

A four horse race? What to expect from the French presidential election

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The French presidential campaign has been a rollercoaster of twists and turns so far. But with just a few days to go until the first round of voting on 23 April, does the contest have further surprises in store? [Marta Lorimer](#) outlines the possible scenarios and highlights the issues you should keep an eye out for.



A four horse race? Photo: The Fountain of Apollo, Park of Versailles, France. Credits: [gags9999](#) (CC BY 2.0)

This year's French presidential election has been the gift that keeps on giving for fans of uncertainty. Predicted in turn as essentially a race between Nicolas Sarkozy and Alain Juppé, then as a safe victory for François Fillon, then a potentially game-changing victory for Emmanuel Macron, it has now become a four horse contest, with the favourites Emmanuel Macron (En Marche!) and Marine Le Pen (Front National) losing support in recent polls, François Fillon (Les Républicains) unexpectedly clinging on and the sudden rise of ultra-left Jean-Luc Mélenchon.

The unprecedented situation of four candidates within a 5% polling margin comes after a difficult campaign for many of the contenders. The prize for the hardest campaign in this presidential race would have to go to François Fillon. Fillon's run in the presidential election started as the success story of an underdog successfully beating the favoured contestants, but has ended up being the story of a candidate who pays his wife for an (allegedly) fictitious job and gets offered free suits by his friends. The weight of so-called [#PenelopeGate](#) has been heavy for Fillon, making it difficult for him to campaign in public, and hurting his image as an 'unreproachable' candidate. While he has managed to hold on to his voting base, he may now end up losing a contest which he had been expected to win easily.

Another candidate who has had a less than great campaign is Marine Le Pen. Le Pen entered the contest as the favourite to win in the first round. However, her campaign has been lacklustre. Much like Fillon, she has been facing a series of scandals concerning the use of EU funds and has been summoned by judges to respond to accusations of publishing violent images online. In addition, during the campaign she has attracted attention for all the wrong reasons. For example, she claimed that she did not consider France responsible for the Vel d'Hiv roundup, a roundup in which thousands of French Jews were arrested and deported. While she [tried to justify this](#) by saying that Vichy was not France, she also received wide criticism and accusations of anti-semitism, suggesting that for all her efforts to 'de-demonise' the party, she still has a long way to go.

In addition, her performance in the TV debates was far from excellent. In the second debate in particular, she got called out by Philippe Poutou, a factory worker and one of the 'small' candidates, for being a member of the establishment just like everyone else. Poutou, [in a clip that went viral](#), accused her of being protected by parliamentary immunity in her judicial issues, while candidates like him were not protected by 'workers' immunity'. As a result, her expected vote share has been declining, and although her voting base is still strong, her position is less solid than it was just a month ago.

Emmanuel Macron, on his side, has also had a difficult campaign, albeit for different reasons. Macron, who presents himself as a 'both left and right' candidate, has had to toe a very thin line in debates. Accused of 'agreeing with everybody', he has had a difficult time explaining why his platform is different and what it is that he stands for. Some in his camp seem to be afraid of seeing him end up like Juppé: peaking too early and losing decisive support at the last minute. Within the last few weeks, he has been on a descending curve, and although he is still well placed to make it to the second round, he is not as sure a bet as he was before.

The true surprise of the last couple of weeks has been Jean-Luc Mélenchon. Starting off at around 13% in the polls, he is now credited with 19% of voting intentions, coming dangerously close to Fillon. Mélenchon, a charismatic character, has fought an effective campaign, sustained by memorable stunts such as holograms at meetings and remarkable performances in the TV debates. Thus, he has imposed himself as the most credible candidate on the left, eating into Benoît Hamon's (Parti Socialiste) support. Momentum is on his side, and although his voting base is less firm than that of the other candidates, he could still surprise us.

Once considered to be one of the key candidates, Hamon has almost been forgotten: in the latest polls he has plummeted below 10% of voting intentions. Suffering from a lack of support from a large part of the Socialist Party and the competition on the left from Mélenchon, he has struggled to make himself heard in the campaign. The cast of runners is completed by a series of more or less colourful 'small' candidates, including Poutou, communist Nathalie Arthaud, shepherd Jean Lassalle, the 'candidate of Frexit' François Asselineau, the *souverainiste* Dupont-Aignan and the man who wants to colonise the Moon and Mars, Jacques Cheminade.

Scenarios for the second round

There are currently six likely scenarios for the second round. It is worth starting from the scenarios that include Le Pen. The most likely scenario for now is a run-off between Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen. While both candidates' support has been eroding, they are still ahead of the others. Le Pen in particular benefits from a solid voting base, as her supporters are highly convinced of their choice. Even Macron's voting base has been firming up, suggesting that he could make it into the second round and beat Le Pen by a comfortable margin.

Other likely scenarios would see Le Pen oppose either Fillon or Mélenchon. If she were to oppose Fillon, she would be predicted to lose, albeit by a smaller margin ([a 10% margin according to the latest CEVIPOF survey](#)). The Le Pen – Mélenchon scenario, on the other hand, would be the run-off that no one would have ever expected. This scenario, in which Mélenchon would be expected to win, is also known as the 'nightmare scenario for investors' due to the high levels of uncertainty it would engender. Both candidates have radical economic programmes and are both in favour of the renegotiation of EU treaties and a possible Frexit.

Scenarios excluding Le Pen would see Macron oppose Fillon – winning easily, according to the polls – or see him face Mélenchon, a case in which he would also likely win, albeit by a smaller margin. The final, and least likely for now scenario would see Mélenchon oppose Fillon and according to [Kantar-Sofres](#), the hard-left wing candidate would beat the former PM by a wide margin.

The short version of this is that in all scenarios in which they make it to the second round, Marine Le Pen loses and Emmanuel Macron wins. However, the period between the first and the second round could still provide some surprises – and indeed, so could the day of the election. In particular, undecided voters still have the power to swing the election in the first round. As the latest CEVIPOF survey indicates, one in four voters is still undecided, and in an election in which the main candidates are polling within a 5-point margin, where they come off the fence could ultimately make a big difference.

Going forward

A final point needs to be made about whether the future of France will be decided in this presidential election. A qualified response would be ‘probably not’. While the presidential race is crucial in determining who will head France, [it may not determine](#) who will govern it. France is a semi-presidential system, so the President governs along with the Parliament. Whichever candidate wins the presidential election will need the support of the parliament – and it is highly likely that the parliamentary majority could come from a different party.

Macron, Le Pen and Mélenchon would most likely face the same challenge in June: that they could end up being presidents without a party to fully support them in the legislature, and find their powers greatly reduced by power sharing and compromises with the legislative majority. So enjoy the presidential race, but beware that it is only half of the story.

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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.

About the author

Marta Lorimer – LSE

Marta Lorimer is a PhD candidate at the European Institute, 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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