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## **POLICY COMPASS**

# **France: The Multiplication of Presidential Candidacies Favours Marine Le Pen**

**By**

**Simon Anquetil**



**18 August 2026**

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For information about Rosa&Roubini Associates, please send an email to [info@rosa-roubini-associates.com](mailto:info@rosa-roubini-associates.com) or call +44 (0)20 7101 0718.

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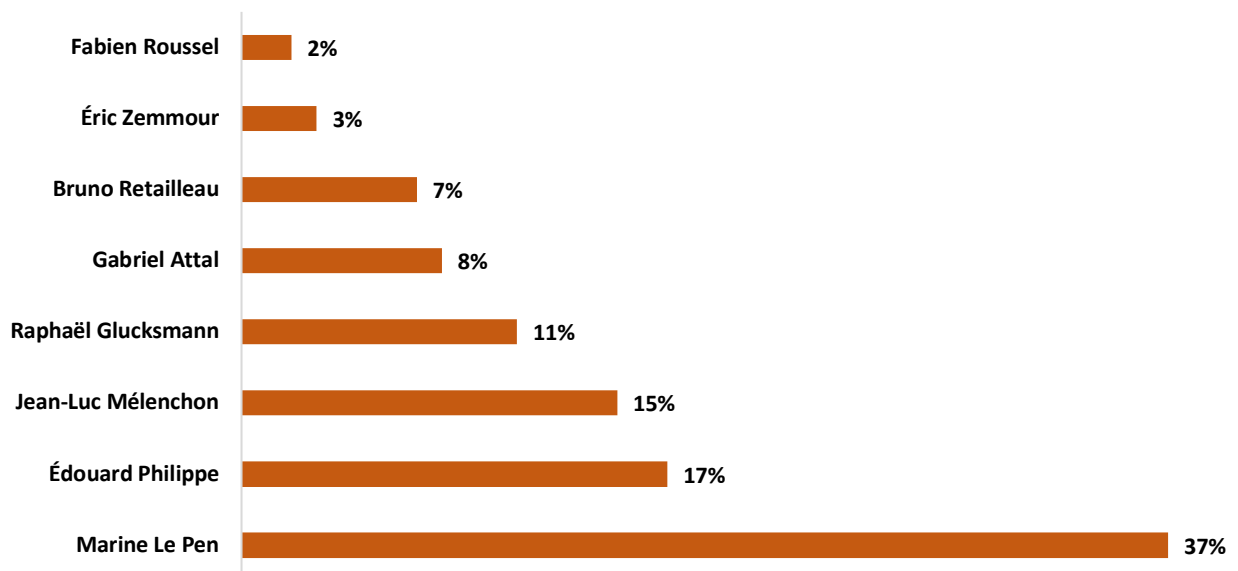
18 August 2026

**Executive Summary**

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- ✦ Following a July 2026 appeal court ruling on EU fund misuse, Marine Le Pen confirmed her candidacy and leads first-round polls at 34–36%, deriving her primary advantage from opposition disarray rather than an absolute surge in her own support.
- ✦ In France's two-round voting system, the National Rally's unified ~35% base virtually guarantees a runoff spot, while anti-RN voters are carved into numerous competing slices across the spectrum.
- ✦ Macronism has become an electoral liability, leading former prime ministers Édouard Philippe and Gabriel Attal to launch competing candidacies that split the moderate vote rather than consolidating it.
- ✦ Les Républicains are paralyzed by internal feuds between nominee Bruno Retailleau and parliamentary chief Laurent Wauquiez, while traditional conservative voters grow increasingly open to backing Le Pen in a runoff.
- ✦ The collapse of a "unity primary" leaves the left split between high-rejection candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon and several moderate contenders, threatening to lock the left out of the runoff for a third straight election.
- ✦ The traditional "republican front" against the far-right is crumbling due to voter fatigue and normalization, though Le Pen still faces a major wildcard with an impending Court of Cassation legal ruling prior to the vote.

**Key Picture: Voting Intention in the First Round of the 2027 French Presidential Election**



Source: [Verian for L'Hémicycle](#), fieldwork 8–10 July 2026. The overall survey had 1,047 respondents; the chart percentages are based on 818 registered voters who expressed a voting intention. 23% did not express a voting intention.

## 1. Introduction

On 7 July 2026, a Paris appeals court upheld Marine Le Pen's conviction for the misuse of European Parliament funds, and, in the same breath, left her free to run for president. Within hours she was on national television confirming her candidacy, and by the evening she had launched her campaign under a single, telling slogan: "For France, a Renaissance."<sup>1</sup> She sits at the head of the polls, gathering somewhere around 34 to 36 per cent in first-round voting intentions, and comfortably winning the run-off against every political rival.<sup>2</sup> The obvious story is that of a resilient far-right finally marching towards the Élysée after a steady progression in recent years. Another view is that Le Pen's path to the presidency is being paved less by her own strength than by the disarray of everyone standing between her and power.

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This is the paradox of the 2027 presidential race. The alarm is rising, across the political spectrum, strategists, commentators and voters increasingly treat a National Rally (RN) victory as the likeliest outcome. Calls for unity, a single candidate on the left and a single candidate spanning the centre and centre-right, have become a fixture of the political conversation. And yet, in defiance of the very fear they all profess, every party and every candidate keep playing their own card. Rather than consolidate against the far-right, the centre, the right and the left are each splintering into rival candidacies that compete for the same voters and cancel one another out. The result is a multiplication of candidacies that spreads the anti-RN vote thin across a crowded ballot. That dispersal, more than anything Le Pen herself does, is what favours the RN. The drift towards a Le Pen presidency is already taking shape in the arithmetic of a fragmented electoral field, and her opponents, by refusing to define clear political strategies, are its architects.

## 2. The Mechanics: Why Fragmentation Favours Le Pen

France elects its president in two rounds. The first is a crowded free-for-all and the top two finishers advance to a run-off. In a field of a dozen or more candidates, no one needs a majority to reach the second round, a commanding plurality will do. And that is precisely the terrain on which the RN thrives.

The RN arrives at the first round as a single bloc, consolidated at around 35 per cent behind one candidate, with a loyal party machine and a floor of support that has proven remarkably stable in recent years. Its opponents arrive as a scatter: two candidates of the right and centre-right in the low-to-mid teens, three or four candidates of the left and right and centre-right splitting single digits between them, and a left broken into several lists that each poll below the leaders. When roughly 65 per cent of the electorate is carved into six, eight, ten competing slices, a disciplined 35 per cent is not a minority, it is a near-guarantee of first place and the best configuration for the run-off.

The contrast is one of discipline against proliferation. On one side, one candidate, one organisation, one message, one durable base. On the other, an ever-lengthening list of rival heirs, party leaders and comeback politicians, each convinced that they are the natural challenger and none willing to stand aside. The arithmetic is unforgiving. If the centre fields two candidates at thirteen per cent each, the right two or three at five to ten, and the left three or four in the same range, then the second qualifying place, the one that decides who faces Le Pen, is contested in single-digit increments, and a swing of two or three points can eject an entire political family from the run-off. The RN is the only party that thrives on the division of the political spectrum. In a two-round system, fragmentation is not a side-effect of a vibrant democracy, it is the most powerful asset the far-right possesses.

## 3. A Fragmented Centre

Nowhere is this phenomenon more acute than in the space President Emmanuel Macron built in 2017 when he acceded the presidency. Term-limited and deeply unpopular, the outgoing president leaves a succession contested by rival heirs who cannot agree on which of them should inherit it. Édouard Philippe, the former prime minister who now leads the centre-right party Horizons, announced his candidacy in 2024 and has been the

most popular non-RN politician since 2022.<sup>3</sup> He polls between 16 and 19 per cent when the field is crowded.<sup>4</sup> Gabriel Attal, another former prime minister and the president of Macron's party Renaissance, formalised his own candidacy in May 2026 and sits a few points behind. Around them hover still more names, such as G  rald Darmanin,   lisabeth Borne, S  bastien Lecornu, Jean Castex, all from the same Macronist bloc.

The issue is that Macronism, as it reached high levels of unpopularity, is now a liability its own alumni scramble to distance themselves from. Bruno Retailleau, party leader of right-wing Les R  publicains, taunts them with the line that there will be no "season three" of the Macron project, and the punchline lands because Philippe and Attal remain chained to a record they governed together.<sup>5</sup> Rather than consolidating that record into a single candidacy, they compete for the identical pool of moderate, government-minded voters.

Philippe and Attal have claimed, repeatedly, that one of them will eventually step aside for whoever is better placed. It looks increasingly unlikely. Their camps are drifting from wary coordination into open rivalry, and neither shows any appetite for subordination.<sup>6</sup> None of them has also secured the support of the leaders of the Macronist bloc, figures such as Bruno Le Maire, Jean Castex, Lecornu, Darmanin and Borne have not thrown their support behind a candidate yet. Philippe has picked up a handful of endorsements from this political segment, but no major leader so far. The result is a centre that, taken together, might command a quarter of the vote or more, yet divided into two candidacies of roughly ten to seventeen per cent apiece, neither of which reliably clears the bar for the run-off. In this context, the French centrist bloc risks this scenario: while its contenders exhaust themselves fighting over Macron's succession in the coming months, the RN sets the agenda, and Le Pen rises in the polls.

#### 4. Internal Battles On The Right

The French conservatives have a history of internal clashes that undermine the party's electoral success. From Chirac against Giscard d'Estaing in 1981, Chirac against Balladur in 1995, Sarkozy against Fillon in 2017 to Sarkozy against P  cresse in 2022, the French right has gone through multiple events of divisions and internal disagreements. The Republicans (LR) designated Bruno Retailleau, the party's president and a former interior minister, as their candidate in a members' vote in the spring of 2026. That designation has settled nothing.

The open wound is Retailleau's rivalry with Laurent Wauquiez, who leads the party's deputies in the National Assembly. The two men have fought each other for years, and never more so than since Retailleau crushed Wauquiez in the 2025 contest for the LR presidency, collecting 75 per cent of the vote.<sup>7</sup> In July 2026 the feud burst fully into the open: Wauquiez announced stated that   douard Philippe, a candidate from outside his own party, could be the right candidate to lead the right to the Elys  e.<sup>8</sup> Retailleau denounced the move as a "small betrayal."<sup>9</sup> Wauquiez then decided not to attend Retailleau's first campaign rally in Paris. Retailleau is not leading a united party, his party's own parliamentary chief is not supporting him.

Squeezed between Philippe's centre-right and the RN, Retailleau struggles to carve out political space. He polls between eight and eleven per cent, and several surveys have found large majorities of voters who simply do not see him as embodying a presidential status. Moreover, on his signature terrain of immigration and public order, he is outflanked on his right by Marine Le Pen, who owns those issues. Meanwhile the right splinters further still, with declared or expected candidacies from David Lisnard, Xavier Bertrand, and Dominique de Villepin, each appealing to a different faction of the right-wing electorate.

The deeper danger for the anti-RN camp lies not in the first round but the second. Among LR voters, the old embarrassment about the RN is fading fast. A recent survey found that Le Pen is now more popular than several leading conservative politicians among LR voters.<sup>10</sup> Where once a run-off between a mainstream candidate and Le Pen produced reflexive blockade against the far-right, LR electors are now increasingly willing to vote for Le Pen. A divided right in round one, and a porous right in round two: both work in Le Pen's favour.

## 5. A Divided Left

The left offers the same trend in a different political setting. The long-discussed "unity primary," the open primary meant to produce a single left candidate across several left-wing parties, is not happening.<sup>11</sup> A version is pencilled in for October 2026, but the Socialists are split over whether to take part, the Communists refuse, and La France Insoumise (LFI) will not participate either. The near-certain outcome is multiple left candidacies competing for the same electorate.

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At one pole stands Jean-Luc Mélenchon of LFI, embarking at 75 on what would be his fourth presidential run. His profile is the mirror image of Le Pen's: a high, loyal floor and a very low ceiling (for now). Indeed, Mélenchon is the most rejected politician in France.<sup>12</sup> He is a candidate whose own supporters are fervent and whose detractors are numerous and immovable. These are precisely the features that make him a strong candidate in a fragmented first round and a catastrophic one in a run-off against Le Pen. Mélenchon was 600,000 votes shy of making it to the run-off against Macron in 2022, a recent poll found him really close to the run-off with 16 per cent of the vote, only 0.5 per cent behind Édouard Philippe.<sup>13</sup> However, run-off projections have him losing in a landslide against Le Pen, the highest margin than any other candidate.<sup>14</sup>

At the other pole, the social-democratic, anti-Mélenchon left has yet to find a standard-bearer. Raphaël Glucksmann of Place publique, fiercely opposed to Mélenchon, is the most obvious contender. Nonetheless, former President François Hollande, former Prime minister Bernard Cazeneuve, and the Socialist Party leader Olivier Faure circle the same space. François Hollande is manoeuvring for a dramatic political comeback, having gathered scores of supporters this summer to test whether he might generate momentum around his figure and lead the moderate left. Several other moderate left-wing politicians have announced their candidacy, such as Jérôme Guedj, Delphine Batho, and Karim Bouamrane, but they are not expected to stay in the race as they lack support and fundraising. No mainstream left candidate has broken clear. The Greens have a designated candidate in Marine Tondelier but the party lacks the financial capacity to sustain a national campaign alone and without the "unity primary."<sup>15</sup> The Greens remain caught between rallying to Mélenchon and joining the anti-Mélenchon pole, several Green Party leaders have expressed disagreements over what strategy to pursue if Tondelier drops out.<sup>16</sup>

The consequence is significant. A left that collectively commands perhaps 30 to 35 per cent of the electorate is on course to be shut out of the run-off for a third consecutive cycle. Not because it lacks votes, but because it cannot bring them under one or two banners. The inability of the anti-Mélenchon camp to unite is particularly consequential. In doing so it removes a potential anti-RN finalist from the favourites and narrows still further the set of candidates capable of stopping Le Pen.

## 6. The Erosion of the Republican Front

For decades, the RN's electoral strength ran into a wall: the "republican front," the reflex by which voters of the left, centre and right voted for the mainstream candidate to keep the far-right out.<sup>17</sup> The first instance of the republican front in a presidential election was in 2002 when President Jacques Chirac faced Jean-Marie Le Pen (Marine's father) in the run-off, leading the incumbent president to win comfortably with 82 per cent of the vote. The republican front helped Emmanuel Macron get elected twice as he faced Le Pen in the run-off both times. The republican front was also efficient in the 2024 snap legislative elections as it prevented the RN from gaining a majority of seats. However, that wall is crumbling, and first-round fragmentation is what fosters this dynamic.

Two forces are at work. The first is simple fatigue and normalisation. Each cycle in which the RN reaches the run-off makes the next one feel less exceptional, the moral urgency that once produced near-automatic transfers has thinned, and the vote transfers from LR and the centre that the front depends on are no longer reliable. The second is structural: a divided opposition produces a low-legitimacy finalist. A candidate who scrapes into the

run-off on 16 or 18 per cent, at the head of a fractured camp, cannot command the cross-bloc coalition that a clear challenger once could. The firewall is no longer guaranteed to hold.

The nightmare scenario for the anti-RN camp is a Le Pen–Mélenchon run-off. Polling consistently identifies Mélenchon as the opponent most likely to lose to Le Pen, precisely because his rejection rates are so high and his ability to draw transfers from the centre and right so weak.

## 7. Le Pen's Weaknesses

Le Pen's legal affairs are a serious trouble to her candidacy. The appeals court that upheld her conviction in July 2026 handed down a three-year sentence, with one year firm to be served under electronic tag. She has appealed to the Court of Cassation, France's highest court, arguing that the appeal suspends her sentence and allows her to campaign freely, without the ankle monitor she has said would keep her out of the race altogether. The timing of that final ruling is unknown, but the Court of Cassation has announced that it will release its ruling by early April 2027 at the latest, two weeks before the first round on April 18. Should the Cassation confirm the conviction, France could find itself voting for a candidate who is a convicted criminal, potentially subject to the very tag she vowed would disqualify her. Le Pen is making a calculated bet by campaigning regardless. It is a bet that keeps a destabilising unknown suspended over the final weeks of the race.

Marine Le Pen's advantage in 2027 is, above all, relative. Her floor is stable, her ceiling can be contested, and her legal position is precarious. What makes her the frontrunner is not a surge in her own support but the disorder of everyone else across the political spectrum. Internal battles between her camp and Jordan Bardella's in her party could also be a challenge, as the RN's leaders have increasingly expressed policy divergences over pension reform, taxes, and public services in recent months.

A late deal that unites the mainstream left behind a single name, or one breakout centrist who consolidates the moderate bloc, could reset the arithmetic overnight. French campaigns have a habit of clarifying suddenly in their final months, and the field that looks hopelessly crowded in 2026 need not stay that way in the spring of 2027. The RN's own second-round ceiling remains real: reaching the run-off is one thing, winning it against a candidate the rest of the country can rally behind is another. Higher turnout could also rescue the mainstream candidate. But the structural logic is clear as things stand. Without an act of consolidation by the mainstream left or the centre-right, the default outcome of a fragmented field is a Le Pen advantage that compounds with every additional candidacy.

## NOTES

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