EUROPE 20.02.2017 | James Overton

Emmanuel Macron: enfant prodige

The youthful French presidential candidate's dynamism is winning him fans left, right and centre

With ten weeks to go before the first round of France's presidential election, the political wind is blowing favourably for outsider Emmanuel Macron. The 39 year old former economy minister, styling himself as "neither left nor right," and without a classic political party behind him, is now among the favourites to succeed on Sunday 23 April.

Admittedly, fate played into his hands when his conservative rival, François Fillon, fell foul of an expenses scandal involving his wife Penelope. Three months ago, it was assumed Fillon would coast into the Elysée Palace after winning a slickly-organised selection vote among party supporters. But allegations he abused the public purse have cast serious doubts on his ability to manage France's finances. Hoping to grab some of Fillon's market share, Macron is now eagerly projecting himself as a prudent voice in the centre ground.

Everything has a price

The youthful candidate's ascendancy has been lightning quick, with commentators initially dismissing his emergence as a "bulle médiatique" (media bubble). The huge sums of money thrown at his campaign have likely contributed to this meteoric rise. Being a serious presidential candidate is an expensive affair: you need to hire venues for meetings, pay travel, staff, offices expenses and fund an effective publicity machine. When the ex-minister formed his new political party "En marche!" last year, he set a funding target of €9 million to be raised by donations and bank loans. He is also contributing from his own personal fortune, said to be worth €2 million, earned during his career as a merchant banker with Rothschild.

The well-organised "En marche!" gatherings have gained extensive TV coverage, with Macron's speeches conveying a fervour that's got people talking.

Gossip has proved to be a marketable commodity. The French electorate is enthralled by the candidate's personal life, especially his unusual marriage to his former schoolteacher, Brigitte Trogneux, 24 years his senior.

Macron's thrusting and youthful image strikes a chord among voters travelling from Paris to Amiens. "I like him," says Christine, a civil servant in her 50's. "He is young, dynamic and breaking the mould of the old parties which are tired and out of date." Mourad, a maths teacher, is doubtful. "I don't think he can win. He's among a whole bunch of left-wing candidates who will split the vote. I think the final round will be on the right, between Fillon and (Front National leader) Marine Le Pen."

Change at the radical centre?

A cynical observer might conclude that his centrist policies will make little difference to a France scared by terror and still reeling from the financial crisis. But Macron insists he is there to bring change. "Politics should not be a career," he declares on his website. "It is a calling, to make reforms and improve the country." Although the candidate has not yet unveiled his official manifesto, he has already announced an overhaul of France's heavily-indebted social security fund; cutting obstacles for the self-employed; and a more radical direction for his 2016 labour law, watered down last year under pressure from unions.

During his tenure as industry minister (2014-2016) Macron demonstrated a will to modernise the economy. Reforms included liberalising the transport sector; cutting red tape for certain professions such as driving instructors, notaries and pharmacists; and supporting a labour law that gave more to employers. By the time prime minister Manuel Valls forced the controversial law through parliament, Macron had already quit the government, deftly avoiding opprobrium from the political left and trade unions.

Macron is at a disadvantage when it comes to the June parliamentary elections, which follow the presidential vote. Whilst the long-established parties already have their political machines running to find candidates, organise campaigns, stick up posters and so on, Macron's apparatus is still embryonic. Should he become president, it is doubtful he could win the backing of parliamentarians. If on the other hand, his bid fails and he enters parliament as a mere député, he would have more time to establish himself as a political heavyweight, ready to have another go at the presidency in five years' time.



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