EUROPE 13.03.2017 | Stefan Dehnert

# La Présidente?

## Polls show Marine le Pen will make the presidential run-off. We still don't know who will oppose her

For decades, politics and society in the Fifth Republic were characterised by a left-right opposition. The French workforce's affinity with the left eroded as large regions underwent deindustrialisation. The natural inclination of both the *bobos* – the educated middle class – and of the immigrants to side with socialism plugged the gap for a while. Yet the Socialists have failed to put forward convincing policies, leading to the exodus of large sections of the electorate who see themselves as the losers of modernity. As a result, the share of the blue-collar vote for the right-wing populist Front National (FN) has risen from an already high 27 percent in 1995 to 44 percent today.

Since wresting control of the FN from her father in 2002, Marine le Pen has sought to discard the party's "demonised" image. That strategy, and a sense of crisis sweeping across the Hexagon has meant it's not just small businesses and those taking early retirement that have been added to the pool of potential voters. The very nature of France's political landscape has also changed, with left-right dualism giving way to a tripartite system: left, right, and far-right.

Initially, France's first-past-the-post voting system shielded the traditional parties. A "republican front" of conservatives and socialists opposed to the FN also meant election results barely changed. However, with the FN's rapidly growing share of the vote, large-scale marches by its supporters, and party successes at both the commune and department levels, this is changing. When last October, former French President Nicolas Sarkozy declared he would vote neither for the FN, nor for a socialist candidate should the two come head-to-head in a presidential run-off, bonds between conservatives and those on the left weakened.

## Return of the ideologues

At the Republican (LR) and Socialist (PS) primaries in January, voters defied pollsters by backing conservative François Fillon and leftist Benoît Hamon – both ideologues in their respective parties. If the two stand for

the old right-left dichotomy, Macron and Le Pen represent a new conflict emerging in many Western countries between advocates of "liberal values" such as globalisation, immigration, tolerance towards minorities and faith in the French social model's capacity to integrate, and those who support an inward-looking state, with hefty restrictions on immigration, limits to free trade, a clear prioritising of national interests and a return to a supposedly simpler era.

Le Pen frames this in terms of a battle between "patriots" and "*mondialistes*", a term rather benignly translated as "supporters of globalisation". It is deliberately derogatory. Le Pen wants to get out of the EU and the Euro, cut back immigration from the current annual figure of 140,000 to 10,000, and show the country's Muslims they do not really belong. Her politics represent a withdrawal of France into itself.

In Emmanuel Macron we have a new player who prefers to position himself neither on the left nor on the right. Macron wants to prepare France better for globalisation and is pro-EU. He explicitly hails Chancellor Angela Merkel's refugee policy. He stands for faith in France's future and its ability to reform, and therefore for those with an open and tolerant world view.

## Pull up the drawbridge

Marine Le Pen's FN is a party with a long history. It has gone from being a meeting place for xenophobes, anti-Semites and the nostalgic into a political force for those who see France's problems as being primarily external - EU rules, globalisation, immigrants, German austerity-mongers. The "out of touch" elites in France itself are equally derided. The Front National, in its promises to regain national sovereignty, peddles the illusion that  it is still possible for national governments to exercise complete political and economic control of their own territory. This vision has enjoyed growing success, thanks to the negative effects of globalisation and years of EU bashing, not just from the FN. Marine Le Pen has been on the political scene for decades and has acquired significant credibility among her supporters. Even the misuse of EU funds to pay her own colleagues has failed to dent her standing. She has cleverly spun an official investigation and the withdrawal of immunity by the European Parliament as a smear campaign against her and the "will of the people" she champions.

Emmanuel Macron also presents himself as an alternative to the political establishment. In fact, he's a product of that very establishment: a former merchant banker and *énarque* – graduate of one of France's elite Écoles Nationales d'Administration.

Try as he may to distance himself from France's cumbersome political machine, which he blames for the country's inability to reform, this flaw is not lost on globalisation's losers. Yet Macron has never been elected to political office and is running the first election campaign of his life – a gust of fresh air in the dusty corridors of power. With no party base to campaign on the ground, he is entirely dependent on the popularity he has gained from media coverage. He has no provably committed core of voters – a problem that won't disappear if he wins. In the parliamentary elections that will follow in June, he won't be able to win a parliamentary majority, despite the 200,000 registered members of his *En Marche!* movement and local support groups. The huge challenge of finding parliamentary majorities for his reform programme could be the stumbling block that brings down the whole project.

## Fillon walks a tightrope

The scandal of having allegedly employed his wife for years in a pseudo-job at the taxpayer's expense has hugely damaged conservative candidate Fillon. With an official investigation into his conduct, even members of his own campaign team are abandoning their allegiance. His vilifying diatribes against the judiciary could have come from Le Pen herself. Lashing out makes him appear desperate. It also erodes the separation of powers – a vital component of a well-functioning democracy – ultimately benefitting the Front National. Meanwhile the left has failed to agree on a candidate, paving the way for a Macron-Le Pen run-off on 7 May.

But with six weeks to go before the first round of voting, there is still a lot of movement in the polls. The only thing certain is Marine Le Pen's stable supporter base. She will likely win the first round, whereas Macron sympathisers are not yet sure if they will actually vote for him.

Macron is already getting a feel for the volatility of his poll ratings. Two controversial remarks caused a brief five percent plummet. He's hoping his personal dynamism will continue to engage large sections of the population as his six-month campaign draws to a close. A raft of manifesto proposals, published earlier this month, have already prompted some former supporters to jump ship. As a young cosmopolitan, he hasn't convinced the nation he can tackle security issues. A terrorist attack shortly before the election could turn voters against him.

If indeed Le Pen and Macron do end up facing each other in the second round, the choices of leftist and conservative voters will be the deciding factor. A recent survey shows half the supporters of Francois Fillon on the right, and Jean-Luc Mélenchon on the far left, intend to vote for Le

Pen in the run-off. Marine Le Pen's conservative position on social issues is attractive to French Catholics, while Mélenchon's supporters approve of the FN's rejection of globalisation and the EU. The PS voters would by and large go for Macron, to stop Le Pen.

In the end, voter turnout will determine whether a Le Pen presidency is within reach. Perhaps the decades-long stigma towards the FN will put potential voters off. But a victorious Macron fails to come up with answers to the various challenges facing France within his first term as president – and fails to secure the necessary support from his European partners – we will almost certainly see a Présidente Le Pen in 2022.

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**Stefan Dehnert**
Paris

Stefan Dehnert is director of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's Paris office.
He previously worked in Serbia, Macedonia and Kosovo.