

## **French Greens at the Crossroads**

**Article by Quentin Ariès**

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**With the 2022 French presidential elections drawing closer, the process is underway to select the candidate who will be the Green voice in the race. Quentin Ariès explains why the ecologist primary, with its personalities, alliances, and lines of division, provides significant insight into the strategic questions facing political ecology in France today.**

The last two weeks of August are when French political life starts to move up a gear. And every year, the Greens are the first to get the ball rolling with summer schools and other party gatherings.

Assembled for the annual “[Green Summer Days](#)” in Poitiers – a city of 88,000 inhabitants [which elected France’s youngest Green mayor, Léonore Moncond’huy](#), during the 2020 Green surge at the municipal level – the 3000 participants together took stock of the state of Green politics. In parallel, the political focus in metropolitan France started turning almost exclusively towards the presidential election, scheduled for April 2022.

Such elections are not in the political DNA of the Greens. Hyper-personalisation and the concentration of political power around a single candidate do not sit well with their electorate. The party has only once surpassed 5 per cent of first round votes, the fateful threshold for the reimbursement of campaign expenses. Worse still, in 2017 the candidate chosen by Europe Écologie – Les Verts (EELV), Yannick Jadot, withdrew in favour of the socialist candidate Benoît Hamon, who ended up a bitter failure – the former minister received only 6.4 per cent of the vote.

However, electoral results for the Greens over the last two years have taken a decidedly brighter turn. In the view of EELV national secretary Julien Bayou, the tide has truly turned. “Let’s be clear: we’re not just fighting any old campaign here, keeping up appearances, or practicing for the future. We’re playing to win,” Bayou declared during his opening speech on 19 August.

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To find their winning candidate, the Greens have formed an “ecologist pole” together with other forces in their political orbit that will hold [a primary](#). Alongside EELV are smaller movements such as green-left Génération·s and more centrist Génération Écologie.

French residents over 16 years old who agree with the charter of values – committing to the shared principles set out by the ecologist pole ahead of the vote in 2022 – had until 12 September to register online (for a 2-euro fee) to decide between five candidates. The first round, which will be held exclusively online, takes place between 16 and 19 September. A second round, between 25 and 28 September, will decide between the two leading candidates.

As was confirmed by the three debates held before the first round, the five candidates share the same diagnosis of the French situation, and similar orientations: responding to the environmental crisis, safeguarding biodiversity, emphasising social and public services, reshaping economic policy, feminism, and protecting minorities.

What differentiates the candidates is how they order these priorities, how they embody green politics, and more generally their relationship to power.

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## **Drawing disappointed Macron voters**

A Member of the European Parliament since 2009, abortive candidate in 2017, and head of the list in the 2019 European elections, Yannick Jadot is a front-runner in the primary. He aims to attract left-wing voters who found themselves disappointed – deceived even – by Emmanuel Macron and his record on issues such as the environment and migration.

For Jadot, ten key tasks form “a civilisational project reconciling us with the future, with nature, with one another, and with ourselves.” These include a “green reconstruction plan”, reforming social security to take into account the environment and the victims of pesticides, floods or heat waves, and a Franco-German citizens’ convention for joint action on the ecological transition.

However, Jadot’s Poitiers speech and electoral programme also referred to subjects not traditionally emphasised by the Greens. These include “keeping the republican promise” to “renovate and reinforce public services,” allowing civil society activists to join the public service, and the construction of more social housing in response to the affordable housing crisis in the Paris suburbs and larger French cities.

## **“The humanist arc”**

The other favourite in this primary, mayor of Grenoble Eric Piolle, is taking a different approach. Mayor since 2014, Piolle wants to rally followers under his slogan “Ecology, Hope” and what he calls “the humanist arc”.

According to the former engineer, the humanist arc is what should draw other political movements to a shared ecological project. Such an alliance already exists in the majority of

cities governed by the Greens since 2020. In Grenoble, Eric Piolle's majority certainly includes the groups which make up the ecologist pole, but also radical-left La France Insoumise, the Communist Party, and activists from civil society.

Piolle is positioned further to the left than Jadot. In particular, he advocates a "climate wealth tax." This new twist on the French wealth tax slashed by Emmanuel Macron in 2017 aims to tax the highest incomes and therefore the most polluting lifestyles. The contours of this climate tax, however, have yet to be specified.

Another notable initiative is his intention to organise, in the weeks after his election, a referendum comprising five questions on issues that include accepting the proposals of the citizens' climate convention, strengthening the political independence of the judiciary, and revising articles 13 and 16 of the Constitution (which deal with the power of the president's appointments to key positions in French administration and the head of state's "exceptional powers"). Other goals include introducing proportional representation for legislative elections and introducing a citizen's initiative referendum, a recurring demand since the 2018 Yellow Vests movement.

## **Ecofeminism: a last hope**

With the duel between Piolle and Jadot bringing some drama to the campaign, Sandrine Rousseau, academic and economist, is playing the troublemaker. Having left the party in 2016 after filing a sexual harassment complaint against former member Denis Baupin, she has since returned as the voice of ecofeminism in the primary.

With her slogan "Yes the times are changing", Rousseau is campaigning against the "unpunished predation" of nature and minorities. "We take, we use, we cast away the bodies of women. We take, we use, we cast away the bodies of the most precarious in society. We take, we use, we cast away the bodies of racialised people. We want no more of this system", she declared in Poitiers.

"We are undergoing a human and climatic catastrophe," the economist continued. Rousseau aims to increase the price per ton of carbon dioxide to 200 euros by 2027. In early September, a ton of CO<sub>2</sub> was worth about 54 euros on the European carbon market.

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## **Embracing "degrowth"**

In addition to the three EELV members, the remaining two primary candidates are members of other parties in the same political galaxy. Jean-Marc Governatori is a former company director, local politician in Nice, and member of the centre-green party Cap Écologie.

Finally, there is Delphine Batho, president of Génération Écologie and former environment

minister for François Hollande (2012-2013). While the other candidates talk of structural economic reforms, Batho is refusing to pull any punches: insisting we have to talk about degrowth.

“People engage in degrowth every day without even realising it” she often repeats. A self-described former marketing manager who became a “rebellious high school student”, Batho is the “candidate of a determined break” towards an “integral ecology” (a concept emphasising the interconnected nature of social and ecological challenges, most notably developed by Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato Si'*). Despite such declarations, Batho has yet to present any concrete proposals, and does not expect to announce a programme before January.

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## **Representing the Left**

The Greens will have their candidate by the end of September and will then swiftly launch talks to finalise their electoral programme. Behind the scenes, negotiations with other parties could begin in October.

In March 2020, just before the pandemic, EELV and its allies (including Génération·s, Génération Écologie, the Independent Ecological Alliance and the Movement of Progressives) published their first directing guidelines. An online platform was established, where citizens can contribute by proposing ideas and vote on the order of priorities.

However, the primary will only be considered a success if the chosen candidate manages to rally the other left-leaning political forces behind their platform.

This is by no means a given. Leader of La France Insoumise and presidential candidate in both 2012 and 2017 Jean-Luc Mélenchon is running again. The French Communist Party has chosen the northern parliamentarian Fabien Roussel. Anne Hidalgo, mayor of Paris since 2014, as well as former Socialist Economic Minister Arnaud Montebourg, are also in the running. Lawyer Hélène Thouy is hoping to represent the Animalist party. Then there's the Popular Primary, an initiative launched by citizens and activists aiming to organise a vote to unite all branches of the French left.

With the primary underway and the election drawing nearer, gathering all these personalities under the green banner seems an impossible task. It will therefore be down to the polls and civil society to decide between them. To take a position of strength, the

primary must first attract strong support from the electorate, which seems to have been accomplished. A total of 122,670 people registered. This surpasses the stated target (never made public) of 90,000 voters.

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This is in fact a record. In 2011, the Greens had 25,000 voters, and just 12,000 in 2016. However, this is still a long way from the Green's electoral potential. For Delphine Batho, given all the marches for the climate and environmentalist movements, the primary should really be mobilising at least 600,000 people, maybe up to as much as one million. In comparison, the 2011 Socialist primary attracted 2.8 million voters, while in 2017 it drew 2 million.

This is even more striking when we consider the latest IPSOS survey on "French fractures", where 88 per cent of respondents say they are aware of climate change and 82 per cent call on the government to adopt "rapid and energetic measures to address the environmental crisis", even if this means "asking the French to make profound changes to their lifestyles." A majority of French people (62 per cent), according to the same survey, are prepared for these measures to require "financial sacrifices" from French companies and citizens.

The fight against climate change and the values promoted by the Greens are now deeply rooted in France. For Greens, the task ahead is to convince those who hold these values to vote accordingly, in time for the first round of the presidential election on 10 April 2022. This requires a marathon effort, yet the campaign ahead is looking increasingly like a sprint for the finish.



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