

# Presidential election in France: Mélenchon, the French Chavez?

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**Dave Kellaway reflects on French Presidential elections too close to call.**

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Shock followed by surprise followed by upset. The French presidential election is yet another expression of the political volatility produced by the aftershocks of the biggest economic recession since the 1930s and the incapacity of both neo-liberalism and social democracy to maintain support for their pro-austerity governments.

First Fillon, the Thatcherite traditionalist catholic, beat the favourite, Juppe, for the mainstream conservative candidature. Then his corrupt payment of parliamentary funds to his wife and family for pseudo jobs lost him the frontrunner status. This opened the way for Macron, a Renzi/Blair clone embodying neo-liberalism with a socially liberal human face to replace him as the person to beat. After that we had the most left wing of the Socialist Party candidates, Hamon, winning the primary against Valls, the outgoing Prime Minister. The latest surprise is the onward march of Melenchon who is currently one of the top four candidates who could make it into the second round run off. A word of caution – last time he ran in 2012 his rating in the polls soared in the week before the vote to around 17% only to result in a final score of 11.1%

Macron and Le Pen remain favourites (just) to go into the second round but they have been slipping from scores of 26/25% to 23 and 22 at the time of writing. Fillon has recovered a bit to 19/20% but Melenchon has seen the biggest momentum going from 12% at the start to 18% and even overtaking Fillon in a couple of polls with 20%. Given a margin of error of at least 2 to 3 points and the uncertainty of how the scores of the minor candidates (there are another 7 including two revolutionary Marxists!) might affect the top four, then it really is too close to call at this time. Unless Fillon continues to bounce back the probability is that the final two candidates will both be from outside the historic mainstream political parties.

## **Eight reasons why Melenchon has made a bigger impact this time**

1. As we have seen in other countries where social democrats in government have managed austerity, this has created huge unpopularity among the traditional left of centre electorate. Hollande is the first sitting President in modern times who has not gone for a second mandate. His government has failed to cut unemployment, which is nearly double the UK rate, and to protect living standards. It has used heavy handed executive powers to force through anti-labour laws in parliament. Melenchon, although a former PS minister, has long broken with it and placed himself as a clear independent opponent of the government.

2. The PS, like the LP today, is completely divided which is never helpful in an election battle. Despite Valls pledging to support Hamon at the time of the latter's victory in the primary, he has since reneged on this and come out for Macron. He is not alone, a number of PS MPs had already done the same and many of the rest are hardly enthusiastic for Hamon. A lot are thinking how they might recycle themselves in tandem or within Macron's En Marche movement.

3. A lot of commentators thought that Hamon's victory would squeeze Melenchon's vote because of the overlap in a number of key policy areas and his break with Hollande. It was my own view at the time that the 'useful' vote tactic would come into play, that the official PS candidate would have the better chance of getting to the second round. Hamon had put himself at the very left of PS with some radical policies progressive taxes and some good ecological policies – and according to him, the universal basic income. But almost immediately he tacked back in order to unify the divided PS so denting his radical appeal. He had resigned early on in the Hollande government, but his late entry as an anti-austerity candidate meant he was playing catch up with Melenchon, who had played the long game of at least 14 months campaigning. Furthermore the tactical, realistic vote played less, given that unlike in 2012 the PS never looked like winning anyway. Hamon is not a great campaigner and does not shine in the debates.

4. Melenchon himself has performed well. He has been a strong speaker, held the biggest meetings; over 50,000 strong such as in Toulouse or Marseille and an even bigger one in Paris. He has looked more modern and in touch; with his hologram meetings in five towns and with a long term social media campaign. He looks less old school than in 2012 and has got youth support. He has toned down the hectoring speeches and tried to appear like Mitterrand who was famously known as the *force tranquille*.

5. Following his last presidential bid there was increased tensions between the two main components of the Front de Gauche (FdG) – Melenchon's Parti de Gauche and the Communist Party. In the legislative elections that followed the 2012 Presidential ones, the CP were able to maintain its handful of MPs whereas the Parti de Gauche did not get any elected. The CP retains thousands of local and regional elected representatives, currently the PG has around 90 and one MEP (Melenchon).

The latter thought that the way to do better this time was to develop his own movement alongside and increasingly redundant FdG. So over a year ago he launched France Insoumise (Insubordinate France) with local committees as a basis of support for this electoral bid. According to John Mullen's article on the *Counterfire* site there are 3000 committees and there are claims of 400,000 supporters registered on line with 270,000 followers of the YouTube channel. The 2012 FdG committees were much more formally structured around the PG, CP and some radical groups. Despite their focus on Melenchon's electoral bid and his team's unilateral political control there has been discussion and input on many aspects of the programme. Forty mini pamphlets have been produced on various topics. Certainly it represents a serious radicalisation and has brought new people into movement. It must also have helped his progress in the polls this time. With his first run it was clear that the PC was the main force pulling out the crowds for the big rallies, it has evened up this time.

6. In programmatic terms, there are clear red lines between him and Hollande government. His constitutional proposals for a constituent assembly and a non-presidential Sixth republic have real resonance. He is for a 90% tax band above half a million annual salary. The public sector and welfare state will receive massive investment. It is fully costed and has been prepared over a long period. Two hundred thousand paper copies of his programme have been sold to the public according to one of their activists (see interview with Danielle Obono on the Bella Caledonia website).

The key question is not whether the programme is entirely anti-capitalist or for a socialist transition but whether it is currently acceptable in any way for the French or European ruling classes. It is not.

7. This time his campaign has been able to reach out more to the centre ground and even to the historic base of the FN. Unencumbered by the Communist Party (PC) or a Front de Gauche having any say in running things, he totally controls his movement, France Insoumise. This makes it easier for him to be consistent and coherent in his messaging and there is a real independence from the PC which can be useful electorally. It is easier for him to proclaim that he is not far left. His policies are formulated in a more populist than leftist way. Some of his team espouse the ideas of Laclau and Chantal Mouffe on left populist narratives.

Many observers suggest his breakthrough also resides in the much stronger tones of national sovereignty and pride in France. His speeches are peppered with reference to France and its potential greatness. It is quite lyrical at times. In Toulouse this Sunday he eulogised:

*“ France belle et généreuse qui commence chaque jour comme un matin neuf sous sa devise, “Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité”. [Beautiful and generous France starts each day like a new morning dressed in the uniform of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity]*

Melenchon has written a book about Germany which is full of imprecations against the dangers of German dominance of Europe. All this plays well among certain French people who retain such an old anti-German reflex.

Most pundits have correctly identified this significant shift from the policies and tone of this previous run in 2012. It has led to ambiguities on openness to migrants. He made a statement on unregulated workers ‘taking the bread from French workers’ and he is for immigration controls, picking and choosing which workers can be accepted. Although he is critical of US imperialism and for exit from NATO his foreign policy is all about defending French interests. His positions on Syria and Ukraine tend to give sustenance to Putin’s positions. Again these policies on defence do no harm to his electoral ambitions.

He is at best equivocal about French interventions in Africa and he defends the French nuclear deterrent. So, unlike in 2012, his supporters are encouraged to bring the tricolore to his rallies, the internationale has been dropped. He intones the PS tradition of Jaures and Leon Blum. Most pollsters suggest around 12% of his supporters will vote for the far right Front National (FN) in the second round.

8. Finally Melenchon is helped by the crisis and division of the Right with the FN more or less retaining his hard core of 23-25% in the polls but with Fillon, the original clear choice of the bosses perhaps not getting to the runoff. Macron is a decent plan B for them but this is not straightforward since he cannot shrug off his role as a banker and the author of the original anti-labour laws. Like Cuidadanos in Spain or Renzi in Italy he exudes an image of youth, modernity and social liberalism allied with savage policies to cut the public sector and ‘make France competitive’. Melenchon is able to come across as more solid, experienced and less gimmicky. Macron tries to hold together defectors from the right and from the PS so can appear to be saying all things to all people ‘just as politicians always do’. His poll lead has shortened as these weaknesses have emerged.

### **What does the Melenchon movement mean for working people and a left alternative?**

There are two possible scenarios if the polls are relatively accurate:

## **1. Melenchon wins**

If he wins through to the second round the polls indicate he becomes President unless he faces Macron. It would be an earthquake and a real opportunity for the left. No doubt it would give confidence to working people and provide better conditions for building a left alternative. Working people will directly benefit from implementation of his policies on increasing the minimum wage, better healthcare, full student grants and support for ecological policies such as organic farming. A Melenchon presidency would be an example and a boost to the Corbyn movement's confidence.

It would also challenge the radical anti-capitalist left such as the NPA (New Anticapitalist Party) and Lutte Ouvriere (Workers Fight) to develop a non-sectarian but critical position in defence of a Melenchon government which would surely draw down the wrath of the French and European ruling classes. The radical left may pick up 2 to 3% of the vote in the first round. Philippe Poutou, the NPA candidate, made a big impact in the only real TV debate, denouncing Le Pen and Fillon's corruption and presenting himself as a worker rather than a professional politician. Both French and international media commented on it. It probably helped place him as the second of the minor candidates with 2% in the polls.

His meetings have also been successful. LO is credited with 0.5% and has historically been reluctant to consider a joint candidature with the NPA or its predecessors.

Both LO and the NPA have never been part of the FdG or tried to get involved in France Insoumise because they have serious programmatic differences with Melenchon and also severe doubts over his ability and willingness to bring together a class struggle left that will really challenge capitalism. For the NPA, Melenchon creates illusions in a 'revolution through the ballot box'. The NPA in its creative broadcasts provides a popular anti-capitalist message. Poutou himself does not identify Melenchon as the enemy but outlines some of these key policy issues, particularly on foreign policy or migrants.

There were discussions about the tactical approach to the FdG in 2012 and subsequently which resulted in a split from the NPA to join the FdG along with other forces as the Ensemble grouping. Ensemble today is working as a critical force in support of Melenchon. However, just as with his attitude to the PC, the former has not actively encouraged the NPA or LO to join a democratic left movement. Whatever happens these forces can provide a critical left pole in any future radicalisation.

## **2. Melenchon does much better than last time**

If he gets well above his last score without winning through the question is will it be translated into a growth of a radical pole of resistance. Obviously to do significantly better than last time is positive and represents a potential class struggle opposition to a Macron or Fillon government. One of the first tasks will be his movement's role in the general elections that immediately follow the Presidential ones. But there are some issues:

1. Will he want to, or be able, to unify the left. Melenchon has been fairly negative to the PC who are concerned about protecting their MPs and candidates. Will he try to create a broad coalition say with the Hamon people, the Greens, the PC and the radical left? Previously the PC cadres in congress voted against supporting Melenchon only for their position to be overturned by a membership vote so there are already big problems uniting the former big battalions of the Front de Gauche.

1. Will he be able to build something out of the explosion of PS? His project has always been to

defeat and overcome the PS. The Valls wing will probably link up with Macron, what will Hamon do? Will Melenchon go on a unity offensive or just build France Insoumise? There were opportunities to put more pressure on Hamon to do a deal on a united candidature which would have had the numbers to guarantee a place in the second round. Up to now he has not encouraged a democratic self-organised movement to emerge. He has favoured a left populist movement controlled totally by himself - even diminishing the influence of the PC. Today for example, unlike 2012, there is little space on his platforms for other forces who support him. Remember his 11.2% last time did not lead to a strong alternative class struggle movement that really influenced any actual anti-government struggles. Elections have always been his main focus.

Melenchon is being taken as a serious threat. Hollande has just weighed in and denounced his 'simplistic' policies. The media is dusting off the red scare stores and selling images of a French Chavez. Even Guardian columnists such as Macron cheerleader, Natalie Nougayrede, has given Melenchon a roasting today, focussing overmuch on his weakness about Putin and his critical EU stance and casually dismissing all this progressive policies.

Internationally the right are in the ascendancy and despite their division the next president is still more likely to be either Macron or Fillon. However within this overall rightward shift there is polarisation and resistance. The votes expressed for Melenchon and the radical left candidates express that very forcibly.

**Dave Kellaway**, 19<sup>th</sup> April 2017

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**P.S.**

\* <http://socialistresistance.org/melenchon-the-french-chavez/9989>