

A strange French election

An early analysis of how next year's French presidential election may play out by "Veteran correspondent on all things French and European" and friend of BEERG, [John Lichfield](#)

We need to talk about the next French presidential elections. And to worry about them.

French elections are strange. They defy predictions. This one – 13 months away – is deeply unpredictable. The consequences for Europe could be huge, greater by far than those of Brexit.

Consider.

France will (with luck) have just emerged, exhausted and ill-tempered, from the worst pandemic in a century with (probably) more than 100,000 dead and its economy in tatters.

The traditional governing "families" of centre-right and centre-left remain leaderless, shrunk and scattered. They have no generally accepted candidates and no generally accepted method for choosing them. Little suggests that they can recover in time to reverse the unthinkable outcome of the 2017 election, when neither the heirs of De Gaulle nor the heirs of Mitterrand reached the two-candidate second round.

Opinion polls suggest that the second round next May will be a re-run of the 2017 run-off between the centrist incumbent Emmanuel Macron and the far-right leader Marine Le Pen – with a far more uncertain outcome. Macron is unpopular. All French presidents are unpopular. He is, in fact, substantially more popular than his three immediate predecessors in the Elysée at the same point in their mandate.

Despite the pandemic, despite the Gilets Jaunes rebellion, despite the lengthy strikes against pension reform, Macron's approval rating is stable-to-rising at around 40%. But, in France, "popularity" or "approval" is not the same as electoral support.

A section of the Catholic conservative part of the traditional Right, lacking any strong leader of its own, may be ready to back Le Pen. A drumbeat is rising on part of the French Left – mostly on the harder Left and especially amongst young voters – that Macron and Le Pen are "just the same".

Another Macron-Le Pen second round would, in large part, be a failure by Left. Its mutually hostile tribes – including the greens – are incapable of uniting behind a single programme or leader.

Nonetheless a growing number of French left-wing voters say that, confronted with such a choice, they will abstain or spoil their ballot. They will be the first to fill the streets with indignant demos against "fascism" and "racism" if Le Pen wins.

A recent, unpublished poll by Harris put Macron's second-round gap lead over Le Pen next year at just 52-48 – thanks partly to heavy abstention on the Left. Another, published, poll suggested a score of 55-45. In 2017 it was 66-34. In 2002, when Jacques Chirac faced Jean-Marie Le Pen, it was 82-18.

Meanwhile, the French vaccines programme is struggling to get off the ground. Cases are rising again. The true economic devastation from the pandemic is still to appear from the mists of government aid. In such

circumstances, it can no longer be guaranteed – as it could be guaranteed in 2017 and 2002 – that the glass ceiling will hold and that the Far Right will be kept out of the Elysée Palace.

Forced to make a prediction or to place a modest bet, I would say that Marine Le Pen will NOT win. Though she has been politically shampooed and blow-dried (again); though she is no longer explicitly anti-European; though her party is no longer overtly racist, Marine will not be President of the Republic next May.

I am, however, not so confident about that as I once was. Nor are many sensible French voices on both the moderate right and moderate left or the Macronist centre. “Faced with this kind of unprecedented crisis, who can be sure that France is vaccinated against the far right?” said a senior Macron-supporting politician. “This is just the kind of period which lends itself to a retreat into nationalism.”

Forecasting (or hoping) that Marine Le Pen will lose is not quite the same as saying confidently that Macron will win. French electoral politics are unpredictable - but they are also predictable in their unpredictability.

Macron is running against the consequences of the pandemic. He is running against the damage caused by his mis-steps and occasional arrogance. He is running against resistance to his modest and generally sensible but incomplete reforms of the French state and economy (whose once-clear dividend in cutting unemployment has been wiped out by Covid-19).

But Macron is also running against 40 years of French political history. In the late 20th century and the 21st century, France does not re-elect governments. At least, it has not done so since 1979. What of François Mitterrand’s two terms from 1981 to 1995, you ask. And what of the re-election of President Jacques Chirac in 2002? Both men had lost previous mid-term parliamentary elections. Both been forced into humiliating co-habitation with a Prime Minister from the opposing camp who became the de-facto power in the land.

The vote for Mitterrand in 1988 was largely a rejection of Prime Minister Jacques Chirac’s two years in government. The vote for Chirac in 2002 was a national revolt against the idea of a President Jean-Marie Le Pen – after the widely fancied Socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin came third in the first round and Chirac came a poor first.

In other words, French electoral fickleness is not a creature of the social media age. No sitting government has been endorsed by French voters for more than four decades, since Valéry Giscard d’Estaing and his prime minister, Raymond Barre, won the 1979 parliamentary election.

You may have doubts about the quality of French political leadership in the last 40 years but questions can also be asked about the patience and intellectual honesty of the electorate. France constantly demands change but France consistently opposes all changes. There is another perverse rule in recent French electoral politics: long-distance favourites frequently find a way to lose.

Dominique Strauss-Kahn seemed certain to be the centre-left candidate – and probably President - in 2012 until he booked into the Sofitel in New York in 2011. Alain Juppé, the mayor of Bordeaux, was favourite to be President in 2017 – until he unexpectedly lost to another former prime minister, François Fillon, in the centre-right primary.

Fillon then seemed certain to reach the second round and beat Marine Le Pen – until his campaign exploded amid allegations (since proven in court) of parliamentary expense fiddling. Could something happen once again in the next 13 months before the first round of the 2022 elections to dismount one or both of the recent clear front-runners – Macron and Le Pen?

Possibly.

Marine Le Pen is detested on part of the French hard and far right. She is accused of being, inter alia, lazy, incompetent and surrounded by young gay men. Her new less aggressive, more consensual image does not appeal to some of those who were reared on the red-meat racial politics of her father. Her recent strong polling results have quietened the criticism but there is talk, nonetheless, of a rival run for the presidency by Eric Zemmour, the hard right columnist and TV commentator.

I have my doubts that Zemmour will run. He is a talker not a doer. As one American politician once said to me about another American politician: "He don't want to run anything, except maybe his mouth."

The rumours are, however, causing concern in Marine's party, the Rassemblement National (né Front National). To reach the second-round next spring, a candidate has to score around 21 to 25 % in the first round. At present, polls credit Le Pen with around 26% (and Macron slightly more or slightly less) . If Zemmour was to run and split the nationalist-euro-sceptic-anti-immigrant-authoritarian vote, Marine might fall to around 20% and risk elimination,

What of Macron?

It is my belief, based partly on conversations with figures within Macronland, partly on guess-work, that the President would stand aside if his ratings collapse and he can no longer be sure of beating Le Pen. In those circumstances, but in no other, I believe that Macron's former prime minister, Edouard Philippe, one of the most popular French politicians, would return to run for president on a ticket of Macronism-without-Macron. I think this is very unlikely - but possible.

The other great unknown is whether a convincing candidate could yet emerge on the centre-right or among the centre-left and greens, who would be capable of pushing either Macron or Le Pen out of the second round. The answer at present is "no". That might change.

In practise, both centre-right and centre-left believe they might be able to defeat Macron (and *en passant* one another) next April. There is little talk of pushing Le Pen out of the run-off – which is in itself testimony to how French politics has changed since the shock appearance of Le Pen père in the second round 19 years ago. The problem for both centre-right and left-greens is that there is a proliferation of would-be candidates but no longer a dominant party to impose, or choose, a plausible one.

On the traditional right, Les Républicains (LR), successor to the party of Chirac and Sarkozy, are a much-diminished force. The two strongest centre-right contenders are no longer even members of the party – Xavier Bertrand, president of the northern French region Hauts-de-France and Valérie Pécresse, president of the greater Paris region, Ile-de-France.

There is talk of a run by the former EU commissioner and Brexit negotiator, Michel Barnier but he has a low political profile in France. There was rather desperate talk of a return by the former President, Nicolas Sarkozy, but that was finally obliterated this month by his jail sentence (now under appeal) on one of several corruption cases against him.

In any case, how are the centre-right to choose? The open primary held last time is widely held to have been a calamity. There are hopes that the regional elections in June will allow a strong contender to "emerge.". The danger is that several centre-right hopefuls will enter the lists in the first round of the presidential election next April and none will get anywhere near 20% of the vote.

The same problem, but worse, exists on the Left. The Parti Socialiste has ceased to exist as a national force. The hard left party La France Insoumise (LFI) has lost ground since its leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon came a close fourth in 2017 but he will certainly run again.

The green party, Europe Ecologie Les Verts (EELV) did well in municipal elections last year but remains weak and divided nationally. The strongest centre-left/ecolo candidates might be Anne Hidalgo, the Socialist mayor of Paris, and the EELV Euro député, Yannick Jadot. Neither have much appeal outside big city France. Other big city greens fancy their chances.

Into this predictable cacophony, there has appeared in recent weeks an unexpected new refrain. Forget the centre-right and centre-left, some say. The only way to defeat Macron (and to be sure of defeating Le Pen) is to outflank the President, not on the right, not on the left, but in the centre.

Right and Left no longer mean much, the argument goes. The opposing forces are now national populism on the one hand and pro-European, pragmatic reformism on the other. The only way to be sure of blocking Le Pen is to create a more likeable version of Macronism.

Jean-Louis Borloo, a former centre-right finance minister and former mayor of Valenciennes in the north, has been talking to politicians from the right, left and centre. He believes that the way to “save France” is to mount a campaign by a “national team” of respected politicians and non-politicians of left and right and centre who would offer a detailed programme for reform and progress.

Who would be the actual presidential candidate? Borloo himself? Xavier Bertrand ? Monsieur ou Madame U.N. Autre? That remains unclear. It is a strange proposal for a country whose presidential system presupposes the emergence of a providential man or woman – not a committee. But it is an idea worth watching.

To sum up...

Macron and Le Pen are deadly rivals but also, in a bizarre way, allies. Macron’s best chance of re-election is to be in the second round against Le Pen. Her only chance of election is to be in the second round against Macron.

She would certainly lose to any other fresh candidate of the centre-right or centre-left or centre – someone who does not carry the baggage of Macron or, put another way, someone who has already had the misfortune of try to govern France. Macron would *probably* beat her but much depends on how the pandemic and its economic aftershocks unfold in the rest of this year.

What if the country did stumble into a Le Pen presidency?

A Lepenniste France would not try to Frexit but would become a source of radical disruption within the European Union – disruption which the EU would not easily survive. Dissident Hungary or Poland are thorns in the foot of the EU. A dissident, nationalist France would be a dagger to its heart.

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About the author:



John Lichfield has been The [UK] Independent newspaper's man in Paris since 1997, covering French news. Before that, he was the paper's Foreign Editor and he has also worked in Brussels and Washington.

In 1999, he was the UK press Awards Foreign Reporter of the year. He has been a frequent contributor to BEERG event and publications.