

Frexit stage left?

How Jean-Luc Mélenchon is shaking up the French election from the left

When all the other candidates were asked in a TV debate whether the age of criminal responsibility should be lowered to 16, they got bogged down in detail. But Jean-Luc Mélenchon went on the attack, saying that the biggest problem with the penal system is that the “big” criminals always get away with everything. Mélenchon is clear who these criminals are: bankers, executives at big companies, polluters, corrupt politicians. The message clicks with TV viewers, and it’s clear who he’s taking a swipe at. Across from him is the Republican candidate Francois Fillon, who is accused of giving his wife a job she never did and claiming half a million euros for it. The right-wing populist Marine Le Pen allegedly misused EU funds. And as a former banker and economy minister with liberal economic policies, the independent candidate Emmanuel Macron must constantly fend off claims he’s a stooge of big capital.

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Mélenchon won the TV debates. The most recent polls show an upsurge putting him in third place among the candidates. Coming in behind Macron (22–24%) and Le Pen (22%), he has caught up with and even slightly overtake Fillon (18–19%). With pithy soundbites and clear positions, he has managed to present himself as the only true force on the left. The Socialist Party (PS), the traditional party of the centre-left, is a mere shadow of its former self.

Mélenchon left the PS almost ten years ago in protest at its stance on Europe and its “overly liberal” economic policies. He founded the Left Party (PG), which now forms the core of his left-wing coalition “La France insoumise”. Benoît Hamon, who in January unexpectedly beat former prime minister Manuel Valls to become the Socialist Party candidate, has failed to make much of an impression since then. In the battle of ideas, proposals such as an unconditional basic income of €750, a sum Hamon later revised down, have proved unable to win over voters

in the face of Mélenchon's calls for a minimum wage of €1,300 net per month. Hamon's poll numbers have stagnated at 8%.

The PS's left wing, represented by Hamon, has been resolutely outflanked from the left. Meanwhile, centrists in the party appear to have given up on the PS, after their preferred candidate, former Prime Minister Manuel Valls, lost in the primaries. Some members have even come out publicly in support of the "neither-left-nor-right" Macron. The most prominent example is Valls himself, who seems to care so little for his party, he backed Macron even before the first round of voting this Sunday.

Macron, who was for three years himself a member of the PS, enjoys the image of a young, dynamic candidate finally able to breathe fresh air into the lumbering French system. Many politicians and voters from the centre-left seem convinced Macron is a secret left-winger whose self-styling as a cross-party candidate is merely a shrewd electoral tactic. That might be due to his elegant cosmopolitanism, his passionate support for pro-European policies and the contrast with his right-wing populist rival Le Pen.

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Yet it makes perfect sense that a neoliberal would make passionate speeches in favour of the EU. And this is precisely where Mélenchon comes in. He does not believe France's economic *misère* can best be solved by a former investment banker. Mélenchon represents the romantic, revolutionary left, which enjoys a long heritage in France. At the same time, the 65-year-old doesn't come across as old-fashioned. He has the most YouTube followers of all the candidates. On the campaign trail he used cutting-edge hologram technology, allowing him to address audiences in several cities at once.

Mélenchon doesn't want to return to the glorious past advocated by Le Pen; he wants to create something new. He talks of bringing an end to the Fifth Republic and the "presidential monarchy". He proposes establishing a Sixth Republic with more redistribution of power and wealth and greater transparency for those in political office. He also wants stricter environmental regulations, including enshrining a "green rule" – the principle of not using more of the planet's resources than can be put back – into a new constitution.

Macron still has a clear lead of six percentage points over Mélenchon in the polls. But polls can be misleading, especially since 35% of voters are still undecided. Mélenchon might also win some voters from Le Pen, since the candidates at either end of the political spectrum agree on a number of points. Mélenchon wants to completely renegotiate treaties with the EU, and has not ruled out leaving the bloc altogether. The name of his left-wing coalition, “La France insoumise” (unsubmissive France) makes clear that his France would not submit to a German-led European Union. In addition, Mélenchon’s references to the nation are frequent even by traditionally high French standards. If the polls are wrong and Mélenchon faces Le Pen in the second round, he would win with 57% of the vote – again, according to polls. It would be the end of the Fifth Republic. But the past year has shown how uncertain opinion polls can be. What does seem certain is that France will change. The candidates from the traditional parties have been pushed to the sidelines. That’s a mini-revolution in itself.



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