

En Marche? Who is Emmanuel Macron and why he stands a chance to win the French presidency

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*With the selection of Benoît Hamon as the candidate for the Socialist Party, the field for the 2017 French presidential election is broadly set. **Marta Lorimer** writes on the candidacy of Emmanuel Macron, who is running under the banner of a new progressive movement – *En Marche!* – and is currently receiving significant support in opinion polls. She argues that while winning the presidency remains a long shot for Macron, recent developments have boosted his chances.*



Emmanuel Macron. Image credits: [LeWeb](#) (CC BY 2.0)

Emmanuel Macron appeared on the French political scene in 2014 when after two years serving as Deputy Secretary-General of the Presidency, François Hollande nominated him to replace Arnaud Montebourg as Minister of Economy, Industry and Digital Data. The 39-year-old former investment banker was an unusual presence in French politics: young, politically inexperienced and not a member of the party rank and file. Today, he is an unusual candidate for the highest office in France.

L'homme providentiel

Macron launched his bid for the French presidency in November. His move, while expected since he formed the progressive movement '*En Marche!*' (Forward!) and quit government, changed the outlook of the presidential race. Widely popular with broad segments of the electorate, Macron has imposed himself over the past few months as the third man in this presidential race, behind the radical right's candidate Marine Le Pen (Front National) and the right-wing François Fillon.

His first campaign meeting in Paris attracted around 10,000 people (15,000 according to the candidate), an unexpectedly high number of participants for a political rally. His progression in the polls has also been quite remarkable, going from around the 10% mark to 20% in the last CEVIPOF poll. Recent polls suggest that in a hypothetical second round he would beat both Le Pen and Fillon (Kantar Sofres-One Point poll for *Le Figaro*, RTL and LCI). While many expected the 'Macron bubble' to burst quickly, he has so far defied all predictions.

The results of the right wing and left wing primaries seem to have made his life easier. By selecting the Thatcherite François Fillon as their presidential candidate, *Les Républicains*, the main right-wing party, have left open a wide space in the centre for a candidate such as Macron, whose economic policies are expected to be close to 'Third Way' politics. The gap in the centre has been further widened by the results of the Socialist Party's primary, where Benoit Hamon emerged on 29 January as the clear winner against the current Prime Minister Manuel Valls.

Hamon, whose policy platform is significantly to the left of the Socialist Party, is more likely to present a problem for the hard left candidate, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, than for Macron, who aims at attracting mostly moderate centrists on both the left and the right of the political spectrum. In addition, Hamon is not very popular with parts of the Socialist Party, which could lead to defections in the party lines. Macron can also count on the support of some high profile members of the government, such as former presidential candidate Ségolène Royal, who has been supportive of the former minister's campaign.

Recent events also appear to have the potential to benefit Macron. Fillon, whose popularity was already starting to languish, has been hit by a scandal dubbed 'Penelope Gate'. The newspaper *Le Canard enchaîné* published documents suggesting that his wife received 500,000 euros for work as a parliamentary assistant and as a collaborator in the magazine '*La Revue des deux Mondes*'. While employing wives and family members as assistants is not illegal in France, there are doubts about the fact that his wife ever completed any kind of work: she has never been seen in the offices, and her role as collaborator in the review is difficult to prove.

In addition, she had always been adamant in denying that she participated in any way in her husband's political activities, which complicates things further for Fillon. He has built much of his campaign in the primaries on his being 'irreproachable', and has vowed that should he be placed under formal investigation, he will withdraw his bid for the presidency. This could open up new, unpredictable scenarios, and against a backdrop of widespread scepticism toward established politicians, it may benefit a candidate who has built much of his success on being from a world outside of politics.

A man without a plan?

Macron, however, still faces a few hurdles. First, he remains politically inexperienced. While many of his supporters see this as an asset, it is also likely to be a point of attack for his adversaries. In attempting to raise his profile, the candidate has already started to put together a plan of visits abroad and has also ensured to multiply his meetings on the ground. Second, while so far he has made some vague proposals, he has yet to produce a complete programme. Although he has announced that his measures will be announced by the end of February, this will make the coming weeks difficult for him, as he will be frequently criticised for not saying what he stands for.

Finally, he is a man without a party: as a newly established movement, *En Marche!* is likely to face practical hurdles on the ground – especially in the context of the French two-ballot system, which will make its task harder than for established parties. This issue will furthermore make it difficult for him to win the legislative elections that will follow the presidential election. He has announced that his *En Marche!* movement will be presenting candidates in all of France's 577 electoral districts, but the selection process is likely to take some time. Those who are interested in running can apply to become candidates online, and will be required to adhere to a 'Contract with the Nation'. Three aspects will be privileged in the selection: first, true parity between women and men; secondly, the 'probity' of candidates, who will be required to have no criminal record; and third, 'political plurality', meaning that the movement will be recruiting 'progressives' from all sides of the political spectrum. However, as a newly established movement, *En Marche!* is likely to face practical hurdles on the ground, which will make its task harder than for established

parties.

Up until three months ago, most voters were expecting a replay of the 2012 election: a three-way race between Nicolas Sarkozy, Marine Le Pen and François Hollande. Sarkozy didn't even make it to the second round of the primaries – ousted by the underdog Fillon. Hollande announced in December that he would not be running for a second mandate, and Manuel Valls, his Prime Minister and expected successor, has now lost to the 'rebel' Benoit Hamon. Marine Le Pen consistently hovers around the 25% mark, but is expected to lose the second round – although at this point, it is unclear to whom she might lose it to. So could Macron make it to the second round and win? It is going to be difficult, but in such an unpredictable race, it is hard to exclude any scenario.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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