

Green in the Elysée? Pulling off a Long Shot

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The presidential election looming in April 2022 is increasingly defining French politics. While the signs point to a run-off between current president Emmanuel Macron and far-right Marine Le Pen, anything can change with a long campaign ahead. Green issues are more prominent than ever in French politics, but a fragmented left means that breaking the neoliberal and far-right duopoly is no easy task. Mickaël Marie analyses past elections to sketch out a strategy to keep the Greens in the running. Much will hinge on honing a narrative of ecological transition rooted in progressive tradition that can unite diverse ideological groups.

Everyone knows that making predictions is a mug's game. Especially when it comes to the French presidential election, that graveyard of failed favourites. From one day to the next, a projected next president can become a workplace fatality. Presidential elections in France are a series of plot twists that hold out hope for those languishing in the polls: a surprise is always possible.

Unless the outcome is to be left to fate, it is important to establish a few facts. And if Greens should seek to govern in France's highest office, it is necessary to consider the conditions for getting there. In short, it is about pulling off a heist. Like in all caper movies, skillful execution is just as important as a good plan.

It would be a heist because the election appears to be a foregone conclusion. Poll after poll says the same thing. Two candidates dominate the field with a 10-15-point lead: Marine Le Pen of the Rassemblement National (National Front, RN), which for many years has been the model for new far-right parties in Europe, and Emmanuel Macron, incumbent president and leader of La République En Marche (LREM), who counts with as much vehement opposition as solid support. At this stage, no candidate seems strong enough prevent a repeat of the 2017 presidential election run-off between these two. On the left and among Greens, no candidate (declared or otherwise) is polling above 10 per cent: not Anne Hidalgo, Paris mayor and presumed Socialist Party (PS) candidate; not Yannick Jadot, the best-known Green candidate; and not even Jean-Luc Mélenchon of La France Insoumise (FI), who ran in 2012 and 2017, though he is performing slightly better than the first two.

How to steal the presidency when you are small, alone, and far behind in the opinion polls? It is certainly a long shot. The first condition for winning the election is evidently to make it to the second round as one of the two finalists. Unless there is a historic turn of events, Le Pen will make the run-off. Her supporter base is the most loyal and mobilised. It is a sad state of affairs, but that is the reality. The first consequence of this situation is that reaching the run-off with Le Pen will mean certain victory for her rival: the far-right candidate will be beaten, if only narrowly, by anyone she faces.

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The second consequence is that Le Pen's almost certain qualification for the run-off complicates the famous principle of "In the first round, we choose; in the second, we eliminate." Constituencies hostile to Le Pen are forced to vote tactically, eliminating candidates in the first round by choosing who they want her to face in the second. The upshot: to reach the second round, a candidate must be perceived as likely to perform well when they get there.

The Le Pen dynamic

Loath as we may be to admit it, Le Pen's support is the most solidly rooted in French politics and society, and the most invulnerable to upset. It is the result of long-term trends also observed in other countries. Based on data from recent years, Le Pen is expected to receive 8-9 million votes in the first round of the 2022 presidential election.

Could the traditional right, whose forces were defeated by Macron in the 2017 election, succeed this time? On paper, it is best placed to do so. At its lowest, the centre-right's electoral potential is at least the 7 million votes secured in 2017 in adverse conditions by François Fillon, candidate for Les Républicains (LR). In the 2007 presidential election first round, Nicolas Sarkozy won 11.5 million votes. Five years later, despite being quite unpopular, Sarkozy still managed to get 9.75 million votes. So at first glance, it is not unreasonable to think that a run-off between Le Pen and a centre-right candidate is possible. Except that, in his four years in office, Macron has seriously wounded the traditional right - almost fatally so.

For a Green to overtake both Macron and the traditional right's candidate to make the second round, they will have to win at least 8 million votes, equivalent to Le Pen's lowest electoral potential. And there lies the way in. Because the electorate cannot be increased, overtaking rivals means reducing their electoral potential - in other words, attracting votes from elsewhere. It is a question of persuasion rather than mobilisation.

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In French electoral history, 8 million votes for a left-wing candidate (let alone a Green) is no mean feat. Since 1981, even though the electorate has since grown, the only left-wing candidates to break the 10 million vote barrier in the first round were François Mitterrand

(1988) and François Hollande (2012). It is a tough target that requires an ability to bring people in from outside the tent (as in 1988 and 2007) and a willingness to repair a damaged and divided country (as in 2012). In 2022's fractured landscape, where the left-wing political forces likely to provide the foundations for victory are structurally, ideologically, and socially weaker, this seems impossible.

Further complicating matters is the fact that Mélenchon will be a candidate come what may. Neither Mélenchon nor his team have really analysed his (relative) success in 2017, and the desire for a rematch trumps any other consideration.

In short, the 8 million votes necessary to make it to the second round of the 2022 presidential election seem not just a long way off but out of reach for a candidate representing the Green movement alone – 8 million votes is 5 million more than the high watermark for a Green candidate: Jadot's 3 million in the 2019 European elections.

Building an electoral bloc

In 2017, Mélenchon and PS candidate Benoît Hamon garnered 9.3 million votes between them. The same year, 47 per cent of voters who had backed Hollande in 2012 voted for Macron in the first round. That is 4.8 million votes. So, in two consecutive presidential elections, 14 million people voted with a left-leaning preference. The arithmetic is, of course, hypothetical, but it is within these 14 million voters likely to choose a left-wing candidate (based on previous choices) that we can carve out a block of 8 million who would be inclined to support a candidate who is both left-wing and green through to the run-off.

When considering how to mobilise these 8 million possible votes, it is worth keeping in mind that a significant chunk of the electorate now takes a tactical, case-by-case approach to voting based on the options available rather than their absolute preferences.

In 2007, centrist candidate François Bayrou received 6.8 million votes, just shy of 19 per cent. In 2012, after five years of Sarkozy rule that seemed to validate all of his arguments, Bayrou got just 3.2 million votes. In the meantime, Hollande had become the tactical vote against Sarkozy. In 2012, Mélenchon got barely 4 million votes. Five years later, that number rose to 7 million. There again, he had become the tactical vote for those who wanted a left-wing candidate in the second round, whoever it may be. Seemingly the best placed, Mélenchon benefited from extra electoral support beyond those who believed in his project.

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A preliminary conclusion: if Hollande got 10 million votes in 2012 and Mélenchon got 7 million in 2017, the idea of gathering (at least) 8 million votes in 2022 for a green and mainstream left candidate does not seem quite so far-fetched.

Assuming the 4 million people who voted for Mélenchon in 2012 remain loyal, 3 million from his 2017 total are liable to go elsewhere. At 2.3 million votes, Hamon's 2017 results were an all-time low for a socialist candidate. And not to forget the 4.8 million Hollande supporters from 2012 who voted for Macron in 2017. Added together, this brings us to just over 10 million votes.

Again, this arithmetic is hypothetical. Some of the 2017 Macron voters from the Left will remain loyal to him, particularly if the left-wing candidates appear too radical or zealous. Even more significantly, many left-leaning voters may sit out the election entirely. That said, there is still a starting point of 10 million possible votes. It is not an election result, but it is potential. It is neither a strategy nor a campaign line, but it outlines a constituency to which a candidate who both offers a green perspective and embodies the best of the social-democratic tradition could appeal.

One last number: the 2015 regional elections, widely considered catastrophic for the Left and the Greens, still saw them reach a combined number of 8.2 million votes in the first round. Taking into account only the moderate left (PS and the Radical Party of the Left, PRG) and the Greens (in other words excluding the French Communist Party, the Left Front, and other far-left lists) still brings the number to 7 million votes. The 2015 regional elections were also considered to have a relatively low voter turnout, with 22 million voters in the first round compared to 36-37 million in the first round of presidential elections.

Examining previous election results brings us to the conclusion that, on paper at least, gathering enough votes to carry a green and mainstream left candidate into the 2022 election run-off is possible. Not simple, but possible.

Uniting greens and social democrats

Of course, turning this potential into electoral reality will be a tough task. The political pre-conditions are challenging. First, there is the need to convince the Socialists, once dominant on the Left but very weak today, and the Greens, previously a bit-part player but now taking on ever more important roles, to put forward a single candidate. The idea is under discussion, but agreement is a long way off. And that compromise is just the easy part. The hard part is telling a story that can unite in one socio-political bloc various ideological strands whose opinion leaders seem to spend more time arguing among themselves – often heatedly – than trying to build a coalition capable of winning a majority. It is as if they have realised that the dead will not come back to life, and now the only goal possible is to be first runner-up. As one commentator observed in 2016: “The European Left often looks divided into two camps: One loses elections, the other doesn't seem interested in winning them.”

So, does the political space exist? Is the mouse hole that would enable this heist really there?

Socio-culturally speaking, it most certainly does exist. The groups that could make up this bloc are there, as numerous opinion polls show. Values that run deep in French society – particularly the desire for lifestyles that are simpler and more sustainable – could find their political expression in an offering that combines ecological transition, more regulation, collective solidarity, and the recognition that everyone's background is unique.

Just because today's left-wing parties are shadows of their former selves, it does not mean that their electorates have dissolved into the sea of ideological realignment. In France as elsewhere in Europe, there continues to be a "central constellation", as French sociologist Henri Mendras put it, that is attached to social justice and social security, and that sees public services and the welfare state as the collective wealth of the poor. Of course, this constellation is no longer a stable and ready-made electoral force. But the social groups it comprises could be open to a political offering centred on transition and protection, change and security in a tumultuous world. However, they no longer neatly fit into the left-right spectrum. This means that it is not about labels or adjectives, but about bringing together different – and potentially contradictory – aspirations and shaping them into a modern vision. The task is undoubtedly difficult, and building a bloc is harder than inheriting one.

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Personal development gurus always recommend highlighting your strengths because they set you apart from others. What would be the strengths of a candidate who was "green and more"? These could be found in the assertion that it is time to live differently, especially after the pandemic has brutally exposed the urgent need for change. They could be found in the critique of a productivist model that has reached the end of the road. And in the ability to frame these changes as part of a long progressive tradition – one which saw the Popular Front invent paid holiday in the 1930s and, later, a government of national unity create France's social security system.

It could be, to borrow the language of American politics, that we are in a "mommy moment": a time in politics when the desire for protection, connection and solidarity trumps aspirations for law and order. This is perhaps what Joe Biden's victory in the United States has shown and, more importantly, the public's approval of his first decisions as president.

The pandemic has turned not only the world upside down, but individual lives too. Some call it a dress rehearsal. Because the pandemic's origins lie in the global ecological crisis. Extreme climate change; a new normal; a world turned upside down: we will have to address the emotional distress that all this will cause and offer people the prospect of something better.

The experience of Covid-19 and the shadow of the global ecological crisis herald a future in which green answers are sure to get a hearing. The key issue in the upcoming French presidential race is not the answer, but the question: do we re-elect the person who, at the height of the crisis, appears to have managed it well? Or do we choose someone who, having learnt the lessons from it, offers a vision for a future that is both different and stable? Different, because it must break with what got us here in the first place. And stable because, after such a shock, few will want to roll the dice. It is not a problem of ideas or values; it is a problem of real lives. Macron can justifiably claim he has been able to do "whatever it takes" to ensure life continues. A Green candidate must argue that the

challenge now is to ensure that everybody can lead their lives in a changing world – a world where we too must change if we want to maintain the conditions for life.

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Given Le Pen’s deep-rooted support, the 2022 presidential election will be a fight over the best candidate to face her. Will it simply be about saving the current system? Or will it be about building something new to save the conditions for life itself? For the Green answer to prevail, we need to ask the right question.

In 1932, during another dark time in our history, German Marxist thinker Ernst Bloch wrote: “Nazis speak deceitfully, but to people; Communists quite truthfully, but only about things.” To bring together people from beyond their usual base and to stand a chance of winning, the Green candidate must be someone who, while talking about things, can also speak to the hearts of those who have suffered particular hardship.



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