GREEN
EUROPEAN
JOURNAL

Are Citizens Really Moving to the Right?

Article by Dirk Holemans, Vincent Tiberj
March 12, 2026

Across Europe, the far right is gaining ground at the ballot box, fuelling the sense that societies are shifting steadily to the right. Yet according to sociologist Vincent Tiberj, this perception may be misleading: while political elites and media coverage have pivoted rightward, many citizens – especially younger generations – have become more tolerant on issues such as gender equality, minority rights, and cultural diversity. If electoral outcomes increasingly reflect unequal participation and a crisis of political representation, what does this mean for the Left and for participatory democracy?

Dirk Holemans: **In your book *La droitisation française, mythe et réalités* ("*France's Rightward Shift: Myth and Reality*"), you challenge the idea that the French electorate has shifted permanently to the right. Your research shows that France is not as right-wing as some in the media would have us believe.**

Vincent Tiberj: If you do the math, it seems as though that's what's happening in Germany or the United Kingdom; so it's not just France moving rightward, but Europe, too. Everywhere, the far right is gaining ground at the ballot box. It's worth stopping here for a moment and thinking about the convergence of three distinct trends.

First, there's the rightward swing at the top of politics; this is the most visible. Political, media, and party elites are moving to the right, especially on issues of identity, law and order, and immigration. And as a result, public debate seems more conservative than before. Yet while this rightward drift is seen in the discourse and institutions, it's not necessarily reflected in wider society.

Second, there's been a shift in values at the grassroots that isn't conservative. Long-running surveys actually show that the French are more tolerant than before about things like minority rights, gender equality, and homosexuality. So, there's been a liberalisation in values, particularly among younger generations.

Third, we've seen that electoral abstention breaks down clearly along social lines. The youngest, the most working-class, and the most progressive are voting less. On the other hand, those who vote the most are older and more conservative. This means that election results no longer accurately reflect the values of society as a whole.

How can we explain this disconnect between what we see at elections and how people's values are changing?

Several things are going on here. Politicians and the media exert a framing effect on the way society is talked about, on what is emphasised and by whom. And that's to do with the French media landscape today.

Among the electorate, there's also what I call the great resignation: a striking number of people,

especially younger generations, who refuse to vote. And it's the younger generations who are the most favourable towards cultural diversity and immigration. Yet there are generational groups, such as conservative boomers, who continue to punch above their weight.

There's also another phenomenon: values play out differently in voting behaviour. There are – or so we think – three blocs: a broadly left bloc (which includes the Greens); a bloc made up of the centre and part of the traditional right; and a far-right bloc. Demands for redistribution mainly come from the Left, but there are also those in favour of redistribution on the far right. And those in favour of cultural diversity, an open society, and so on, are split between the centre and the Left. So while it seems as if the far right is gaining ground, the situation is much more complex.

It's gaining ground because it has managed to monopolise conservatism against social change. It has managed to appear balanced on social and economic issues when in fact it's pretty right-wing. So, there's a sort of disconnect between the public, what happens when they become voters, and what happens when they vote.

One of the most striking trends that explains this shift, and especially the rise of Jordan Bardella between 2022 and 2024, is the hard-right turn among conservative voters. Conservatives who in the past had refused to vote for the extreme right, broadly voting for the traditional right instead, have now switched to the far right. This is especially noticeable among conservative boomers, practising Catholics, and parts of the conservative middle and upper classes.

The far right is gaining ground because it has managed to monopolise conservatism against social change.

So, the centre is emptying out, and conservative-leaning people no longer fear voting for the far right. Usually, conservatives don't like extremes…

There are two phenomena at work here, and once again, what we're seeing in France is similar to what's happening elsewhere. First, there's the Rassemblement National's [National Rally, RN] detoxification strategy. For example, it has gradually begun to stand up for gays, a bit like the far right in the Netherlands. It has also started "defending" women's rights against Muslims. Second, there's the way the Right and the centre have begun to adopt far-right rhetoric by focusing on immigration and deploying the same logic around the idea of "a great replacement".

The Right and the centre are now acting as if the National Rally is asking the right questions but offering the wrong solutions. They're increasingly sounding like the National Rally on immigration. The same goes for the Macronists, and therein lies the contradiction. Emmanuel Macron was elected twice to keep out the National Rally. Yet in 2023, after the pension reform crisis, the Macronists allowed an immigration bill to pass that Marine Le Pen saw as an ideological victory. Using the language of the far right boosts the far right – and loses you votes.

Your analysis naturally raises the question: what should the Left – the Greens included – actually do?

Here, we need to remember what happened in 2024. The snap election in France took many by surprise. But there were two things that Emmanuel Macron didn't see coming. He didn't anticipate the ability of

left-wing parties – which were very divided at the time – to come together remarkably quickly. They were no longer speaking to each other at that point, but they managed to get back around a table for three or four days, form the New Popular Front, and then agree on a manifesto. As a result, there was a sort of holy alliance that echoed the first Popular Front of 1936.

The other thing Macron didn't foresee was the huge wave of grassroots civic engagement, in both the first and second rounds of the election. So collectively, French society managed to do something, and that's because unions and big NGOs like the Human Rights League, Oxfam, and Greenpeace took a stand.

But it's also because groups of ordinary people mobilised to stop the National Rally from getting in. Suddenly, in the first round, you had a clear choice: more Macron, or stop? The answer was stop. In the second round, it was: Do you want Jordan Bardella to be prime minister? The answer was no. When it claims the election was stolen, the National Rally is trying to rewrite history.

But the result is a paradox nonetheless: the parties that clearly lost the election – the Macronists and the traditional right – still govern.

With this in mind, can we return to the idea that the centre is largely empty? Should the Left try to occupy this space?

When you look closely at the relationship between the French electorate and political parties in general and left-wing parties in particular, you can't help but be struck by how many people there are who are politically homeless, who refuse to say they identify with a particular party. This doesn't mean that people think all parties are the same; it's just that they know exactly who they're against. On the other hand, taken individually, parties enjoy very little support today. So, this is a crisis in political supply, in the ability of parties to connect with voters.

Which brings us to the dilemma for the Left. There is Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who hasn't changed. He ran in 2012, 2017, and 2022, and it seems he hasn't given up on the idea of running in 2027. There is, of course, a bid built around him and his inner circle. So quite clearly, there's no collective mindset here. No, it's a one-man show.

The same goes for Raphaël Glucksmann. Glucksmann's party, Place Publique, has even fewer elected representatives than the Socialist Party, but in France it's very easy to mount an individual campaign. So, we have a situation where the Left is caught in a vice, squeezed between a candidate who wants to own the centre-left and a heavyweight on the far left. What alternative is there? Their stranglehold over the rest of the Left today is clear: they dominate the landscape with their positioning and their escalating antagonism. As a result, any attempt at the sort of alliance that saved the Left in 2024 is falling on deaf ears.

The fear is that once again, just like Macron, the candidates who want to lead the Left are thinking about tactics rather than strategy and policy. Basically, the goal is to get through to the second round against Marine Le Pen or Jordan Bardella with the expectation that they'll pick up votes there.

Any attempt at the sort of alliance that saved the Left in 2024 is falling on deaf ears.

But it's a very risky tactic: you're not necessarily building support. You're not building a movement of the kind that's behind Marine Le Pen and Jordan Bardella. A crucial thing to remember is that votes for the far right are affirmative. People vote for them because they are persuaded that the National Rally will take charge of politics. But the relationship that Jean-Luc Mélenchon or Raphaël Glucksmann are building is more that of a default option.

And what about civil society groups? What's their perspective?

I think that NGOs, unions, and large organisations are well aware that there's a real danger and are increasingly raising the alarm. The Human Rights League, Oxfam, the CFDT union, the CGT union – they're pretty unanimous, and that's rare. And we should also remember that the CFDT and CGT handing out leaflets calling for tactical voting against the National Rally, as they did in 2024, was almost unheard of.

Today, we're seeing a desire to create platforms and forums for debate, and there's potential for transformation. Even so, to bring about real change, civil society groups must do more than just agree to work together: they must do so with a political mindset. Yet in France, parties continue to believe they should call the shots. Sure, they offer to meet with civil society groups. But they still don't say: "We're committing to a truly collaborative effort." Many remain convinced that politics revolves around them.

We tend to forget that the energy on the Left and in progressivism now lies in NGOs and grassroots networks. There's a problem with French political culture, which is still built around parties, even though they are objectively weaker. Meanwhile, NGOs and unions still haven't fully grasped that they too can forge a new political alternative.

You mentioned young people. While it's true that younger generations often appear more progressive, they vote less than boomers. At the same time, we're seeing a highly mobilised Gen Z in many countries, taking to the streets and organising mass protests in places like Nepal and Morocco.

This picture needs nuancing. When we used to talk about "generation climate", we weren't talking about all young people. This activism mainly involved young urbanites from relatively well-off backgrounds. Meanwhile, we're seeing many young men with – especially those under 30 – strongly drawn to parties like the AfD in Germany, Vox in Spain, or the National Rally in France. So, Gen Z is by no means a homogeneous bloc. That said, if we look at overall trends, younger generations still tend to favour redistributive policies and an open vision of society.

The core problem lies in an abandonment of voting and parties. And this abandonment is not temporary: it's a long-term phenomenon that's been growing for 10, 20 years and accelerated markedly when François Hollande was in office. France is particularly affected because of a deeper disconnection rooted in its democratic system, which has long assumed that the public must basically become voters. Voting was deemed the only legitimate means of political expression, and there was no real expectation of continued participation.

Gen Z is by no means a homogeneous bloc. That said, if we look at overall trends, younger generations still tend to favour redistributive policies and an open

vision of society.

Our institutional model, with its strong presidentialism, and our political parties have never really had an overhaul. This means we're left with a structural democratic deficit in France. It's a huge challenge, but civil society could champion an alternative approach based on more participatory forms of democracy. These practices already exist at a local level, in NGOs, and in social movements. And what's interesting to note, particularly among youth movements, is a rejection of traditional leadership forms where a few figures end up speaking for themselves. So we're witnessing multiple attempts at democratic innovation: people are educating themselves, experimenting, looking for other ways of organising

We face a paradox: on one side are the public, ever more informed and able to get involved; on the other, institutions that tend to limit the public's role, particularly when it comes to key economic projects. These are interesting times for Western democracy. Citizens are taking on elites, challenging the way politics is done. They're demanding more openness and more debate.

Dirk Holemans is coordinator of the Belgian Green think-tank Oikos and co-president of the Green European Foundation. His most recent book is *Freedom & Security in a Complex World* (2017, GEF).

Vincent Tiberj is a political scientist and full professor and researcher at the Emile Durkheim Center, and Dean of Research at Sciences Po Bordeaux.

Published March 12, 2026
Article in English
Published in the *Green European Journal*
Downloaded from https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/are-citizens-really-moving-to-the-right/