trump on 8th November last in the American presidential election means that everything is now possible and more uncertain than ever before. The main issue at stake in this presidential election is the following: who will challenge Marine Le Pen (Front National, FN) in the second round? The qualification of the far right populist candidate in the battle on 7th May indeed seems to be certain, if we are to believe the polls. If the latter are right she may face Emmanuel Macron (En Marche, EM), who, in the face of a candidate who is advocating national withdrawal, the rejection of Europe and immigration, is standing as the defender of openness, a supporter of the European Union and a reformer who will take France into the 20th century. We can see that the rift between the open/closed societies seems to be taking over from the left/right vote in this election.

Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen are thriving on the crisis ongoing in the partisan system, on the weakening and discredit which the politicians from the two "main" parties are suffering, i.e. the Socialist Party (PS) in office for the past five years in France and the Republicans (LR), who might not feature in the second round of the presidential election, which would certainly lead to a major reshuffle in the French political landscape.

According to the most recent poll by IFOP between 21st and 24th March last, Emmanuel Macron is due to come out ahead in the first round of voting on 23rd April next with 26% of the vote, ahead of Marine Le Pen, who is due to win 25% of the vote. The candidate of the government right, François Fillon (Les Républicains, LR) is due to win 18% of the vote. On the left, with 18% of the vote, Jean-Luc Mélenchon is due to draw ahead of the Socialist Party's representative, Benoît Hamon, who is due to win 10.50% of the vote. Although the electorate's interest is high so is the level of uncertainty and indecision. One third of those interviewed (35%) said that they might still change their mind. Finally 37% of those interviewed maintain that they will not go to ballot.

The candidates running

On 18th March last, the Constitutional Council published a list of 11 people, i.e. one less than in the election on 22nd April and 6th May 2012, of candidates who are officially running in the presidential election. They will be the following:

– Nicolas Dupont-Aignan (Debout la France DLF (France, Arise)), 56 years old, unfortunate candidate in the presidential election on 22nd April and 6th May 2012 (1.79% of the vote in the first round), eurosceptic and anti-liberal;
– Marine Le Pen (Front national, FN (National Front)), 48 years old, leader of the populist far-right since 2011, unfortunate candidate in the presidential election on 22nd April and 6th May 2012 (17.90% of the vote in the first round);

– Emmanuel Macron (En Marche, EM), 39 years old, former Secretary General of the Elysée under the presidency of François Hollande (2012-2014) and former Minister for the Economy, Industry and Digital Affairs (2014-2016);
– Benoît Hamon (Socialist Party, PS), 49 years old, former delegate Minister for Social Economy and Solidarity and Consumer Affairs, (2012-2014) and the National Education, Higher Education and Research, (April-August 2014), presently an MP and regional councillor in the Ile-de-France. He was appointed to be his party's candidate after so-called "Belle Alliance" primary on 22nd and 29th January 2017, when he came out ahead of former Prime Minister (2014-2016) Manuel Valls with 58.69% of the vote;
– Nathalie Arthaud (Lutte ouvrière, LO (Workers' Struggle)), 47 years old, economics teacher, defends the overthrow of capitalism. She was the unfortunate candidate in the presidential election on 22nd April and 6th May 2012 (0.56% of the vote in the first round);
– Philippe Poutou (Nouveau Parti anticapitaliste, NPA (New Anti-Capitalist Party)), 50 years old, unfortunate candidate in the presidential election on 22nd April and 6th May 2012 (1.15% of the vote in the first round). He is fighting amongst other things for the prohibition of dismissals and an increase in the minimum salary to 1,700 € net per month;
– Jacques Cheminade (Solidarité et progress (Solidarity and Progress)), 75 years old, unfortunate candidate in the presidential election on 23nd April and 7th May 1995 (0.28% of the vote in the first round) and that of the presidential election on 22nd April and 6th May 2012 (0.25% of the vote in the first round). He is fighting to counter the dictatorship of finance and American imperialism;
– Jean Lassalle (independent), 61 years old, MP, stands to be the defender of rurality;
– Jean-Luc Mélenchon (Front de gauche, FG (Left Front)), 65 years old, MEP, unfortunate candidate in the presidential election on 22nd April and 6th May 2012 (11.10% of the vote in the first round;
– François Asselineau (Union populaire républicaine (People's Republican Union)), 59 ans, former councillor for Paris (2001-2008). Extremely hostile to "American imperialism" he is fighting for France's exit of the EU and NATO;
– François Fillon (Les Républicains, LR (The Republicans)), 63 years old, former Prime Minister under the Presidency of Nicolas Sarkozy (2007-2012) and former minister on several occasions. He was appointed candidate of his party after the primary on 20th and 27th November 2016 when he drew ahead of former Prime Minister (1995-1997) and present Mayor of Bordeaux, Alain Juppé, taking 66.49% of the vote.

The campaign full of surprises

The presidential election on 23rd April and 7th May is already unique since it goes against all of the rules in this type of exercise.

Firstly, the relinquishment of the outgoing President of the Republic, François Hollande (Socialist Party, PS) on 1st December to stand for a second mandate. "*I am doing this and take full responsibility, but also I am appealing for a collective leap of conscience which involves all of the progressives who must come together in these circumstances since what is at stake is not one person, it is the future of the country,*" declared the head of State in his speech delivered to the nation. This withdrawal is the first under the fifth French Republic. The head of State, who has an extremely low popularity rate in the polls (4% according to a survey undertaken by Ipsos-Cevipof for the daily *Le Monde*), partly linked his political fate after his five year mandate to the results he achieved in terms of unemployment. This has not declined over the last five years as much as he had hoped it would (9.30% unemployed in the second quarter of 2012 amongst the working population and 9.70% in the fourth quarter of 2016).

François Hollande has also possibly learnt the lesson of other seasoned politicians, who were ejected during the primary on the right and the centre – the second unique event – his predecessor Nicolas Sarkozy (LR) in the first round of voting (20.67% of the vote) and Alain Juppé (LR) in the second (33.51% of the vote). Some weeks later it was the turn of former Prime Minister Manuel Valls (PS) to suffer the same fate in the primary on the left (41.31% of the vote in the second round).

Indeed, on the right and the left, each organised a

primary to appoint their candidate in the presidential election. However, unlike events in 2011, during the primary on the left when voters chose "the candidate of consensus" as François Hollande was then called, in each of the camps this year the primary gave victory to candidates that were strongly influence either by the right (François Fillon) or the left (Benoît Hamon), more than the line of their respective political party. This is the third unusual element in this campaign.

As a result (fourth factor) this situation has been to the advantage of Emmanuel Macron who declares that he is neither left or right-wing and that he stands under the colours of the movement "En marche" which he created on 6th April 2016. He is a candidate who has never been elected, and has been joined by François Bayrou (Democratic Movement, MoDem), positioning himself in the centre of the political scale, who decided not to stand in the election. Emmanuel Macron is attracting supporters of the Socialist Party and the Republicans who have been disappointed by their camp.

Hence several ministers of the outgoing government (to date, Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian (PS), the Secretary responsible for Biodiversity, Barbara Pompili (Europe Ecology-Greens, EELV) and her counterpart, the Minister for Youth and Sport Thierry Braillard (Radical Left Party, PRG)) have chosen to support rather than to campaign for Benoît Hamon, whom they criticise for his rebellious, if not hostile attitude to those in office during the five year mandate of François Hollande, and his programme which is too far to the left than that of the Socialist Party. Manuel Valls himself declared on 19th March that he was not supporting the official candidate of his political party. The former Prime Minister denounces the "*ambient cynicism in which everything and its contrary is being promised, in which blank cheques are being signed.*"

On the right some of those close to the Republicans have stepped back from the victor of the primary in their camp, François Fillon, but for other reasons. Indeed, and this is the fifth unique element in this campaign; on 14th March, the official Republican candidate was charged with embezzling public funds, for aiding and abetting the embezzlement of public funds, for aiding and abetting the misuse of company assets and the breach of his declarative obligations (taxes), which is a first under the fifth Republic.

He is accused of having paid his wife, Penelope and his two children for supposedly fictitious jobs as parliamentary assistants. His wife was also paid by the "Revue des deux mondes" for work that is also said to have been fictitious. Two days later, François Fillon was challenged for having accepted gifts of luxury suits totalling several tens of thousands of euros on the part of a lawyer, Robert Bourgi.

After having declared that only if he was charged would he step down from the presidential race, the right-wing candidate finally chose to offer himself up to universal suffrage. "*The closer we get to the presidential election the more scandalous it would be to deprive the right and the centre of a candidate (…). My decision is clear: I am running and I shall go to victory,*" he indicated on 18th February last. The Republican candidate claims he is the victim of a frame-up, a conspiracy, launched by the highest office of State, of a "*black cabinet driven by the outgoing President of the Republic, François Hollande,*" he said on 23rd March last.

But François Fillon is not the only candidate to be experiencing legal problems. Marine Le Pen is also being accused by the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) for having paid two people (one of her co-workers and body guards) for fictitious jobs as parliamentary assistants between 2010 and 2016. Protected by her parliamentary immunity as an MEP she has refused to answer any court summons.

What are the candidates offering?

Over the last five years the Front National has constantly consolidated its influence: Marine Le Pen's party won 24.86% of the vote in the European elections on 25th May 2014, 25.24% of the vote in the first round of the departmental elections, on 22nd and 29th March the following year, and finally, 27.73% in the first round of the regional elections on 6th and 13th December 2015. The populist candidate has led in all of the polls and all political analysts have been anticipating her presence

in the second round of the presidential election for the last few years. She can rely on an extremely determined electorate who really do not care at all about the accusations and the questions of which she is the focus. Moreover, in Emmanuel Macron, she has found a "globalist" as she likes to call him, and an ideal rival.

Marine Le Pen's programme is extremely nationalist (re-introduction of the national borders, exit of the Schengen area and the euro area). Her lead proposal "is to win back France's sovereignty". She is promising, if she is elected, to organise two referendums in quick succession, one on national priority and the second so that France can "recover its budgetary, territorial, monetary and legislative sovereignty". The Front National candidate supports retirement at 60 after 40 years of contributions and the re-introduction of the national currency. She hopes to introduce a tax on the engagement of foreign workers and to grant priority to the French in terms of the attribution of social housing.

Emmanuel Macron says he is "outside of the system", whilst his career has taken him through the best schools of the Republic, the corporate bank Rothschild, the Elysée and the Ministry of the Economy. He is taking advantage of the discredit to which the political parties have fallen in the eyes of the French population. "*I will not settle to be blocked in by divisions of another age which no longer respond to the challenges of the world and our country. Regarding the major issues of our time, the left and the right are deeply divided and so they are being prevented from taking action;*" he wrote in his book, Révolution.

Although Emmanuel Macron has managed to rally 200,000 people to his name under his movement "En Marche" and although the polls are forecasting him to be Marine Le Pen's future rival in the second round on 7th May next, it remains that he is also the candidate whom potential voters also say they are finally less sure to pick. Unlike the Front national candidate his electoral base is extremely volatile.

Emmanuel Macron stands as a pragmatist. Pro-European, he hopes for the harmonisation of the EU Member States' budgetary policy and the introduction of new institutions to which national governments would transfer more sovereignty. He is also attached to the respect of the European rule which stipulates that the budgetary deficit must remain below 3% of the national GDP.

He supports the end of special retirement schemes, the abolition of sickness and unemployment contributions, a 1.7 point increase in the CSG (except for the unemployed and 40% of the poorest pensioners), the exoneration of the housing tax for 80% of households within the next three years, the suspension of unemployment benefits after the refusal of two decent job offers and a reduction on corporate tax from 33.3% to 25%.

The "En Marche" candidate also wants to create around 5000 teaching posts and 10,000 police and gendarme positions. Finally, from a political point of view, he wants to reduce the number of French parliamentarians by one third.

For his part François Fillon is continuing his electoral campaign. Some analysts thought for a time that he would be obliged to throw in the towel; likewise some of those close to him had started to defect (more than three hundred MPs, his spokesperson Thierry Solère and his campaign director Patrick Stéfanini). On 5th March the former Prime Minister held a meeting at the Trocadero in Paris which helped him bounce back. The next day his rival in the November primary Alain Juppé announced that he was not going to replace the candidate of the Republicans or stand for the vote of the French. There are many questions: is François Fillon in a position to lead a campaign? Is he able to explain his austerity policy to the French? Can he force them to adhere to a discipline from which he freed himself? Finally, will he succeed in rallying a fragmented right-wing to his name? Answer on 23rd April.

The Republican candidate is offering a liberal but Colbertist economic programme (a two point increase of VAT, the repeal of the 35 hour working week, the abolition of the wealth tax, an alignment of the public/private retirement schemes, abolition of 500,000 civil

servants' positions over five years. He is a conservative regarding questions of society: revision of the Taubira bill to prevent plenary adoption by homosexuals, a ban on medically assisted procreation for single women or women only couples.

A supporter of a strong Europe with strong nations, François Fillon wants to strengthen the intergovernmental functioning of the EU and introduce a policy service for the euro zone by the heads of State and government. He also supports a Defence Union. Finally he supports the repeal of economic sanctions implemented against Russia.

Benoît Hamon is also finding it difficult to rally support from his own camp and has widened his electoral base. On 23rd February last the ecologist candidate Yannick Jadot (Europe Ecology/The Greens EELV) gave up running in the presidential election to the benefit of the socialist candidate. The ecologist gained the promise from Hamon for an exit from nuclear power over the next 25 years, the end of the planned airport at Notre-Dame-des-Landes (Nantes) and the introduction of proportional voting in the general elections. The socialist candidate also proposed an alliance to Jean-Luc Mélenchon, which the latter refused. Now the two men are vying for the leadership of the left. Benoît Hamon must imperatively win more votes than his Left Front rival if he wants to play a role in the reshuffle of the left which will take place after the presidential election.

The introduction of a universal revenue and ecological transition are two main priorities in the socialist programme. The universal revenue, planned to support the buying power of those who receive it, should, once it is initially introduced, cover 19 million French citizens whose revenues do not exceed 2,200 € monthly. Benoît Hamon also plans to increase the minimum wage and also the minimum retirement pension. He wants to introduce a tax on robots (in companies where automation is going hand in hand with reductions in the number of employees), to protect work which in his opinion is becoming rarer and to retain half of public procurement for SMEs.

At European level the Mr Hamon would like to see the signature of a treaty on the democratisation of the governance of the euro area. He is against "austerity" and wants a repeal of the 3% rule (public deficit of a Member State must not exceed 3% of its GDP) and a pooling of a Member State's debt when this rises beyond 60% of the GDP.

Finally he would like to introduce a citizens' initiative bill whereby 1% of the electorate would be able to propose a bill on parliament's agenda and submit this law to referendum.

Jean-Luc Mélenchon wants "austerity" to end and the launch a vast plan of revival that would involve an investment plan of 100 billion € financed by borrowing. The populist left candidate plans for an increase in the public debt of 1,733 billion € over the five year mandate (France's debt totals 2196.4 billion €, i.e. 97.60% of its GDP). He also maintains that he would create more than three million jobs. He is campaigning for a devaluation of the euro and is challenging the independence of the European Central Bank (ECB) and would like a moratorium on the reimbursement of debts.

Jean-Luc Mélenchon is demanding the re-negotiation of the European treaties in force (the result of this would be submitted to referendum by the French population) and a "democratic, social and ecological re-founding of the Union".

The French Political System

France is a semi-presidential regime. Since 1962 the president of the French Republic has been elected by direct universal suffrage according to a majority two round vote. If none of the candidates wins the absolute majority of the vote in the first round, a second round is organised two weeks later.

Any candidate running for the supreme office must imperatively be aged 23 at least and present at least 500 signatures of elected representatives (MPs, regional councillors, general councillors, mayors) from at least 30 departments or overseas communities

without one tenth of them being representatives of the same territory. Since this year the name of the representatives who have given their name to a candidate is published.

The head of the army, the President of the French Republic holds the executive power. He appoints the Prime Minister and terminates his function on the presentation by the latter of his resignation from government. The head of State promulgates the laws on the proposal of the government or by both chambers of parliament. He can also submit a bill or a treaty ratification to referendum. After consultation with the Prime Minister and the leaders of both chambers the President of the Republic can also pronounce the dissolution of the National Assembly, the lower chamber of Parliament.

Reminder of the Presidential election results of 22nd April and 6th May 2012 in France

Turnout: 79. 48% (first round) and 80.35% (second round)

Candidates	Number of votes won (first round)	% of votes won (first round)	Number of votes won (second round)	% of votes won (second round)
François Hollande (Socialist Party PS)	10 272 705	28.63	18 000 668	51.64
Nicolas Sarkozy (Union for a Popular Movement, UMP)	9 753 629	27.18	16 860 685	48.36
Marine Le Pen (National Front, FN)	6 421 426	17.90		
Jean-Luc Mélenchon (Left Front, FG)	3 984 822	11.10		
François Bayrou (Democratic Movement, MoDem)	3 275 122	9.13		
Eva Joly (Europe Ecology The Greens EELV)	828 345	2.31		
Nicolas Dupont-Aignan (Republic Arise, DLR)	643 907	1.79		
Philippe Poutou (New Anti-Capitalist Party, NPA)	411 160	1.15		
Nathalie Arthaud (Workers' Struggle, LO)	202 548	0.56		
Jacques Cheminade (Solidarity & Progress)	89 545	0.25		

Source: Web site of the Constitutional Council http://www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/conseil-constitutionnel/francais/les-decisions/acces-par-date/decisions-depuis-1959/2012/2012-152-pdr/decision-n-2012-152-pdr-du-25-avril-2012.108521.html (for the first round) and http://www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/conseil-constitutionnel/francais/les-decisions/acces-par-date/decisions-depuis-1959/2012/2012-154-pdr/decision-n-2012-154-pdr-du-10-mai-2012.108531.html (for the second round).

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