

A Paradoxical Relationship with Power

Article by Lorène Lavocat, Vanessa Jérôme

September 15, 2021

In her latest book by, *Militer chez les Verts* (Being a Green Activist), political scientist Vanessa Jérôme analyses what motivates activists to mobilise and campaign for the French Greens (Europe Écologie - Les Verts). In this interview, she explains the strategy and dynamics of a party that has become a fixture in French political life despite facing many obstacles and a sometimes uneasy relationship with their own success.

This interview was originally published by [Reporterre](#).

Lorène Lavocat: You emphasise the “minority mindset” as the “cornerstone and fate of being a Green”. What is it?

Vanessa Jérôme: For this book, I looked at the lives of Green activists. This activism is difficult, ridiculed, and mocked; it represents a minority in the political landscape and I wanted to understand why since 1984 people have been determined to campaign under this banner while being insulted and having very little hope of winning elections.

Digging deeper, I discovered that all these activists have internalised – at times very early in their lives – the feeling of being different, of being unique. They come from families of political dissidents, they are the first of their siblings to go to university or the most educated among them, the only LGBT person in their social circle... While they're not the only ones in such situations, this feeling has a particular influence on them. It shapes their relationship with the world, the idea that they have of their place in world, and the way that they behave. It's this observation that leads to my assertion that their *habitus* is built on the minority mindset.

In other words, the Green Party acts as a place of refuge for people who feel they are part of a minority?

Yes, since the party likes to be seen as different from all the others in what it's about and how it works. It presents itself as the first and only environmentalist party, the party that politicised the climate, biodiversity, animal welfare, the harm of productivism and the link between social and environmental inequality; the party that was right “before everyone else and despite everyone else”, a sort of political avant-garde. The way it works, which is very complex, is also very original.

To simplify, you could say that it's a federation of regions with a national leadership and which selects most of its senior figures and election candidates through specific ballots using proportional representation. Designed to give parity and representation to all factions in all the bodies of the party, they are more respectful of minorities and diversity in opinion.

The party also allows “conscience clauses”: a Green region can depart from the national party line or an elected representative can decide not to vote with their group. All these aspects, which simultaneously underpin and illustrate the Green slogan of “politique autrement” [doing politics differently], attract activists who like to be different.

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Isn't this minority mindset an obstacle to winning?

That's the other side of the coin. The desire to be different that stems from the minority mindset encourages activists to overstate their differences. Internally, it encourages argument and division, which in turn weakens the collective in several ways: poisonous power struggles between factions, endless amounts of time spent on internal selection, high activist turnover, splits... It also makes it difficult to form alliances with other parties whom the Greens want to stand out from, especially at a time when environmentalism has the wind in its sails. It's also difficult to agree on a strategy when, almost since the very beginning, a third of activists favour an alliance with the Socialist Party, a third advocate environmentalism “above all else” – even if it means joining forces with environmental organisations that do not claim to be on the Left – and a third pushes for a rapprochement with the far left. As a result, the Greens form alliances that vary in size and are unstable, contextual, and local.

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Despite all this, the Greens' centre of gravity has always been left-leaning. What is their position regarding other progressive parties?

The current situation is in large part the legacy of history and the Hollande presidency, which really disappointed. For a Green activist to agree to talk to, and form an alliance with, a Socialist, there would need to be a mea culpa from the latter. They would have to acknowledge that the Socialist Party made a mistake, that it strayed into productivism and neoliberalism, as well as securitarian excess. For many environmentalists, the Socialist Party has long been synonymous with betrayal and contempt, at the national level, as well as in local government where the Greens and Socialists have frequently governed together. What's more, the Socialist Party seems less vital than before for ensuring victory, with many Greens now even believing it has become a turnoff.

With the Communist Party, it's a question of mutual caricatures. For Greens, Communists

are pro-nuclear productivists who unflinchingly follow the national party line. And for Communists, Greens are “bourgeois bohemians”. With [Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s far-left] La France Insoumise, there are substantive differences but its activists are seen as more sincere about the environment, all the more since several former Greens were driving forces behind the creation of the Left Party and then La France Insoumise. On the other hand, the hyper-personalisation around Jean-Luc Mélenchon and his overbearing male side goes down really badly.

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All this has strengthened the idea that you must first bring together environmentalists of all stripes, and then make alliances on the Left. Hence the emergence at the regional elections of “green alliances” bringing together parties like Generation Ecology, Cap 21... Except that alliances with these parties, which are admittedly green, but whose centre of gravity has historically been right-leaning, complicates and even rules out other alliances.

In short, party-political power struggles are more entrenched than ever, while public demand for an alliance and single candidacy for 2022 has never been stronger.

You explain that Europe Écologie - Les Verts (EELV) is currently going through a phase of “Green intersectionality”. What do you mean by that?

The party has long been considered as an environmental organisation, caricatured as the party for birds and little flowers. Wrongly so: since its birth, its concerns have been eminently social and economic. You can’t be anti-productivist without getting involved in economics, or promote an empowering vision for society without being feminist, anti-racist, anti-speciesist... But once again, out of a desire to be different, along with the difficulty in asserting themselves in these areas on the Left, they have emphasised their uniqueness: the environment.

Today, while many social struggles are enjoying legitimacy and international visibility, as is the case for #MeToo and Black Lives Matter, activists feel more legitimate in asserting their multiple, intersectional commitments. The Young Ecologists in particular are leading the way: their latest campaign is entitled “Ecology, ally of all struggles”.

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The abuse hurled against environmentalists is nothing new, you note in your book. Is there anything distinct about current critiques?

The epithets “green ayatollah”, killjoy, anti-progress come up time and again. Green activists are used to being attacked, especially during election campaigns. What’s changed today, first of all, is that opportunities to attack them have proliferated since the election of Green mayors in large or symbolically important cities. Furthermore, these attacks and insults are no longer just uttered in the bubble of the activist world, but by representatives of the state – indeed the president himself has called the Greens Amish! Lastly, because, for all these reasons, the media report and comment on them, further reinforcing their unprecedented scale.

You note the Greens’ paradoxical relationship with power, a sort of attraction/repulsion. Despite this, are they ready to take power in 2022?

I would say that the Greens are more ready to wield power than they are to win it. And we should also distinguish between local power and national power. They have long been in local government, and their record in cities that were already Green is quite good. They are well run; none have gone bankrupt; they implement progressive policies; they kickstart the transformation of society.

On the other hand, they have few representatives in the senior civil service (although that’s slowly changing) and have only rarely been associated with power at the national level. Is this a failing at a time when there is a clamour for fresh leadership and ways of governing? What’s more, the Greens’ paradoxical relationship with power protects them, or rather protects citizens, from dictatorial, mindless use of power. When you’re not completely caught up in the institutional game, you’re clearer-eyed, wiser, more thoughtful. Their main concern is that, without an electoral majority, they are forced to form alliances to have any hope of winning elections, especially at national level, and that isn’t easy.

The Greens have still not won the cultural battle, despite all parties now talking about the environment. Indeed, you write that “the real political battle for ecology has just begun”. What’s happening?

It’s clear that it’s ecology’s time, particularly as the climate emergency is obvious. So as not to be left behind, all parties now say that they’re green, including [Marine Le Pen’s far-right] National Rally! But what shade of green is it? That’s why I say that the war over the meaning of ecology has begun: each will fight harder than ever to promote their vision of ecology, and the Greens will have to fight too. The Greens can draw on their history and consistency, but not on the strength they could have had if they’d managed to monopolise the representation of ecology in the political landscape.

What role can the Green party play in this new battle?

A leading role if it manages to build majorities without abandoning the inherent propensity for conflict in its project. This can’t be consensual because it opposes powerful economic interests and reactionaries of all types. There is also major risk of being caught up in the rancid debates that are already being forced by the Right and all those who, even on the Left, use the same language, as we’ve seen on secularism or the Republic. Because it’s also about bringing together, to work side by side, the representatives of multiple, fragmented struggles who have hitherto ignored one another, except to fight among themselves.



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For many years, her research focus was on political ecology and environmental activism. Her doctoral thesis on Europe Ecologie Les Verts (EELV) remains the first—and only—long-term participative ethnographic study of the French Green Party. Her recently published book (*Militer chez les Verts*, Presses de Sciences Po, 2021) takes up the conclusions of the thesis and presents several more recent surveys, including an original study of the French Young Greens.

Published September 15, 2021

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/a-paradoxical-relationship-with-power/>

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