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Vote splitting... gimmicks and alliances

The wide field of French presidential candidates is working in Le Pen's favour

French elections typically attract a large number of candidates, of varying political hues, but then quickly settle into a two-horse race between the conservatives and the Socialist Party (PS). This year, though, all bets are off.

Voters and observers alike had been expecting, and hoping, that the official launch of campaigning earlier this month would bring a level of clarity. However, with just over two months to go, it is hard to predict the outcome with any confidence.

Only extreme-right National Front leader Marine Le Pen (48) has managed to hold on to a solid base of support in opinion polls, which she leads. That lead, and concerns about the growing popularity of her anti-Europe, anti-immigrant and protectionist policies, have placed her in the enviable position where all the other candidates are measured against her.

The other frontrunners – former conservative prime minister Francois Fillon (62) and centrist Emmanuel Macron (39) - have both seen their support wax and wane. And, in the wings, all the other presidential hopefuls struggle to be seen as presidential possibles, and not just as pawns whose votes count more for those they may support than for themselves.

That may be why left-wing candidate Jean-Luc Melenchon (65), who has been trailing the frontrunners, decided to make sure his campaign launch would be talked about – by demonstrating a gift of bilocation, thanks to a life-size hologram.

His supporters were delighted and amused, observers were left speechless, and his detractors ridiculed him as Melenchon announced in Lyon that he was also in Paris, before popping up as a 3D image on stage in the capital.

The stunt worked. Melenchon's brand of left-wing politics hasn't changed all that much in his four decades in the game, so while his supporters would have keenly noted what he was saying, the majority of those watching him live, or on the evening news, or on their Twitter feeds were just intrigued by the technological gimmick – but at least they watched.

Melenchon and his plans to shorten France's 35-hour workweek, leave NATO and block free-trade deals, has been steadily building support and is holding at 12-13 per cent in the latest polls. That is not enough to get him through to the second round face-off, but it is significant enough to pose a serious threat to the Socialist Party (PS) candidate Benoit Hamon (49).

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Hamon is currently placed fourth in the polls, but only just ahead of Melenchon, having dipped since his late entry into the race. Hamon is also staunchly left-wing, and his surprise win at the primary in January seemed to confirm that most French socialists are unhappy with the party and government's shift towards the centre. He won the primary after a hugely unpopular President Francois Hollande finally announced he would not seek re-election, but the months of uncertainty while others waited in the wings gave non-PS candidates like Melenchon more time to build support.

Hamon's more traditional left-wing policies, such as a universal income, have been welcomed by some, but dismissed as unrealistic by many others. As he has settled into campaigning, he has softened his approach, and called on the divided French left to unite behind him, saying this week that he was "open to all the left".

However, his campaign took a hit on Tuesday when government spokesman Stephane Le Foll, admitting that "the left is divided", suggested the real question was how to avoid a second round face-off between Fillon and Le Pen. He reiterated his support for Hamon, but added: "There comes a time ... when one has to envisage a different choice," although he refused to confirm that he was contemplating throwing his weight behind Emmanuel Macron.

Hoping to win over the more centre-leaning Socialist voters, the former investment banker and economy minister has been positioning himself

squarely in the centre, and that could well sway those left-wingers who voted for former prime minister Manuel Valls in the primary.

The decision Wednesday by another centrist, Francois Bayrou, to stay out of the race and instead back Macron will also help the youthful candidate, who has been dropping in the polls.

Bayrou announced his decision to fall on the sword for the sake of the greater good of centrist politics saying: "Because the risk is great, because the French are disorientated and often in despair, I have decided to offer Emmanuel Macron an alliance." Macron quickly, and unsurprisingly, accepted, calling it "a turning point" in the race.

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Centrist candidate, Francois Bayrou, on his decision to stay out of the presidential race

Bayrou was credited with just 5-6 per cent of first round votes, but they all help the numbers, as Macron was trailing third. More importantly, though, Bayrou's open offer gives the youngest of the candidates a credibility he was sorely lacking. When he first threw his hat in the ring, Macron seemed an attractive package to a jaded electorate, but the more one chips away at the facade, the less there seems to be behind it.

Bayrou's announcement also prompted the euro to rally against the dollar, and relief in the French bond market, jittery over fears of rising support for Le Pen. Macron has been tipped to come out victorious if he makes it to a second round face-off with her.

In many ways, this race feels more like a process of elimination than a choice. And as each new pawn falls or is knocked over, the pieces left on the chessboard are repositioned. And all have just one objective – to take out the queen.



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Elaine Cobbe is a seasoned news journalist with more than 20 years of experience of covering international events. A correspondent for CBS News, she is based in Paris and has reported from around the world, including Iraq, Kosovo and Rwanda. She is also a regular commentator of French news on radio in Ireland, South Africa and New Zealand.