

Two women on both sides of the Atlantic – Marine Le Pen in France and Hillary Clinton in the United States – have emerged as strong contenders for the highest office in their country, the presidency. The Sunday Times looks at who they are and why they are the contenders to beat.



PHOTO: AFP

Ms Marine Le Pen may have cleaned up the National Front's crude racism and anti-Semitism that dominated when her father Jean-Marie was in charge, but the party is still anti-immigration and anti-European Union.



PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

Mrs Hillary Clinton speaking at a conference in San Francisco on Tuesday. Being a woman with the prospect of becoming the first female US president doesn't hurt, though analysts say it is unlikely to be the focus of her campaign.

Adding glam to French far-right



Jonathan Eyal
Europe Correspondent

Only a few years ago, she struggled to get the minimum of 500 signatures required to get her name on the ballot papers.

But today, Ms Marine Le Pen, the 46-year-old boss of France's far-right National Front, has a good chance of being elected as her country's next president, according to the latest opinion polls.

Her success in transforming what used to be a fringe political movement of fascists and madcaps into a disciplined vote-gathering machine is little short of a miracle. It's also proof that personality still matters a great deal in politics.

Of course, it helped that throughout her life she enjoyed instant brand recognition in France: her father, Mr Jean-Marie Le Pen, founded the National Front in 1972, when Marine, his youngest daughter, just celebrated her fourth birthday.

But, as Ms Le Pen has frequently remarked, that was as much a liability as an advantage, for her life was scarred by politics.

When she was eight years old, her family apartment was bombed by an assassin. While still in her teens, she witnessed her parents' messy divorce, after Pierette, her mother, ran off with the man writing a biography of her father. Media titillation reached a frenzy when, in a subsequent bid to boost her income, her mother posed naked for Playboy magazine.

As a young lawyer, she found herself cold-shouldered by others of her profession because of her father's notoriety. "We remained the children of Le Pen and people would tend to make us guilty," she once said. As a result, she often ended up taking cases nobody wanted, which included defending illegal immigrants, precisely those whom, later in life, she would castigate as France's biggest problem.

As the National Front grew in prominence, she left the Paris courts in 1998 and took over the Front's legal department. From there, it was only a matter of time before she became party leader.

"It's amazing to see how destiny can mock you sometimes: I find myself here, in politics, where most

of my life I tried to escape from that," she said in 2011, when she was elected the National Front's leader.

Ms Le Pen often tells her audience that she's merely responding to the "call of fate" in entering the political arena. That Joan of Arc, the French patriotic saint, is her party's emblem is also consistent with the theme of nation before self.

But rhetoric aside, Ms Le Pen is fiercely ambitious and a far more astute political player than her father.

Convinced that the National Front would be able to transform itself into a mass movement only if its brand was "detoxified", she set out on a mission to cleanse it of the crude racism and anti-Semitism which touched almost everything her father did.

So, while her father once publicly complained that there were too many blacks in the French national football team and dismissed the Holocaust gas chambers as a "detail of history", she kept a close watch on what she said publicly. But there has been no outright disavowal of the views of the more extreme elements of her party.

Still, few doubt her dedication to re-energising the National Front, tirelessly travelling the length and breadth of France to recruit new members while firing up the party faithful.

It helps in its rebranding that she is something of a novelty: a platinum blonde in a right-wing

world traditionally dominated by old men in forbidding dark suits.

She is no pushover though. Her public image is steely and she speaks in an authoritative manner, in a voice abraded by too many years of heavy smoking.

The fact that this twice-divorced mother of three has succeeded in juggling family and public career is a big draw for French voters, particularly women. She comes across as one of them, a modern French woman, tough yet vulnerable, beating the odds.

When she first appeared on "You the Judge", the top chat show on French TV, no less than a quarter of France's population tuned in.

The National Front under her is still anti-immigration and anti-European Union. It supports reserving jobs, welfare benefits and housing for French citizens alone. A notable change is its anti-Muslim focus; Ms Le Pen once notoriously compared Muslims praying on the streets of French cities to the "occupation" of France by Nazi Germany.

The formula seems to work. In the 2012 presidential election – the first she contested – she pulled in 6.4 million votes, or 18 per cent of the ballots cast. Last month, the party won its first two seats in the French Senate.

Recent popularity polls showed her ahead of socialist President Francois Hollande and Mr Nicolas Sarkozy, a former president and most likely candidate for the mainstream right-wing parties.

According to Dr Sylvain Crepon, a sociologist who studies the French far-right, the demographic base on which the National Front depends has remained constant: "The small shopkeepers who are going under because of the economic crisis and competition from the out-of-town supermarkets, low-paid workers from the private sector and the unemployed."

Ms Le Pen's genius consisted in adding to this solid constituency the votes she harvested among France's small provincial towns and the housing estates on the outskirts of major cities. It is there that what Mr Crepon calls "the rural underclass" now resides.

Few of these people go to church, few of them believe in any ideology, and few have roots in the places where they now live; they are the perfect electoral fodder for Ms Le Pen.

To be sure, her success is not entirely assured. France's two-round electoral system works against her. While she can clearly beat rivals in the first round, she may not survive the second. Besides, much can change between now and the 2017 presidential election.

Still, with the popularity of all mainstream French politicians now in the doldrums, few observers doubt that Marine Le Pen is the woman to beat.

✉ jonathan.eyal@gmail.com

It's now or never for another Clinton run



Melissa Sim
US Correspondent
In Washington

Hillary is going to run, Hillary is going to win.

Those were the bold predictions offered last Tuesday by billionaire Warren Buffett, who said he is willing to wager money that former US secretary of state Hillary Clinton, 66, will be the next American president.

And while he is no political analyst, he may be on the money, at least for now.

Many recent polls identify the former First Lady as the front-runner among Democratic candidates who include Vice-President Joe Biden and Massachusetts senator Elizabeth Warren.

And political analysts believe the timing is right and competition on either side of the aisle poses little threat to Mrs Clinton.

Says Professor Jeffrey Hill, chair of the political science department at Northeastern Illinois University: "If she doesn't run this time and waits another four years, age and health might become a bigger issue. It's now or never."

He says Mr Biden is probably the closest Democratic contender, "but he was not successful the last time" and was eliminated fairly quickly, unlike Mrs Clinton who lasted till the very end of the Democratic presidential nomination in 2008.

Mrs Clinton also comes up tops when pitted against possible Republican candidates such as

former Florida governor Jeb Bush – the second son of former president George H. W. Bush and brother of another ex-president, George W. Bush – and Kentucky senator Rand Paul.

Undoubtedly, her level of experience trumps the competition's. Previously, when she sought the Democratic nomination in 2008, she was criticised for not having enough foreign policy experience, but that changed after she became top envoy in President Barack Obama's first term.

"She was received well by the American public and was regarded as one of the most popular officials in the Obama administration," says Prof Hill.

Add to that her experience as senator for New York and her role as First Lady and "she has a great deal of experience", he adds.

Being a woman with the prospect of becoming the first female president of the United States also doesn't hurt, though analysts say it is unlikely to be the focus of her campaign.

Says Mr Jon Seaton, a managing partner at political consulting and public affairs firm East Meridian: "I think the fact that she is female may lend some historical significance to the campaign, but overall I do not know that this translates into actual votes."

She already has the vote of liberals, but has to work on getting black Americans and middle-class white Americans on her side, say experts.

They cite her comment of being "dead broke" after leaving the White House in 2001 as a possible indication that she is out of touch with the ground.

When it comes to financial backing, Mrs Clinton has a leg up on the competition, with her close ties to Wall Street and support from Hollywood, says professor of politics Larry Sabato, director of the Centre for Politics at the University of Virginia.

This gives her the luxury of not having to announce her candidacy just yet, with analysts predicting that the news will come early next year.

Says professor of American politics at the University of Maryland Irwin Morris: "What's the benefit to announcing early if people think you are already going to run? From a fund-raising standpoint, there is no need. And if she announces, people will focus their criticism on her."

But there are other forces working against Mrs Clinton, including being next in line after President Obama.

"It's very hard to follow a two-term fellow partisan president," says Prof Morris, explaining that people seem to want change after a period of time.

Prof Hill adds that the current Obama administration is not particularly popular and as a Democratic candidate, she will be identified with it.

Furthermore, even as unemployment falls, and stock markets rise, voters seem pessimistic about the economy and will be looking out for what she has to say on the subject.

"Hillary Clinton's ability to navigate this bleak economic climate will be more critical to her success as a presidential candidate than perceptions of her tenure as secretary of state," says political analyst Amy Walter in an article on political website The Cook Political Report.

In a speech in June, she outlined her plans for the Bill, Hillary and Chelsea Clinton Foundation, named for herself, her husband and her daughter. While not officially a campaign speech, it hinted at where her priorities might lie – promoting early childhood education, tackling economic inequality and championing equal opportunities for women.

On the international and security front, she is known to be more hawkish than Mr Obama. In her new book *Hard Choices*, she says that as secretary of state she had advocated providing military assistance to the rebels fighting Syrian leader Bashar Al-Assad – an idea rejected by Mr Obama at that time.

✉ simlinoi@sph.com.sg

ROAD TO THE WHITE HOUSE

■ Born Hillary Diane Rodham to Dorothy and Hugh Rodham on Oct 26, 1947; the eldest of three siblings, with two younger brothers.

■ Graduated from the prestigious Wellesley College before entering Yale Law School in 1969; met her future husband Bill Clinton at Yale.

■ Married Mr Clinton in 1975; their daughter Chelsea was born in 1980.

■ Joined the University of Arkansas Law School in 1975 as

faculty member, and the Rose Law Firm in 1976.

■ Served as Arkansas' First Lady for 12 years from 1978, after Mr Clinton became the state's governor.

■ Became the nation's First Lady in 1993; drew criticism in her first term as First Lady for having her own agenda because she worked for liberal causes, but also won many admirers for her staunch support for women around the world and her commitment to children's issues.

■ Elected as the US senator for New York in 2000 and won re-election in 2006.

■ Contested and lost in the Democratic nomination for the presidential ticket in 2008 to Mr Barack Obama, who went on to win the presidency.

■ Joined President Obama's administration as secretary of state in 2009, leaving last year after earning herself the title of "most widely travelled" secretary of state, having logged 351 days on the road and visited 112 countries.