

## **“A dangerous and complicated moment”: France After the 2022 Elections**

**Article by Gwendoline Delbos-Corfield**

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France’s June 2022 legislative elections saw 23 Greens take office in the country’s National Assembly, thanks to a successful alliance among Green, left-wing, and progressive parties. While this historic achievement may be significant, the far right also saw unprecedented gains, voter turnout reached a record low, and Emmanuel Macron’s political agenda has been endorsed for a second term despite numerous broken promises. Gwendoline Delbos-Corfield assesses whether recent shifts towards fragmentation are here to stay and the prospects for Greens to influence politics in a country where the role of opposition is strongly curtailed.

***Green European Journal:* In the campaign for the 2022 French legislative elections, Green and progressive parties joined forces to form a coalition: the New Ecological and Social People’s Union (NUPES). How did this come about? Was the decision by the French Greens to enter this alliance a reaction to the disappointing results of April’s presidential elections, or was it the product of a longer term reflection and process?**

**Gwendoline Delbos-Corfield:** I have long held a very critical view of French politics and the French situation, but even more so today. The way the Fifth Republic is organised with the presidential and legislative elections in two rounds has similar effects to first-past-the-post systems. Because of this lack of proportionality, which comes from the French fear of parliamentarianism, coalition-building ends up being a must at all levels, for municipal elections, regional elections, and especially for the national ones – which is where coalitions are most difficult to build. It is a way of seeing politics that opposes Left and Right and leaves no space for anything in between. For the Greens, it means that coalitions are always a consideration, and there is constant debate in the party on the topic.

Ever since the electoral agenda was inverted, so that the legislative elections follow presidential elections, legislative elections have been something of a formality that just confirms whoever wins the presidency. But this time around, [La France Insoumise leader] Jean-Luc Mélenchon made a smart move and managed to break this pattern. He moved quickly to present the legislatives as a way of still getting into power and used this to force different movements to come together. Within the Greens, there was little debate in the end because there was no other option. It would have been completely misunderstood if we had not joined the NUPES.

**The results of this election cycle present a mixed picture. Yannick Jadot failed to reach 5 per cent in the presidential elections, yet there is now a significant Green group in the National Assembly. At the same time, the far-right Rassemblement National (RN) gained more seats than ever, Emmanuel Macron was re-elected,**

**and Jean-Luc Mélenchon emerged as the dominant force on the Left. Was it a success for the Greens overall?**

It's a very dangerous and complicated moment. 89 deputies from the RN now sit in the French Assembly. For years I've been saying that France is politically and democratically immature, and that we should move to a parliamentary system. The counter-argument was always that the French system protects us from the far right because they will never reach the second round and win seats. That obviously no longer holds.

The strength of the far right makes for a very serious situation. So does the fact that so many did not turn out and vote. Surveys have shown that France is among the countries with the least trust in its elite, the world of politics, and journalists. Conspiracy theories are a major problem, which was why the vaccination uptake was also difficult. As president, Macron has cynically and opportunistically instrumentalised this situation.

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In this bad and dangerous overall picture, the Greens did the best they could. The parliamentary group is not the biggest imaginable, but it does contain the largest ever number of Green deputies. Most importantly, the way in which these people were selected means that they have full autonomy to follow the Green agenda. From 2012 to 2017, the Greens had 17 deputies elected thanks to the Socialist Party, and they continued to be politically dominated throughout the mandate. Having strong, autonomous MPs will be a first, and I trust that they will be an active and assertive group. Although there were major disagreements on foreign affairs, the Greens choose their own candidates as part of the NUPES alliance and the rest of the programme largely matched that of the Greens.

**Some have concluded we're witnessing a shift to a political landscape divided into three major blocs: the far right, the liberal centre-right, and the socio-ecological left. Do you think that that might be a new, more or less stable configuration? If so, what would it mean for political ecology as an autonomous force?**

I don't believe in this theory of the three poles and I think that the fragmentation is here to stay. A liberal centre-right? Under Macron, the French government is less and less committed to defending the rule of law. It's not out in the open, but when you dig, you find violations of data protection, the criminalisation of civil society, police violence, and migrant pushbacks. After the first round of the legislatives, many in what is supposed to be the liberal centre-right refused to choose between far-right and NUPES candidates. Since these elections, the same people have even said that the extreme left is more dangerous than the extreme right. Sure, there are small communist or anarchist-leaning parties in France, but Mélenchon is not extreme left and it is dangerous to depict him as such. This idea of Macron as a liberal defender of the rule of law is not credible.

On the right, the traditional Republican right may have shrunk with its voters moving to

Macron or Le Pen, but it will not go away. Rassemblement National is also here to stay. And they are underrepresented in the Assembly relative to their actual support.

Environmental issues are indeed a shared concern across the Left. I don't know one left-leaning person in France who does not believe that the environment is at the heart of the debate. Apart from a few outliers in the Communist Party, the Left in France is convinced that social justice and environmental justice go hand in hand. It is a source of hope that all left-wing parties are concerned about green issues but the Left is still likely to remain fragmented and the question will be how we manage it.

**There have been tensions around Europe - La France Insoumise contains Eurosceptic elements, while the Greens are pro-European. Has the alliance bridged this gap to some extent?**

We will need time to read the situation. The Greens, in theory, never changed their stance as unambiguous pro-Europeans. But it did bring up differences within the Greens about Europe. Many Greens still consider the EU to be more neoliberal than France, which I think is incredible when you look at the French situation. Similarly, some still regard Germany as an occasional threat. A lack of understanding of the parliamentary situations in other European countries, particularly Germany, blinds the Greens and the wider Left to a great extent. There is also a lack of knowledge about the European institutions themselves. Many on the French Left, including the Greens, see violating European treaties as a solution. That is the same thing that Hungary and Poland are criticised for. Most of Europe's problems do not stem from the treaties.

At the moment, the European debate is not taking place - it was easier not to open that box during the election. The Greens and Socialists reiterated their pro-European positions and La France Insoumise said that they did not define themselves as Eurosceptic. But the issue will re-emerge as the next elections are the European elections in 2024, and some are already calling for another NUPES alliance. It is unlikely to happen - the Greens will prefer to run on their own - but there will be discussions.

**Some have said that the arrival of Green and left-wing deputies with backgrounds in environmental campaigning and activism hints at the transition of the "climate generation" into institutional politics, others have proclaimed the death of the climate movement in the wake of the pandemic. What is your reading of the situation?**

The climate agenda remains present in the minds of civil society in a very strong way. It is not dead at all. In France, we have been seeing more radical actions and civil disobedience, like the protests at the Tour de France, for example. These protests are young people saying that the government is ignoring the climate problem, and it is true.

*Our electoral system means that it's only at local elections that environmental issues are seen as a priority.*

After Macron won in 2017, we were hoping for a green economy. Of course, we expected a bit of greenwashing, but it did appear that there would be some kind of green economic policy. Instead, the government performed very poorly on green issues and the situation is only getting worse. It is a short-sighted pro-business agenda, not even the progressive green business agenda that we might have hoped for.

All of France has felt the impact of heat and drought this summer. People are ready to make sacrifices for environmental issues when they are asked to, and surveys show that it is a major concern for people. But our electoral system means that it's only at local elections that environmental issues are seen as a priority and so it's only in cities that have elected mayors who are Green, or close to the Greens, where you can make a real difference.

**After these elections, the number of female MPs fell by 2 per cent but the ranks of the NUPES and Green deputies include many strong, prominent women, including young women. How do you see the picture for women after these elections?**

The Fifth Republic is a patriarchal system. That doesn't mean that French society is more patriarchal than others but that the political system is patriarchal. It is built on the idea that a strong man should lead the country and solve all of its problems. This man doesn't need help and he doesn't need consultation. He acts as "Jupiter". During the pandemic, people would ask me, "Why are things happening differently in Germany?" In Germany, you have consultation. In France, the State concentrates all power at the national level and in the hands of the dominant party.

This system influences how women act in politics and how they are involved. Organising the legislative elections across two rounds encourages the selection of recognisable faces and makes it more difficult for outsiders. Parties struggle to bring in new generations of politicians because they end up relying on the best-known names. Young women are disadvantaged by such a system.

In 2017, Macron put forward many female candidates because most of his candidates came from outside of politics. They were elected because they were his people, even the campaign posters made that clear. Now we are back to the old system. Many of the women who entered politics with Macron became disgusted by politics and decided not to go back. So, it is not the French society that is lagging, it is the French political system.

**What can we expect from the Green parliamentary group? Will they have much influence? Where will the Green strategy lie between radical opposition and constructive engagement with Macron's government?**

People outside of France need to understand that you cannot just invent a parliamentary system in a non-parliamentary system. After the elections, many people were saying that France is going to discover parliamentarianism. No, it's not. When it doesn't exist, it doesn't exist. The system lacks the tools, means, and ways of working for that.

In the French Assembly and Senate, hundreds of amendments are made to every law but the governing party doesn't actually consider them. You don't even look at the opposition's

amendments, you just refuse them. Of course, the opposition will do serious work to scrutinise legislation and make amendments. But to get media attention, they will have to resort to polemics and stunts. That is the only way to usefully do politics in the French system. There are no incentives to focus on amendments and detailed legislative work because there is no parliamentary political culture in France.

*A society where people, particularly young people, do not vote is a society in danger.*

The Greens will face the double difficulty of acting as part of an opposition in which Mélenchon will continue to be the most vocal. Political parties across the spectrum in France are struggling to keep their members. It's a challenge for the future of the Greens too. Another part of the opposition will be led by the RN and they will take every chance to push their racist and authoritarian agenda. Some of the debates that exist on French television would be illegal elsewhere in Europe. Open antisemitism, racism, and xenophobia will become even more normal. But we will fight back, make no mistake about that.

The greatest challenge in France today is that of civic education. The public needs to gain a deeper understanding of France's institutions, Europe, and the geopolitical situation. A society where people, particularly young people, do not vote is a society in danger. France has good civil servants and NGOs who keep France and the French system alive and safe, for now, but it needs the citizens themselves to take an active part in the country's future.

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