

PARIS ELECTIONS DIARY

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In less than an hour, the single television debate between Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen, starting at 9:00pm tonight, may decide the outcome of the French presidential election run-off. Or it may not.

Five years ago, Macron had never been elected to any office, his Socialist Party membership had long lapsed (he only paid dues between 2006 and 2009, after which he joined Rothschild's for three years, where such membership, one assumes, wasn't required). His was the typical career of France's top mandarins, who weave a seamless path between ministerial jobs and the lucrative private sector in carefully calibrated two, three-year segments. And yet, in their 2017 debate, it was Emmanuel Macron, not Le Pen, who decisively swept what the French wanted in terms of populist vote at the time: a new face who made all the incumbents look old—while looking like a competent pair of hands.

This will not work out tonight. Marine, as everyone calls her, had been woefully unprepared last time. Macron destroyed her with a few cutting remarks as she fumbled through her notes, having confused two major French companies while debating the economy. Five years on, Emmanuel Macron is the incumbent, whose regular put-downs during walkabouts have done a lot to make him one of France's most unpopular presidents. (During debate prep, his first circle told him so often he should not "look arrogant" that he reportedly shot back "I don't need a behavioural coach—I need strong arguments, not a yoga class.") Meanwhile, Le Pen has been swotting for weeks with her own set of tame mandarins, and knows that she has a relatively low bar to clear: she only needs to do better than her previous performance, and look more *sympathique*.

Eleven years ago, as she took over the National Front presidency from her then-82-year old father, Marine Le Pen vowed to make it into a “normal” party. “I’m taking risks to draw the Front National out of its old rut,” she told me at the time, for a *Daily Telegraph* interview.

I could have tried to pander to all the small groups who wanted no change at all. Instead, I have made my case that I was a secular republican and a democrat. Over 90 per cent of our members are with me.

She vowed to reclaim conservatives who elected Nicolas Sarkozy on what she said at the time were false pretenses. “Nicolas Sarkozy took many right-wing voters for a ride,” she said. “He stole our slogans on security and order, promised a lot and delivered little.” Prophetically, polls at the time showed that her anti-globalisation, Eurosceptic and anti-capitalist speeches made more inroads in the left-wing electorate than on the Right: today, something like one fourth of Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s hard Left supporters plan to vote for her Sunday.

Today, when asked to define a public figure in one single word, a majority of the French come up with “cats” about her. In the past five years, she has worked hard at what she from the start called “detoxifying” her brand. She softened her platform, so that she no longer advocates Frexit, or even leaving the Euro. Unlike Eric Zemmour, the former *Le Figaro* columnist, who seduced over most of the RN stars during his short-lived presidential bid, Le Pen insisted Islam was compatible with the values of the Republic, only Islamism wasn’t. Throughout, everyone including her own father heaped abuse on her, claiming the RN was losing its USP. Why would people vote for a mere clone of Les Républicains, Sarkozy’s old party?

But what Marine achieved on the sly was *relatability*. At 53, she has taken to a confessional tone at her low-key rallies. Her core voting block is the Lidl-shopping French working (or often not working) class in the Northern rust belt, in those small towns all over the country with few public services, where the loss of the local employer means

nobody want to buy your home when you try to move out. 55% of her voters are women. When she tells them that it hurt as her own niece, Marion Maréchal, whom she and her sister brought up, defected to Zemmour's new party, it's something they understand. They know of Marine's own relationship to her difficult father, and her two divorces. Her family is a mess; she is a 'handsome' rather than a beautiful woman of the size-6-Parisian type (think Valérie Pécresse), who wears clothes they understand. She has often said that her six cats console her of the hard knocks of politics. Her political Instagram has 942 posts and 267,000 followers; her locked one devoted to her cats has 167 followers and 3,768 pictures. To them, she is genuine—she will never call them “people who are nothing,” as Macron infamously did when comparing ordinary citizens to the movers of his ideal France, *la Start-Up Nation*.

It never pays to admit to a mistake in France. Compare [Anne Hidalgo](#), the unloved Paris Mayor and Socialist candidate, who achieved a dismal 1.7% of the first round vote, with Valérie Pécresse, the competent but uncharismatic Républiquein president of the Ile de France region (one fourth of the French population), who got 4.7%. Both of them have, in effect, [bankrupted](#) France's formerly mainstream parties, who will not be refunded for campaign expenditures since their candidates did not reach 5%. Pécresse, who sank 5 million euros of her own money in her campaign (about half the costs), apologised in her concession speech, and has been vilified for trying to crowdfund the debt. Hidalgo went on the attack, accusing “the extreme-Right” of “political violence” against her (by which she meant almost no-one voted for her) on French TV, standing next to Vitali Klitschko, the Kyiv Mayor, where she'd rushed days after her ignominious defeat to catch a bit of Ukraine glitter.

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What possessed Emmanuel Macron to channel a luxuriantly hairy-chested 1970s Tom Selleck, manspreading on an orange leather sofa with a knowing grin, obviously pleased with himself, in front of the official Élysée photographer, Soazic de la Moissonnière?

She has form in providing those faux-casual snapshots: she also took those of the hoodie-

wearing unshaven Macron seemingly hard at work on Ukraine over the week-end, coincidentally emitting a Zelensky sartorial vibe. Or the cringe-making one of the Macrons kissing in the green room before his big first round rally, both jeans-clad, Brigitte on her husband's knees. When social media erupted over the last one, the president found himself doing gracious damage control on daytime talk shows, admitting that he had "cleared that series [of pictures] but passed over that one too fast." Few believe him. "He hears nothing but compliments from his entourage—I'm sure he unironically felt he looked good in it," says my mole.