

# The Amazing Race: Tracking the twists and turns in France's presidential election

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*The French presidential election scheduled for 23 April and 7 May has produced a series of unexpected developments, with opinion polls now pointing toward a second-round runoff between Marine Le Pen and Emmanuel Macron. [Marta Lorimer](#) tracks how the campaign has developed and suggests that with over a month still left to campaign, there may be more surprises ahead.*



Back in September 2016, the big story expected to come out of the French presidential election was Marine Le Pen making the runoff and beating her father's best score of 17.79% in a presidential race. But the events which have taken place since November have made the race increasingly surprising, with unexpected candidates, unlikely winners and seemingly unpredictable outcomes emerging.

Observers of French politics have spent the last few months observing all their predictions being thrown out of the window. In September 2016, everyone was expecting the main right-wing party, *Les Republicains*, led by either Nicolas Sarkozy or Alain Juppé, to win in a runoff against Marine Le Pen. In November, the scenario changed: while the right was still expected to win, it was expected to do so under the leadership of the (self-styled) 'irreproachable' candidate Francois Fillon.

In February, the 'Penelope Gate' scandal reshuffled the deck. Now, the most likely scenario is a runoff between Le Pen and Emmanuel Macron, the centrist leader of *En Marche!*, which would leave both of the two main established parties out of the presidential race for the first time in the Fifth Republic's history. While it would not be the first time this has occurred for the Socialist Party, which was already excluded from the 2002 runoff that saw Jacques Chirac beat Jean-Marie Le Pen, it would be a first for the right. But how did it come to this?

## Fillon, the TINA candidate



**Credits:** [Remi Jouan \(CC-BY-SA-2.5\)](#).

Fillon emerged as the uncontested winner of the [first right-wing primary](#). Sarkozy's former prime minister ran on what many have described as a 'Thatcherite' programme, but also managed to appeal to the more socially

conservative electorate. Importantly, he presented himself as an 'irreproachable' candidate, with no convictions or open trials, even criticising his opponents by saying that if he ever were indicted (as had happened to Sarkozy and Juppé), he would not run in the presidential election.

In an almost premonitory fashion, during the debates Alain Juppé said that when it comes to justice, 'it is better to have a past than to have a future'. Fillon found this out the hard way when in January, the newspaper *Le Canard Enchaîné* published records demonstrating that he had hired his wife and children as parliamentary assistants – with strong suspicions emerging that the work they carried out was either unrelated to his role as deputy, or plainly 'fictif', i.e. non-existent. A preliminary enquiry was opened shortly thereafter, but Fillon was not formally indicted – and decided not to withdraw his candidacy. That is, until 1 March, when Fillon was notified that he was being summoned on charges of embezzlement.

Coherence would have required him to announce his withdrawal: after all, he had just a month earlier declared in a [TV interview](#) that if indicted, we would withdraw from the race – and that is what many were expecting when he scheduled a press conference on the same day he was notified of the charges. What they got, on the other hand, was a fully-fledged populist attack worthy of Italy's Silvio Berlusconi. Claiming that he was the victim of a 'political assassination' and attacking the judiciary, he announced that he would not withdraw his candidacy and that he considered it was up to the French people to judge his innocence. He also invited his supporters to show up in massive numbers for a rally in Paris on 5 March, an event which eventually attracted around 40,000 people (200,000 according to the organisers).

The language of his declaration on 1 March left many in his party uneasy, and the Fillon camp suffered massive defections, including his official spokesperson, campaign manager and former primary candidate Bruno Le Maire. Several members of the party also began calling for an alternative candidate in the form of Alain Juppé, the runner-up in the primary. Juppé, however, announced in a press conference that he was unwilling to run, considering that he did not 'incarnate the will for renewal' that the French people were expressing, and that his centrist platform would not be able to rally what he deemed to be a 'radicalised' electorate. More importantly, Juppé had put forward two conditions for replacing Fillon (neither of which was fulfilled): first, he would have to get the support of Nicolas Sarkozy; second, Fillon would have to step down of his own accord.

While Fillon is probably going to take the party down with him, especially if he cannot make it into the second round, what these events demonstrate is that if he is still the candidate, it is because 'there is no alternative'. Fillon can count on the legitimacy granted upon him by the primary elections, and replacing him would require a deal of some kind between the different factions of the party. At the moment, no candidate would be able to unite what is an essentially divided party, which means that as things stand, Fillon is the only option with any real legitimacy bestowed upon him. The best that the party can do now is rally behind him and put forward their most unitary-looking face.

Fillon's choice to remain has provoked both headaches and positive reactions in the other French parties. The Republican centrist coalition partner, UDI, recently suspended its support for Fillon. While a section of the party is in favour of continuing to support him, others are ill at ease with his recent attacks on the judiciary and could be tempted by Macron.

### **Emmanuel Macron, the balancing act**



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In contrast to Fillon, the last few months have produced continued good news for Emmanuel Macron, François Hollande's [former finance minister](#). With *Les Republicains* choosing a strongly right-wing candidate and the Socialists selecting an equally strongly left-wing candidate, Macron, the 'both left and right' candidate has been left with a boulevard in the centre-ground. Fillon's political scandal undoubtedly benefits him, and has resulted in Macron moving up one position in the polls, from close third to almost certain second behind Marine Le Pen. He has recently garnered the support of the 'eternal candidate' François Bayrou, which, while not enough to tip the balance on its own, is still likely to be significant in terms of bringing into the movement more centrist candidates.

If Macron is the incarnation of change for many, his peculiar position is also likely to lead to some tensions. Bringing together members of parties who have spent their lives opposing each other requires a fine balancing act, and the tension was evident in his programme which came across as an attempt to make everyone happy. While some hailed it as an exciting progressive plan for reform, others considered it to fall some way short of fulfilling the high expectations Macron had been cultivating. More worryingly, according to [research from the Cevipof](#), Macron has an issue with the levels of conviction expressed by his supporters. In fact, he scores lower than other candidates when it comes to voters who are 'absolutely sure' of their vote, meaning that he may not be as solid a candidate as suggested by opinion polls.

### **Marine Le Pen, the inevitable second round**



**Credits: [Claude Truong-Ngoc](#) / Wikimedia Commons.**

The concern with Fillon's judicial issues have arguably put a significant amount of attention on the right-wing, leaving the rest of the political spectrum out of focus. However, another reason why Fillon is the only possible option for the Republicains, is the risk of defections to the Front National should he be removed in a coup. In fact, along with Macron, the FN's presidential candidate stands to be the other winner from issues on the right.

Le Pen has so far had a relatively good campaign. She presented her presidential programme in February during a meeting in Lyon. Hoping to capitalise on her strategy of 'de-demonisation', the programme contained many of the Front National's old ideas in a repackaged version, but also removed some of its most controversial ones (e.g. the reintroduction of the death penalty). While remaining recognisably FN, it looks very different from previous programmes: it is shorter, based on '144 propositions' and does not bear the FN logo – suggesting Le Pen is trying to 'decouple' herself from her party, which still suffers from a negative image amongst French people. In fact, [a recent poll](#) showed that 58% of the polled sample still thought that the FN presented a 'danger for democracy', showing that Le Pen has more than just the two-round electoral system against her in this election.

The smooth running of her campaign has also been hindered by a series of judicial issues. Le Pen has been involved in a 'fake jobs' scandal of her own. She is accused of having employed her bodyguard, Thierry Légier, and her personal assistant, Catherine Griset, on parliamentary assistant contracts and has been asked by the European Parliament's anti-fraud office to return €336,146. She has had her parliamentary immunity revoked by the European Parliament and is also being investigated in France for tweeting pictures of ISIS executions in response to a journalist who had compared ISIS and the FN.

These scandals, however, do not seem to be affecting voters, who are still convinced of their vote and seem to have brushed them away as attacks against their favoured candidate. In fact, FN voters are by far the 'most sure' about their choice in terms of candidate, with over 70% declaring themselves as either sure or very sure to vote for Le Pen. Strikingly when compared to the Brexit vote in the UK, Le Pen appears to be particularly popular with young people below the age of 25.

**Where does all of this leave the left?**



**The Socialist Party's candidate, Benoît Hamon. Credits: [Parti Socialiste](#) / Flickr.**

The story of the presidential election so far has been a story of the (centre) right. The Socialist Party, in fact, was virtually written off before the campaign started, as it was expected that it would never be able to recover from

Hollande's tenure. The candidate to emerge victorious from the primary, Benoît Hamon, was yet another surprise winner. While many were expecting Manuel Valls to replace Hollande after the latter announced that he would not be running, Hamon, a member of the Socialist's internal opposition, managed to win the overwhelming support of participants in the primary with a strongly left-wing programme whose unique selling point was the introduction of a universal basic income. This move to the left, however, has left several MPs uneasy, and some have decided not to stand for re-election, finding it very hard to 'live with' Hamon's programme

Following the primary, he set out to reunite the Left, trying to strike an agreement with the Greens and Jean-Luc Mélenchon's hard left. Hamon's attempt was semi-successful: he managed to convince the Green presidential candidate Yannick Jadot to step down and support his bid for the presidency, in exchange for important concessions on the programme. However, nothing came from discussions with Mélenchon, with candidates citing irreconcilable differences on issues such as Europe (and, one may add, a potential clash of egos).

There are still over six weeks to go until the presidential election, and if the last month is anything to go by, there may still be surprises ahead. The next month is likely to be crucial for the future of France and Europe: the race is well worth watching.

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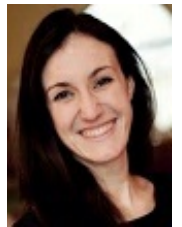
*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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Marta Lorimer is a PhD candidate at the London School of Economics. She holds a degree in European Studies from Sciences Po Paris and the LSE. Her research interests include far right parties, European politics and ideas of 'Europe'.



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