

Leaders Without Power: The Struggles of France's Greens

Article by Vanessa Jérôme

July 5, 2023

Despite their activist and local politics background, France's Greens face a chronic lack of leadership experience. Fighting internal party battles for short-lived, semi-professional roles remains the most common trajectory for aspiring Green leaders. Will party reforms and the growing discontent towards national politics help them take centre stage?

What more is there to write about the supposed inability of Green leaders to exert their authority, be it over their own activists, perennially viewed as an army of unruly anarchists and fanatics, or over other political actors at a time when the unfolding climate crisis should give the green vision for society more legitimacy than ever? Missing in action, half-baked, aspiring, contradictory – much ink is spilt over green leadership because it still seems hard to imagine.

But are we using the wrong term? As Frédéric Sawicki points out, the notion of leadership is freighted with ambiguity: often too prescriptive and tinged with vulgar psychology, it results in an overly heroising vision of government, while other concepts better capture the collective and negotiated aspect of the exercise of power. But Sawicki agrees that thinking in terms of leadership does offer several advantages.

First, it emphasises that “modes of political leadership are inseparable from their social and cultural context”. Second, by revealing “the diversity of paths to leadership [...] from one society to the next”, it encourages us to assess the relevance of “resources that can be legitimately used in competition between contenders”. Lastly, when used to examine how the politician's role has changed, the notion of leadership reveals that “political relations are today based more on transactions than they are power dynamics, admiration or even an attachment to broader values”; or, in other words, that pragmatism, once inherent to the job of the politician, has become “a general guiding principle”.

So, rather than look at the supposed non-existence of green leadership understood as a specific, ahistorical and cross-border form of authority, it makes more sense to explore the conditions for acquiring and exercising this authority in a particular political landscape, such as the French one, and then make comparisons with other European Green parties.

Activist paths

Since the French Green Party was founded in 1984, the background of its leaders has barely changed. Coming from highly politicised families, often with members who are activists or even local elected officials, most Green leaders are introduced to activism in childhood. For the most part left-leaning, their families' involvement in politics is long-standing (from opposition to the Algerian War in the late 1950s and early 1960s to campaigns to regularise undocumented migrants in the 1990s), making them likely to have joined, at a relatively young age, youth organisations such as the Scouts, Young Christian Workers or Young Christian Students.

Other leaders discover activism as students, campaigning for political or union organisations, or getting

involved in ad-hoc groups or movements. Over the years, these have included the Unified Socialist Party, the National Union of Students of France, Greenpeace and other leftist, student, and environmental organisations.

Membership of these activist organisations often provides the opportunity to learn skills associated with the role of leader (public speaking; planning and people management; promoting their work with the wider public), although as part of small local groups or one-off campaigns, and not necessarily in the most high-profile roles. Indeed, despite being highly invested and campaigning for multiple causes, Green activists rarely occupy the top job in the organisations they campaign for and sometimes even helped set up.

Coming from highly politicised families, often with members who are activists or even local elected officials, most Green leaders are introduced to activism in childhood.

Although highly educated, Green leaders do not hold credentials considered prestigious, or those in fields inclined towards the exercise of political power at the highest level. Neither members of what Pierre Bourdieu referred to as the “state nobility” of elite education institutions, nor part of France’s political elite, Green leaders past and present are somewhat unusual in their backgrounds and activist careers. And this prevents them from taking a reverse route” to the top of politics – in other words, getting hired as political staffers rather than being elected – since Green elected officials are rarely found in ministries, which offer the jobs with the most relevant experience and best prospects for rapid career advancement. There is a reverse route, but it is at the local level, where the majority of Greens in elected office are to be found.

As a result, it is still by fighting internal party battles that Greens learn most about competing for political leadership and exercising this role. The party’s small size means that skills and knowledge already acquired in the voluntary or union sector are easily transferable. These are then gradually reshaped by the party and the complex rules that govern it. In this organisation created *by and for* people whose habitus is built on the minority mindset, and in which important jobs are allocated proportionally to the various factions, learning the ropes of political leadership involves making yourself stand out and playing up your membership of a minority in the hope of securing key positions in the party or on candidate lists quicker than anyone else.

This sets the French Greens apart from some of their European counterparts. While their activists have very similar demographics to French Greens, they have not had to wait as long to taste power: either electoral systems have been more favourable, or more federal/less centralised systems of government have better enabled them to nurture their shared desire for “*politique autrement*” (doing politics differently). Germany and Belgium are prime examples. Here, the interaction between individual habitus and the party has evolved differently, creating space for alternative ways to learn about (taking) power in both the party and electoral politics.

Precarious leaders

In so far as it is quantifiable, political leadership is not a role that is held once and for all, nor in every interaction. Rather, it is defined in part by the context and political institutions in which it is exercised.

Being a candidate in a local election, the leader of a party for several years, a Member of the European Parliament with your own staff or the head of a local group with just a handful of members does not teach you the same things nor come with the same constraints.

Uncertain, precarious and poorly paid, or led as part of coalitions, their careers, like fireworks, often involve ascents that are rapid but fleeting.

That said, as Sawicki highlights, with leadership comes a number of generic tasks: “managing tensions within the party, not just between members of the inner circle and those around it, but with representatives of the bureaucracy too; maintaining the balance of power between different factions and mediating when necessary; juggling their own interests with those of their supporters; making common cause by manipulating the party’s institutions, values and beliefs...”. This, writes Sawicki, is what makes leadership “an integral part of the political profession”.

It is a profession in which the Greens still lack experience. Uncertain, precarious and poorly paid, or led as part of coalitions, their careers, like fireworks, often involve ascents that are rapid but fleeting. The majority are limited to the costliest level at which politics is practised: semi-professional. These politicians cannot earn a living from politics alone – or not for long anyway – and, as a result, are unable to master or deploy all of the knowledge and skills that the job requires.

Aware of this structural weakness, the Greens have sought to redraw the boundaries of their organisation and broaden the pool from which they recruit with a view to attracting new profiles of activists and new leadership hopefuls. Thanks to organisational reforms and other somewhat more cosmetic changes, the last of which came in December 2022, the party re-baptised as Les Écologistes is tapping into the activist hotbed that is its youth organisation, as well as interest from the growing number of supporters with master’s degrees in applied politics.

At the same time, the party is taking advantage of the transformation of the business of politics. With an emphasis on less hierarchical and more collegiate ways of exercising power at local level, Greens are trying to capitalise on their expert councillors, especially on the town councils won in the 2020 municipal elections. By drawing on their experience in non-profit management and participative democracy, or on their technical expertise, they hope to lend credibility to their way of doing politics and legitimise their unselfconscious yet paradoxical relationship with power.

Long ridiculed for their inability to break through on the national stage, the Greens may in the end benefit from the growing disrepute in which national politics is held, as well as that which – more than ever at the beginning of Emmanuel Macron’s second presidential term – undermines the Fifth Republic, whose rules have never favoured them. Their consistent criticism of French presidentialism and their extensive local government experience, including as junior coalition members, would lend them legitimacy and be seen, in the eyes of electors, as a sign of their credibility.

Will the simultaneous transformation of the party and the way politics is done be enough for the French Greens’ political leadership to cut through? Will it live up to the expectations of the many people who despair at the constant delays and heavily conflictual transition towards a greener society? It is far from certain.

Discredited in the eyes of some for having governed too much with a now ailing Socialist Party, and in the eyes of others for having too long positioned itself on what are considered the “radical” fringes of politics, Les Écologistes may find closed a window of opportunity that was never really open for them. Caught up in the tortuous process of rebuilding the French Left, of which the NUPES alliance is the latest incarnation, and, like their European counterparts, dogged by the rise of the far right, it may well be that they never break through as transformative political force.



Vanessa Jérôme is a Green Party Specialist and Associate doctor at the European Center for Sociology and Political Science. She has taught across many schools on topics such as; Political Institutions, Political Parties, Engagement & Activism, Gender Studies, Sociology of Inequalities and others.

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 July 5, 2023

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/leaders-without-power-the-struggles-of-frances-greens/>

The Green European Journal offers analysis on current affairs, political ecology and the struggle for an alternative Europe. In print and online, the journal works to create an inclusive, multilingual and independent media space.

Sign up to the newsletter to receive our monthly Editor's Picks.