

## **Europe Ecologie Les Verts after the EU elections: Do or Die**

**Article by Emiliano Grossman**

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Over the past decades, the electoral fortunes of the French Greens have alternated between stunning performances and bitter disappointments. Drawing from the results of the 2019 European elections, Emiliano Grossman asks how EELV's success might be sustained over time. Can the pattern of constantly rising and falling green waves be broken? Faced with the task of uniting a diverse and flighty electorate that is quick to tire of internal divisions, EELV needs a clear strategy to avoid the bad habits of the past. As ecology emerges as a new societal divide, the Overton window is moving on green issues. If they navigate this situation right, the Greens might hold the keys to power in the years to come.

After a disappointing presidential-legislative election season in 2017, which prolonged the difficulties experienced since 2012, Europe Ecologie Les Verts (EELV) regained momentum at the European Parliament elections of May 2019. The party won 13.5 per cent of votes cast despite a high turnout, something that can work against its more mobilised electorate. EELV outdid all forecasts and came close to the 16.3 per cent score of the 2009 election – the best result of any Green party in a French national election to date.

The context was undoubtedly favourable. Protests by high-school students pushed climate issues up the agenda. And although the European election campaign was lacklustre overall, environmental issues were central and remained associated with EELV despite the efforts of other parties. EELV thus benefited from heightened environmental awareness across society, not just the energy of its activist base.

Nevertheless, interpreting the trends underlying this result remains tricky. Was the poor result in 2017 just an accident? Was EELV simply another victim of the French party system being turned on its head? In that case, might 2019 show the true strength of ecology in France? Or was 2019 just down to favourable circumstances? As is often the case, the truth lies somewhere between the two, in a space that holds both opportunities and risks.

### **Don't overestimate the success**

Given the historical fluctuations in the green vote in France, European election results should be taken with caution. French ecologists, in various formations, have often obtained good results in European elections, but have rarely reproduced them nationally.

*Graph 1: Electoral results of ecologist parties in France (1989-2019)*

As shown above, the exceptional 2009 European election was followed by poor results in the 2012 presidential and parliamentary elections. Showings at local elections – here for cities with more than 30 000 inhabitants – are better, but have only surpassed 10 per cent once in 25 years. The reasons for the discrepancy are known. Greens, in France as elsewhere, have traditionally adopted Europe as an integral part of their doctrinal corpus, rather than paint it as a threat. As a result, the Greens have regularly campaigned on Europe when most parties of government were careful to be as evasive and flexible as possible – with the exception of certain incarnations of the Socialist Party. Faced with the rise of Euroscepticism since the early 1990s, the Greens have often appeared as one of the few truly pro-European political offerings.

*In France, European elections have always been “second-order elections”*

It is also true that the low turnout at these elections generally reduces the score of governing parties and mechanically increases that of the opposition, Greens included. As a result, ruling parties – though not in 2019 – have tended to neglect this election. In France, European elections have always been “second-order elections”, to use the term coined by German political scientists Karl-Heinz Reif and Hermann Schmitt. This factor may also explain the Greens’ relatively high scores in regional elections. However, the rather diverse configurations of the green lists in these elections – including competing lists, an autonomous EELV, the Plural Left coalition, and ad hoc alliances – make them more difficult to compare over time.

On the other hand, legislative and presidential elections mobilise all parties to the maximum. Spending, media presence, and activism all reach their peak during legislative and presidential campaigns, reducing the impact of parties with smaller memberships and less money. The weaker local presence of EELV outside cities explains the

trends in municipal election results.

Past figures do not, therefore, point to good results at the 2020 municipal elections or the 2022 presidential and legislative elections. But might things now be different?

## **Promise at last?**

The world has changed since 2009. The prominence of environmental issues is now structural. Bad climate news is accumulating and awareness is growing to unprecedented heights. As highlighted by the Greta Thunberg phenomenon, the younger generations are driving this shift. In surveys, increasing numbers of French people put climate change at the top of their concerns. This brought results in May 2019, when polls had predicted the Greens a much lower score.

These positive conditions complicate analysis of the European election results. What success resulted from the merits of the EELV campaign, leadership, and programme? And what was due to circumstantial factors that go well beyond the party?

Graph 2 shows the evolution of voting for the main candidates and parties between 2017 and 2019. The data come from two working periods of the ELLIPSE panel of the [Sciences Po's Center for Sociopolitical Data](#). Since the data are not weighted, it is not the results that are of interest here, but rather the movement between parties.

The green electorate of 2019 came in equal proportions from the 2017 voters of centrist now-President Emmanuel Macron and left-wing Jean-Luc Mélenchon. The contribution of Hamonist votes – the 2017 Socialist candidate Benoît Hamon was green leaning and supported by EELV – while important, was relatively modest compared to the contributions of other candidates.



*Graph 2: Voting in the 2017 presidential elections and the 2019 European elections*

A diversity of voters' backgrounds is first an asset. EELV currently attracts a wide range of voters with diverse political sensibilities. As shown below, the party is clearly on the Left, sitting somewhere between centrist parties and Mélenchon's La France Insoumise. Although the median green voter is slightly more to the right than the PS, the two parties are broadly similar. But, as will be discussed later, competition is no longer only taking place on the left-right axis.

Shifting party loyalties do not only apply to green voters. The entire party system was disrupted in 2017 and no consolidation is in sight. The success of Macron's La République en Marche (LRM) is currently embodied by its leader and there is no guarantee that the party will be able to outlive him politically, particularly in the event of defeat in 2022. Moreover, the departure of LRM voters to the Greens was more than offset by the influx of centre-right Fillonist votes – François Fillon was the Les Républicains candidate in 2017 – that has fundamentally changed the LRM electorate.

The party system is therefore in a state of great fluidity. The longstanding left-right divide faces competition from a new divide pitting cultural progressivism against conservatism. If Rassemblement National occupies the conservative end of this spectrum, EELV might be the natural candidate to occupy the progressive end. Though it must be noted that it is unlikely to keep this position unchallenged.

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What's more, the context is conducive to a greater emphasis on environmental issues. The environmental credibility of Emmanuel Macron and his party remains limited, despite recent defections to LRM by several senior EELV figures. Political commentators are correct to say that the environment is a consensual issue in that no one is opposed to it. But the parties differ in the importance they attach to it and recent months have shown that this degree of importance is becoming crucial, in France as elsewhere.

Although EELV cannot claim to embody the French environmental movement in its entirety, EELV "owns" environmental issues in the electoral arena, to use political scientist John Petrocik's term. In other words, voters associate the environment with EELV above any other political force. As a result, the attempts of La France Insoumise and various factions of the PS to play the green card seem ultimately to have benefited the historic Green party. Despite their efforts, non-green parties have failed to emerge as credible alternatives.

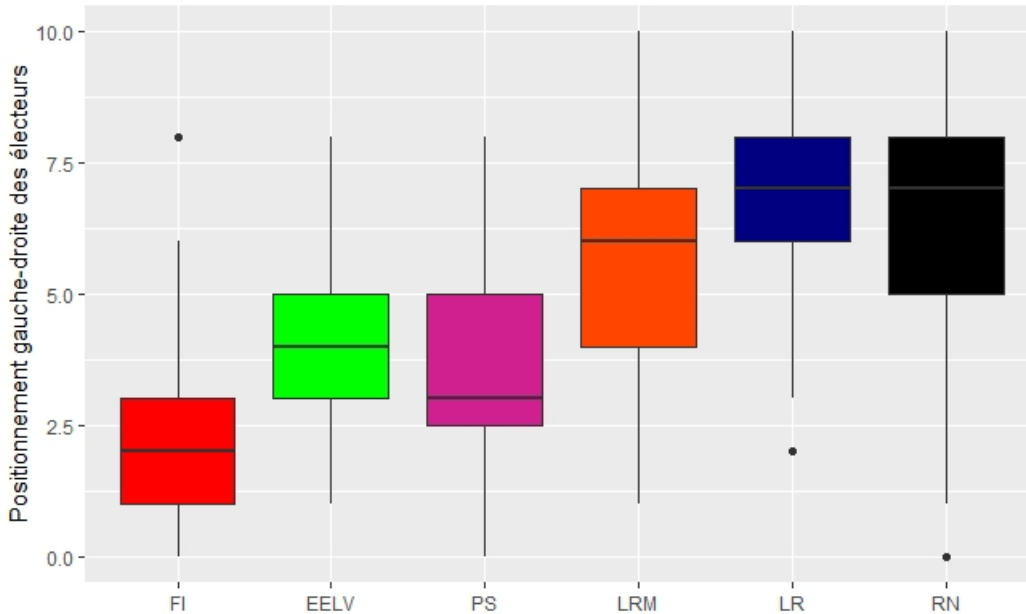
Two likely scenarios are emerging for the coming years. First, the cultural divide could be "greened". This would mean LRM and the RN taking a clearer position on the issue. If it was to transpire, it may well favour EELV because of the party's ownership on this subject. Or, one can imagine the emergence of an environmental divide distinct from the cultural divide. This cleavage would necessarily be less predictive of affiliation than the cultural one, but would probably prove powerful among the youngest age groups.

Whatever comes to pass, the present situation is a historic opportunity for EELV to change its status. But this will require an internal political reckoning with the potential for tensions among seasoned activists and their wider electorate.

## **A difficult cohabitation**

EELV has often had difficulty building on its successes. Of course, it is difficult to assess what proportion of the

voters in 2017 were regular supporters who did not have a Green to vote for at the presidential election. The central challenge is therefore to understand this electorate in order to consolidate and, if possible, expand it.



*Graph 3: Left-right positioning by party*

That is where young voters come in. EELV is the first choice on the Left for young people, closely followed by La France Insoumise. Unfortunately, the numbers for these categories of voters in our survey are not large enough to draw definitive conclusions, but environmental issues will likely be decisive in the battle for the first-time voters of 2022. Again, this is an opportunity, rather than a probability.

The diversity of voters implies an obvious danger: how can such diverse political sensibilities be brought together? The differences between FI and LRM are striking in Graph 3. Yet it is from these parties that green voters might come (back) from.

Yannick Jadot said that he did not distinguish between people who had been “ecologists for an hour and those who have been ecologists for 40 years”, but it is not certain that EELV’s activists and senior figures see it the same way. The prospect of a change of status for EELV could disrupt internal organisation and debate. Though the EELV congress at the end of 2019 and the appointment of a new leader under the banner of unity and continuity would seem to make this less likely.

In part, this dilemma is the classic growth problem for political groups that are doing well. New and old voters will not share the same vision of politics, parties and their functions, or the work of representatives. It is also likely that having voters at different points on the left-right spectrum will prove to be a headache. Between past volatility and current diversity, it will be important to proceed in a thoughtful and strategic way if the objective is to achieve power.

## **Careful management of diversity**

The potential green voter is urban and of all ages, characterised mainly by their concern for the environment. The voter’s ideological position is less clear: from the far left to the centre. The voter is not very attached to a party at the moment, although that does not mean that they are not looking for a political home. For the time being, the

main quality shared by much of this electorate is its relative volatility and its occasional proximity to the Green party, as well as a substantive concern for the climate and biodiversity. Without a strategy that takes into account the specific characteristics of these voters, poor results – the classic scenario – are to be expected in 2020 and 2022. For EELV, these observations imply a series of strategic choices. Some ways to distinguish and understand them:

### **1. An ecology-centred political discourse**

Just as it was important at certain times in the past to move away from the image of a single-issue party, today environmental issues should be the priority. It is not a question of leaving out subjects such as inequality, but of promoting their understanding through an ecological prism. This is the price of reconciling the wide range of left-right positions. Beyond short-term debates on the desirability of a particular alliance, it is essential to develop a common language for a growing part of the electorate.

This implies an ambitious effort at building both the EELV political project and, more broadly, political ecology in contemporary French society. It is time to undertake the thinking around this project, by inviting experts and activists from other countries and societal actors at all levels.

### **2. An outward-looking party**

Internal discussions and the proliferation of ideas are necessary to the first point, but they must not be limited to insiders alone. Between the many defections of recent years – first to the Socialists, then to LRM and LFI – and the public spats between leaders, an immature and unstable party will not attract new voters.

A debate is needed and EELV must guide it. But it must be a debate that mobilises beyond the party, as an opportunity for new and future voters to express themselves. Bruno Latour recently said that the younger generations need to be able to describe the world in which we live. In this scenario, EELV would be the catalyst, the facilitator of this expression of young people. But this will demand a real effort to open up towards the outside world.

### **3. A strategy to conquer power**

All these efforts will remain in vain if EELV does not unambiguously aim to win power. The electoral potential, which I believe to be broad, can only be realised if there is ambition, clear and openly expressed. New, volatile or future voters will only stick around if the party is willing to make the necessary sacrifices, and to put both the organisation and the personal desires of activists and senior leaders at the service of taking power.



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