

For the French Greens, There Is Power in Disruption

Article by Adèle Carson

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France's Green Party faced an uphill struggle to stand out in the eyes of voters at the country's presidential elections, with multiple rivals, green-washing, and a drastically reconfigured political landscape. If the party is to succeed in the future, Adèle Carson argues, it must recognise what went wrong with its presidential campaign.

It is the story of a presidential campaign that never took off. It began with a narrow victory for Yannick Jadot in the ecologist primary: 27.7 per cent of the vote in the first round, 51.03 per cent in the second round against Sandrine Rousseau, a feminist, anti-racist candidate who was also seen as more divisive. Following the result, *Le Monde* issued its verdict: "The 'pragmatist' won by a narrow margin against the 'radical'". From January 2022, the Green presidential candidate hovered at around the 5-per-cent mark in the polls but rarely surpassed this threshold. The final result was 4.8 per cent in the 10 April election. What happened?

The reassuring narrative of a candidate who was robbed of his Green voters at the last minute by the momentum of Jean-Luc Mélenchon's Union Populaire campaign is a convenient way to avoid facing the truth about a campaign that missed its target and remained as flat as the voting intention curve.

Looking at the results, it is clear that the climate movement formed by groups such as Fridays for Future no longer exists. Carried by a generation that has aged since 2018 and has started their careers, the massive citizen dynamic for the climate crashed on the wall of the pandemic. The call for a vote that could emulate the success of the 2019 European election was blind to what a presidential election is: it is a regal choice, not an election of super climate activists for a supranational assembly.

The Green result of the Greens at the presidential election raises the question of political ecology's role in French politics. This year's presidential campaign was dominated by three forces: Emmanuel Macron's liberal party, the far-right Rassemblement National, and the radical left-wing Union Populaire. Where is the Green's place in this stage of the French Fifth Republic?

Is political ecology the new incarnation of the 21st-century Left? Is it part of a wider social-ecological bloc, which was the logic of the electoral pact in the French legislative elections? Or is ecology a new imperative of government that applies to all parties? Is there an "ecologism" as there was a "socialism"? Should ecology remain the domain of activists, outside the party system? Recent developments – in the June legislative elections, the Greens joined a new union of progressive and left-wing parties led by Jean-Luc Mélenchon, known as NUPES – may seem to provide immediate answers, but these questions remain open in the longer term.

Any answers must address the political identity of the French Green Party. It is not an association, nor an NGO. A socially viable ecological transition must form the core of its political programme. But what else? Answering these questions requires overcoming the lack of identification felt by voters towards the party and anticipating the “political greenwashing attacks”. This is the *sine qua non* condition for a rise to power, or even a simple holding strategy in the political landscape.

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Victims of tactical voting?

The most-established candidates had a major advantage in this election. It marked the third presidential campaign for both Jean-Luc Mélenchon and Marine Le Pen, whose extreme-right challenger Eric Zemmour was also well known thanks to a prominent and longstanding media career. The result was, of course, the re-election of sitting president Emmanuel Macron.

Meanwhile, Yannick Jadot’s campaign failed to distinguish itself and was characterised by a failure to plan and anticipate. As polling expert [Denis Pingaud put it](#): “its composite machinery formed after an uncertain primary has produced a certain amateurism.” The groundwork of building campaign teams, gaining visibility, and occupying the political space, should have been done well in advance. Due to the late time of the primaries as well as certain structural issues within the party, the teams were created far too late and without sufficient training. It is simply not possible to upset the game in a few months in these conditions.

Instead of waiting indefinitely for a lacklustre campaign to take off, the Greens should have become aware of the extent of the opportunities and of their real place in the elections. The leading team was convinced of its potential and missed every opportunity to build alliances. Greater lucidity might have yielded different results.

The interaction between the far-right parties is interesting to observe in comparison. Yannick Jadot could have been to Jean-Luc Mélenchon what Eric Zemmour was to Marine Le Pen (before he scolded her on the night of the first round): a reservoir of votes and an opening towards other segments of the electorate. Above all, he could have contributed to a larger dynamic that put key issues such as climate on the agenda and prefigured the alliance for the legislative elections.

A candidate closer to the political DNA of the French Greens might have broadened the appeal of what was to become the NUPES by acting as the spokesperson for one cause, one issue, in the collective mind. Yannick Jadot explicitly refused to play this role. Instead, the Green candidate first dismissed Anne Hidalgo and the Socialist Party and then spent the last few months of his campaign targeting his “rival on the left”. As well as losing

coherence, he thus became quite repellent in the eyes of the – many – undecided voters.

In comparison, Eric Zemmour concentrated his attacks on President Emmanuel Macron. Although late on he suffered from tactical voters switching to Marine Le Pen, he contributed upstream to increasing the potential electorate of the Rassemblement National, helping consolidate the emergence of a far-right bloc. Such dynamics were never present among the Greens and, as a result, potential voters made their choice based on the situation from March onwards. Polling numbers a clear drop in Zemmour's ratings from March, while Yannick Jadot remains relatively stable.

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The purpose of a Green campaign

If Mélenchon did not take Green votes, why did the Greens fail to attract further support? Their campaign appeared to want to stick to all the classic political codes. Mimicry and conformity were chosen to the detriment of disruption. A two-fold observation can be made: on the substance, a fierce fear of radicalism and cleavage. In terms of form, a total acceptance of the rules of the political and media game. The Greens preferred to let themselves be led by the media's agenda rather than seeking to break with the presidential campaign exercise.

Environmentalist associations and organisations were already wary of the idea of political mobilisation, all the more so because the attitude of the Green candidate was so politicised. Here again, a more accurate understanding of the Greens' true place and role in this election would have changed everything. The campaign committee suffered from a lack of modesty and did not critically assess the successes of 2019 and 2021. The objective of this campaign ought to have been set out: to build and unite around an issue of national significance by highlighting ecological initiatives and environmental problems on the ground.

If not during presidential election campaigns, then when else should we discuss our polluted soils and water tables, overflowing landfills, the death of our forests, the alarming state of waste management in tourist areas in high season, the mosses on the moors that cause beaches to be closed every year, and the concreting over of our coastlines? The challenge was to stand out. Instead of distinctiveness, the standardisation of political life was favoured – a mistake that led to isolation.

Ecology as the Left's common ground?

If the question of whether political ecology belongs within the left-wing camp was never resolved during the presidential campaign, it is because one question remains unaddressed: is the ecological project, and all that it implies, compatible with the software of government historically developed by the political forces of the Right and the Left? In other words, how does it translate into political divides and does it constitute a rupture?

Although a so-called “conservative ecology” does exist, a right-wing partisan ecology has not yet emerged. One notable element in France today is the glaring persistence during this election of a right-left divide on environmental issues. “The answers to the ecological crisis constitute the backbone of the projects carried by Jadot, Mélenchon, and, to a lesser extent, Hidalgo, who interweave ecological and social issues,” write the journalists Audrey Garric and Stéphane Mandard for *Le Monde*. NGO comparisons were unanimous. Ambitions on energy savings differ radically different between Mélenchon, who aimed to divide primary energy consumption by three by 2050, and centre-right candidate Pécresse, who called only for “the hunt for waste”. For the Greens, attacking the only competing candidate with an ecologically viable candidate risked a total loss of coherence.

But though ecology was more present on the Left, it was not enough to win. Mélenchon focused on ecology in the first months but built up his momentum on purchasing power and social issues. Ecology is a voter concern, but it is not yet a deciding factor. The path to changing this will be long and complex.

The war in Ukraine could have been an opportunity. The subject disqualified a part of the political spectrum. Jadot hung on to the European branch, unlike his main rival on the Left. After a short period of increased visibility with some positive interventions, the accusations of political opportunism took over. The inconsistencies in the discourse (for example, unclear answers on US shale gas in the context of embargoing Russian oil and gas) and unwarranted denunciations of “Putin’s friends” became quicksand. Although this debate provided opportunities for Jadot, military matters were not something people expected the Greens to focus on.

The Greens were also robbed of the sophistication and depth of their social project by the energy issue, more precisely by their passionate rejection of nuclear power. They are constantly drawn back to this topic by a Pavlovian media, although Mélenchon’s score proves that the nuclear question was not so decisive in the end. His campaign was also anti-nuclear but did not matter in the same way. Given that opposition to nuclear is a historic element of political ecology, it was odd that the Green candidate failed to master either the language or the technical details, to the delight of social networks and the media.

Though distinct, the energy transition and the ecological transition have an important point of convergence: the production and consumption of energy can emit greenhouse gases and the combustion of fossil fuels is a major factor in emissions. Nuclear power contributes to global warming in an extremely marginal way and is not incompatible with the decarbonisation of the economy. Is it therefore advisable to restart the construction of 14 nuclear reactors? That could have been the debate if, in the French context, nuclear power was not so emblematic of a (not so) glorious past.

There is no need for the Greens to change their position. It is now a dominant position within the French Left. However, the subject must be mastered. Above all, the Green project should not be allowed to be reduced to an exit from nuclear power. To do so passes up the opportunity to demonstrate the extent of the transformation that Greens call for.

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Priorities for the years ahead

The French Greens must prepare for the end of “ecology”, or rather its deep transformation. This concept, which is currently used indiscriminately, is riddled with conflicts and must be clarified. The idea of a unanimous position in favour of the environment is feigned, incantatory, and ineffective. Ecology covers a wide range of issues, some of which are contradictory. Greens must ensure that they remain the most ambitious on environmental matters, in line with scientific objectives. Above all, ecology has to be broken down by sector and territory to become more concrete and effective.

On the sectoral level, it is about a planned industrial vision of a decarbonised economy with less raw material usage and waste. This mutation of ecological thinking and doctrine has already taken place (see, for example, [Jadot’s speech](#) at the Salon du Made in France). Estimates of the impact on jobs in the various sectors are, for example, well known and used in Green policy and campaign materials.

On the territorial side, the challenge is more difficult. The French Green Party has recently come to embody, sometimes more in the media than in reality, a rather “urban” ecology. Rural ecology is not just an adapted version of the theme, it pertains to different issues. The question of hunters, for example, in this presidential campaign, the self-proclaimed “first ecologists of France”, is only a foretaste of the turn that these debates can take. Not to mention the elephant in the room: the transformation of the agricultural model. It is convenient to bring the struggle for a reformed Common Agricultural Policy to the European level, but this does not make the Greens any more popular with those who are primarily concerned. The French Greens have work to do to convince people that they are protecting the countryside.

The French Greens must continue to prove themselves at the local level, with a clarified compass and concrete actions. Ecology’s spread as software for governance must involve the local level and town councils play an essential role in pushing forward these ideas. Pedestrianisation of city centres is one example of the need for output legitimacy, to convince through long-term results. Adherence to these changes in society is gradual and initially generates doubts and rejections. The French Greens must thus continue to focus on the actors and areas that transmit this change: associations, leisure activities, democratisation and access to nature, the promotion of alternative agriculture, and so on.

More immediately, the priority must be clear for the next five years: systematic opposition to anything that moves away from France’s national, European, and international commitments to the environment. The voice of political ecology must be heard in the National Assembly, in the courts, in the media, and in the cities. The French Green Party must reconnect with its potential to act as a pivot with organised civil society, NGOs and parapolitical bodies, to build strong and lasting connections between the ultra-local, national, and European levels.

Adèle Carson was a project officer in Yannick Jadot's campaign team.

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