

The State of the Presidential Campaign in France and the Mélenchon Factor

Tuesday 18 April 2017, by [MONDON Aurelien](#) (Date first published: 18 April 2017).

The establishment's panicked reaction to Mélenchon should convince us that he stands a real chance of winning.

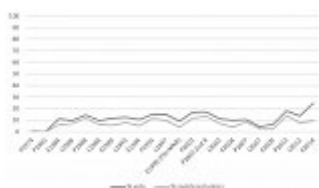
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It seems that every week of the French presidential elections has new surprises. A year ago, it was easy to make predictions, but, just days before the first-round vote, the campaign remains wide open.

Presidential elections in France always offer voters a wide range of options — from the far left to the far right. Nor is it rare for small candidates to upset the hierarchy.

The most famous instance came in 2002, when Jean-Marie Le Pen of the far-right National Front (FN) reached the second round. When Le Pen's victorious face appeared on the screens around 8 PM, panic took hold. Fascism was standing at the gates of power, or so it seemed. This mainstream narrative ignored the fact that Le Pen's popularity had been stagnating since 1988, when he first reached around 4.5 million votes.



Evolution of the vote for the FN since its creation.

What should have dominated the news cycle — and, in fact, what accounted for Le Pen's second-round appearance — was the fact that the three main parties' votes had totally collapsed that year. Their combined score almost equalled that of an unprecedented level of abstention.

The media also focused on the Socialist Party's (PS) candidate Lionel Jospin, blaming his defeat on the fragmented left vote. While socialist and nationalist Jean-Pierre Chevènement took a chunk of Jospin's vote, the more radical left — represented by the Communist Party's Robert Hue and, more surprisingly, the two Trotskyist candidates, Olivier Besancenot of the Revolutionary Communist League (now New Anticapitalist Party or NPA) and Arlette Laguillier of the Workers' Struggle (LO) — all won impressive results that cut into Jospin's share.

Indeed, the situation in 2002 closely resembles today's election, as the results expressed clear exasperation with the status quo. After years of collaboration, during which conservative president Jacques Chirac nominated Socialist Jospin as prime minister after losing the 1997 legislative election, the differences between the center-left and center-right had become almost impossible to discern.

Yet despite these similarities, the surprising turns in the 2002 election don't fully live up to the current campaign. French voters are more dissatisfied today, partly due to the ongoing economic crisis and increasing austerity measures. While everyone expects a surprise this year, it is its nature that remains uncertain.

The Main Players

François Hollande's dismal approval ratings throughout his term made it clear that he would struggle in the first round, but he remained the most obvious candidate. Instead, his decision not to seek reelection marks the first time in the Fifth Republic's history that a healthy outgoing president has not sought another mandate. When François Mitterrand retired in 1995, he was already suffering from the cancer that would take his life a year later. Similarly, when Chirac passed the baton in 2007, his health had already begun deteriorating. Hollande decided to withdraw very late and, as such, it came as both a surprise and relief to most PS members. But this was only the first shock in the campaign.

The primaries would decide the PS candidate, giving the party's left wing a tiny chance to take control. Manuel Valls stood as Hollande's heir, and his time as both minister of the interior and prime minister made his prospects rather dim. Unsurprisingly, Socialist supporters chose a candidate unassociated with the current presidency: Benoît Hamon. Probably the most radical of the party's candidates, Hamon defeated Valls with more than 58 percent of the vote in the January 2017 primaries.

In November 2016, the center-right *Républicains*' (LR) primaries already proved that nothing could be taken for granted. Before the vote, all appeared set in stone: the primaries would crown either centrist Alain Juppé, Chirac's former prime minister, or the former president and hardliner Nicolas Sarkozy. Late in the campaign, however, François Fillon appeared. Sarkozy's former prime minister was a relatively unknown quantity thanks to his dull, technocratic persona, but his promise to moralize France's political life seemed to capture LR voters' attention.

He won in the first round decisively, dealing yet another blow to Sarkozy, after he lost to Hollande in 2012. The second round proved a formality, as the gap between Fillon and Juppé was simply too wide. Right-wing voters had chosen their champion, and Fillon had a clear mandate to push through his mix of radical moralism and austerity economics.

Had things gone to plan — with Hollande and Juppé or Sarkozy representing the center-left and center-right, Marine Le Pen would have found herself in a perfect place to reap the benefits of decades of disappointment. Indeed, since 2012, the media, pundits, and politicians have uncritically accepted that she would reach the second round; all that remained to be decided was who she would face. As Hollande's ratings went from bad to worse, it seemed obvious that she would run against the LR candidate.

In 2012, Le Pen had received a record-breaking 6.5 million votes and had since won the 2014 European election, thanks in part to low voter turnout. She broke another record in the 2015 regional election, when the party received 6.8 million votes, but failed to take control of a single

region. As is usually the case in France, the electoral system prevented the FN from winning in the second round: the PS threw its votes to the center-right rather than risk a Le Pen victory.

For a party with only two members in parliament — one of whom actually refuses to formally join — the FN and Marine Le Pen get a disproportionate amount of media coverage. The far-right party mostly receives negative attention, but it knows no publicity is bad publicity. Indeed, Le Pen's father Jean-Marie famously exploited the press to keep the party in the limelight. Outside of election periods, he would make deeply reactionary remarks, most famously about the Holocaust, and relish the non-stop coverage.

Since she took control of the party in 2011, Marine has stopped relying on crude racism to get media attention. Admittedly, she regularly makes polemical statements — such as comparing Muslim prayers to the Nazi occupation [1] or excusing France's role in the Vel d'Hiv Jewish deportation [2] — but the press has treated her far more amenably than her father.

It seems as though new leadership and a veneer of moderation have convinced much of the media that the FN has changed, even though Le Pen kept both the party's name and much of its platform. While most academics recognize that this turnaround is, for the most part, only rhetorical, many commentators take Le Pen's word that the FN is ready to join the political mainstream.

Everything seemed set for a remake of the 2002 election. Were she to face Hollande and Juppé/Sarkozy, Le Pen would have easily progressed to the second round. Compared to other parties, the FN seemed to be gaining steam. In a climate of deep political distrust, running against establishment figures, Le Pen's outsider status made her a natural favorite. Elite discourse, which portrayed her as the sole alternative to politics as usual, reinforced this position. It's a tribute to the political class's lack of imagination that very few considered that other outsiders might emerge.

The first signs that Le Pen's plan would not go as smoothly came from the party primaries. The defeat of centrist candidates like Valls and Sarkozy created a gap that Emmanuel Macron, a banker and Hollande's former minister of the economy, has managed to fill.

Macron's age and outsider status — he has never held elected office — has certainly played in his favor. So far, he's managed to retain this position, appealing to both the center-left and center-right, despite receiving support from PS, LR, and centrist Modem politicians. Even Valls got behind him [3], a development Macron did not welcome, but this hasn't seemed to damage his image.

Macron continues to lead the polls, but his supporters appear to be the most likely to switch candidates. Many of those who saw him as a vote utile (a strategic vote) may be reconsidering now that Jean-Luc Mélenchon has become a serious contender.

When Hamon won the Socialist primaries, he was expected to soon swallow Mélenchon's base. But the rogue leftist senator had already proven a resilient candidate when he received 11.10 percent of the vote in 2012. (Polls gave him up to 14 percent, suggesting that his final result may have been reduced by a last minute *vote utile* for Hollande.)

This time, the leader of France Insoumise, or "Unbowed France" (FI) declared his candidacy early, taking his communist allies by surprise and forcing them to support him before they knew who would become the PS candidate. Throughout the campaign, Mélenchon has demonstrated his strength, drawing huge crowds wherever he turns up. Opinion polls, however, had him trailing until recently, when he surged. Now surveys place him either equal with or ahead of Fillon, with margins of error that make the difference between him and the leading candidates uncertain.

Mélenchon's Rise

It remains too early to say whether these polls will translate into votes on Sunday, but we can follow a number of leads to explain why Mélenchon is gaining momentum. First, the primaries proved that many French voters want a more left-wing alternative than the PS has been in recent years. Valls — with his mix of Sarkozist macho securitization and Hollandist economic centrism — appealed to only a third of those most invested in the party. The remaining votes went, for the most part, to the so-called “rebels” Arnaud Montebourg, Vincent Peillon, and of course Hamon.

When many prominent Socialist politicians abandoned Hamon for Macron, it reinforced this desire for more radical left-wing politics — and also demonstrated their opportunism and economically liberal politics. This has weakened Hamon, who seems unable to affirm his candidacy, and has bolstered Mélenchon, who has run a tight ship.

The second debate represented another turning point. While Mélenchon did well in the debate between the five main candidates, the second one, which included all eleven, opened space for left-wing perspectives to take center stage. Proper politics took place that night, and one need look no further than the mainstream media's reaction to know that something interesting happened.

The two Trotskyist candidates, Philippe Poutou (NPA) and Nathalie Arthaud (LO), proved particularly convincing. First, they attacked Fillon and Le Pen over the corruption charges they face, breaking what seemed to have become a taboo for Macron, Mélenchon, and Hamon. The far-left candidates also reminded voters that the working class and the poor that their champions should be sought on the Left, not the far right.

In recent years, the media has increasingly portrayed the FN as the party of the working class. This trend extends beyond France, of course, as similar diagnoses have appeared in the United States and the United Kingdom to explain Trump, UKIP, and even Brexit. What the mainstream media — and some academics — often overlook is that the majority of the working class tends not to vote at all. So, if 33 percent of manual workers vote for the FN, but 66 percent abstain as was the case in the 2014 European election, then that party really only represents one in ten workers.

While “33 percent of the working-class vote goes to the far right” and “One out of ten workers vote for the far right” are both technically correct, they have a significantly different impact on readers. The fact that establishment discourse prefers the first version says more about what the elite thinks of the working and lower classes than it does about voting patterns.

Arthaud and Poutou exposed precisely this disdain in the debate, which drew more than six million viewers. Some of Poutou's key interventions went viral [\[4\]](#), not only in France but far beyond its borders. He busted the myth that the FN represents workers by showing that Le Pen not only opposes the people, but also very much belongs to the system. His attack left her speechless. While his comments resonated across France and beyond, the right-wing media quickly attacked Poutou, a factory worker, for his clothes, his posture, and his language.

This tactic proved counterproductive, as Poutou has since risen in the polls to 2.5 percent. However, the main beneficiary of the return to class has been Mélenchon, who saw his strategy vindicated.

A similar trend seems to be taking place among young people. While they have been accused of fueling the far right, they also tend to abstain in droves — not because of apathy but because of their alienation from liberal politics. A recent poll suggested that Mélenchon may have become the most popular candidate among this segment of the population [\[5\]](#), meaning that he has managed to offer young people an alternative they can relate to. If this is confirmed on Sunday, he may indeed draw

some back to the polling booths.

Since the debate, the reaction to Mélenchon has been telling. The leader of the CFDT, one of France's major unions, warned that he had a "rather totalitarian" vision of society [6]. Hollande, who promised not to get involved in the campaign, felt obliged to denounce the left-winger as a "fad," representing the "perils of simplifications and falsifications" [7] — something mainstream politicians could never be accused of obviously. The most unpopular French president of the Fifth Republic declared that Mélenchon's "campaign smells bad," no doubt resenting that the electorate can finally vote for someone they believe in rather than vote against someone they dislike. These declarations, rather than impacting Mélenchon's chances, could prove to be the final nail in the PS's coffin, as rumors circulate that Hollande actually prefers Macron over Hamon.

The media's reaction has also been striking — and far more negative than what Marine Le Pen receives. *Le Figaro* went furthest, denouncing the "devastating project" of "Maximilien Ilitch Mélenchon." [8] Mélenchon's platform, while radical for 2017, is far from revolutionary, and he has always belonged to the liberal democratic system and abided by its rules. Comparing him to no less than Robespierre and Lenin is simply ludicrous, yet *Le Figaro* devoted four articles to attacking the candidate's "social big bang from another era."

The *Financial Times* warned that the banks have begun to react to that possibility, just as they did during the Brexit campaign [9]. The *New York Times* has not published any op-eds by Mélenchon, while it has given Le Pen the opportunity twice.

The establishment response to Mélenchon shows that it sees him as a real threat. Le Pen has served as a scarecrow, making the consensual neoliberal politics of the center-right and center-left appear preferable to a former fascist party. While the FN's success is certainly alarming, the party itself is extremely unlikely to take power soon. Further, the ruling class has done more to normalize the party than anything its leadership has undertaken.

For the past few years, the hype around the so-called project of *dédiabolisation* (detoxification) has allowed the establishment to divert attention away from frustration with and distrust of the current hegemony. Mainstream politicians and media risk little in promoting the former fascist party because it is extremely unlikely that Le Pen could ever increase her vote share enough to win the second round.

In 2012, Hollande needed more than eighteen million votes to win — three times Le Pen's highest vote share. While it is likely that voter turnout will be low, it is unlikely that she could win without at least doubling her current record. Of course, some LR voters may join her, but it is unlikely that enough will be swayed by her pseudo-social measures or her less traditional take on some important cultural issues like same-sex marriage. In fact, were Fillon not embroiled in a long string of scandals, he would likely siphon many votes from the traditional Le Pen electorate.

A Return to Politics

Facing Mélenchon in the second round poses a very different challenge for any of the main contenders than facing Le Pen. He could represent the whole left and the anti-establishment, in a moment when voters are begging for alternative politics. The establishment's panicked reaction should convince us that he stands a real chance of winning.

However, the Left shouldn't see such an outcome as more than it is; it simply reflects the growing desire for more hopeful and more radical left-wing politics. It would be a mistake to see Mélenchon

as a providential leader, as it risks quick disappointment. While his victory could reawaken the Left and deal a serious blow to the current hegemony, many issues remain with the FI candidate.

For one, the cult of the personality his team has tried to develop is certainly problematic, although his proposed Sixth Republic reforms would likely counteract this. Also, despite presenting himself as anti-establishment, Mélenchon belongs to the system; before breaking away from the PS, he was a long-time member and former senator.

Further, as French president, he would have to depend on the broad left to win a majority in the legislative election. This would shackle him to a system not conducive to radical change in an international community that strongly opposes anti-austerity measures.

Finally, his “left patriotism” is questionable, along with a refusal to break away from the now-common understanding of secularism [10], and his misguided defense of republicanism, based on a chauvinistic and essentialist reading of the 1905 law, will not lessen the tensions running through French society.

Despite these very real concerns, his rise in the polls offers a break in the neoliberal consensus and a return to politics. If he progressed to the second round, France’s left could demonstrate its strength. While Jean-Luc Mélenchon may not be able to deliver the changes the France needs, his victory — or even his strong showing — would provide a clear basis for a more hopeful horizon.

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P.S.

* “The Mélenchon Factor”. Jacobin. 4.18.17:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/04/jean-luc-melenchon-france-insoumise-elections-socialist-party-fn-le-pen/>

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Footnotes

[1] <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/marine-le-pen-to-face-court-for-comparing-muslim-prayers-in-the-street-to-nazi-occupation-10513920.html>

[2] https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/national/marine-le-pen-france-is-not-responsible-for-the-vel-dhiv/2017/04/10/ff1fc2e8-1e0b-11e7-bb59-a74ccaf1d02f_video.html

[3] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/29/france-manuel-valls-backs-emmanuel-macron-presidential-election>

[4] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GD6A2gwGR1s>

[5] <http://www.humanite.fr/jean-luc-melenchon-en-tete-chez-les-18-24-ans-634654>

- [6] <http://m.20minutes.fr/elections/2049295-20170413-presidentielle-patron-cfdt-laurent-berger-alerte-contre-vision-assez-totalitaire-melenchon>
- [7] http://mobile.lemonde.fr/election-presidentielle-2017/article/2017/04/12/a-dix-jours-du-premier-tour-hollande-sort-de-son-silence_5109768_4854003.html?xtref=http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/election-presidentielle-2017/article/2017/04/12/a-dix-jours-du-premier-tour-hollande-sort-de-son-silence_5109768_4854003.html
- [8] <http://www.lefigaro.fr/elections/presidentielles/2017/04/11/35003-20170411ARTFIG00330-jean-luc-melenchon-un-projet-devastateur-pour-la-france.php>
- [9] <https://www.ft.com/content/dc62e780-1e9c-11e7-b7d3-163f5a7f229c>
- [10] <http://www.lefigaro.fr/politique/le-scan/2016/08/25/25001-20160825ARTFIG00031-pour-melenchon-le-burkini-est-une-provocation-politique.php>