

A Window of Opportunity: The Challenge of Uniting the French Left

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Despite Yannick Jadot's and the green movement's best effort, no breakthrough materialised for political ecology at the French presidential election. France once again faced a second-round choice between Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen, and thankfully re-elected the incumbent. Alain Lipietz looks back on the path to presidential elections held in April, the disruptive campaigns of Jean-Luc Mélenchon and Yannick Jadot, as well as what can be expected from the upcoming parliamentary elections.

On the evening of 10 April in Villejuif, a working-class town in the Paris suburbs, a young polling clerk was crying: "They forgot about the climate! What's going to happen to my life?" The "climate candidate" Yannick Jadot had suffered a crushing defeat of just 4.7 per cent of the national votes. In the preceding three months, the tactical vote went to La France Insoumise (LFI) candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon (22 per cent). In the final few days of the campaign, the far-right electorate split between Marine Le Pen and Eric Zemmour presented a so-called mouse hole (a narrow window of opportunity). Roughly half the votes cast for Mélenchon were reportedly tactical, while socialist voters disappointed in Macron after voting for him 2017, turned to Mélenchon and not Yannick Jadot.

Three voter pools can be identified in France: the far right, the centre-right, and eco-social democracy (in descending order of size). Within eco-social democracy, two "modern princes" compete on turning this voter pool into a hegemonic social bloc: the Green bloc (bringing together small parties around Europe Écologie-Les Verts, the traditional party of political ecology), and LFI. Greens have made inroads in the past three elections, European and local, taking power in several of the country's major cities including Lyon, Strasbourg and Bordeaux. Although the eco-social bloc did not gain voters as a whole, it was Mélenchon who managed to consolidate support within it. This achievement came at the price of financial ruin for other progressive forces

Over five years, Jean-Luc Mélenchon gained just 0.6 per cent on Marine Le Pen, while Zemmour gained 7 per cent of votes. At the end of the day, the far right commanded 32.5 per cent of the first-round votes.

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The battle between voter pools

32.5 per cent is a horrifying number. In 1932, the Nazi party brought Hitler to power with 33 per cent of the vote in the German elections. With 32.5 per cent, the French far right was in a position to win the presidency. It didn't help that by 2022, Macron's policies oozed right-wing cynicism; he raised the retirement age to 65, as it had been before 1981, when exhausted workers would die a matter of months after they retired.

Even before the elections, it was clear that the far right could only be beaten by a united Left and centre-right – a hardly new situation. Faced with this threat, there could be no casting of blank votes out of justified hatred for Macron. Like in 2002 and 2017, the Left found itself refereeing a fight between the right and the far right. Yet this time around, it was not enough to count on enough brave democrats being willing to sacrifice themselves to defeat Le Pen.

In fact, although roughly a fifth of Mélenchon supporters voted for Le Pen in the second round and 45 per cent abstained or voted blank, the remaining 42 per cent switched to Macron. Like the vast majority of those who voted for Jadot and the old parties of the Left (the Socialists and Communists), they ensured the defeat of Marine Le Pen in the second round.

For much of the green-left electorate, seizing this window of opportunity created by Zemmour was preferable to voting for Macron to keep Le Pen out. At the start of the campaign, Jadot also eyed this window of opportunity with far more credibility. Until the very end of campaign, the majority of the electorate tolerated just three candidates: Macron, Jadot, and the centre-right candidate Pécresse. Marine Le Pen was only rejected by 50 per cent of the electorate, making a victory possible. The Trotskyists and Mélenchon were rejected by the majority. More shunned still were Socialist Anne Hidalgo (55 per cent) and Éric Zemmour (64 per cent). So, Yannick Jadot was in a better position than Mélenchon for the second round.

A narrow window remains open for the forthcoming parliamentary elections in June, for which the parties of the Left and the Greens united at the beginning of May. It was not easy. The old parties of the productivist Left that emerged from the 1920 Tour Congress, the Communists and Socialists, have potentially been wiped out permanently. Even in Villejuif, a long-time Communist stronghold that was won back in the 2020 local elections, Fabien Roussel (Communist Party) and Anne Hidalgo (Socialist Party) came in behind Yannick Jadot and far behind Jean-Luc Mélenchon.

Is reconciliation between the green bloc and LFI possible? A Mélenchonist might have responded to the distraught young polling clerk in Villejuif as follows: "But hold on: Mélenchon got 44 per cent in Villejuif, and he's just as Green as Jadot!" But apart from the fact that Mélenchon too exited in the first round, if this young woman didn't feel represented by him, it's because he had little to say about the environment at the end of his campaign. The environment could not be found in his last leaflet *Another world is possible* for example. Worse, when climate protestors marched under the "Total: no more Russian gas" banner, Mélenchon responded with a slap in the face: "An embargo on Russian gas would be a mistake".

Despite the three years given to us by the IPCC, Mélenchon rejects this opportunity to accelerate the energy transition. Out of the three pillars of political ecology – the environment, social justice, and democracy – Mélenchon is very credible on the second, neglects the latter and subordinates the first to the second.

In contrast, Yannick Jadot reacted to the invasion of Ukraine as a statesman aware of the lessons that history, particularly the Spanish Civil War (1936) and the Munich Agreement (1938), has taught us while framing his proposals for sanctions as part of a historic climate strategy. Jadot's position was matched by that of LFI MEPs who rebelled to vote for a European Parliament resolution on Ukraine drafted by the Greens and the Liberals and co-signed by the leader of the LFI list, Manon Aubry.

The question, therefore, is not why Mélenchon seemed like the best tactical vote, but why Jadot did not. The explanation is complex and goes several layers deep. The first layer is the campaign itself, during which Jadot was on the wrong end of a succession of “campaign incidents”.

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“Campaign incidents”

The most crushing incident, which extends far beyond the electoral campaign, is the media blackout on the climate emergency. As the IPCC gives us three years to take decisive action, this election was in effect for the last presidential term in which something can still be done. Just 3 per cent of presidential debates focused on the climate, despite Jadot's efforts. Even the shocking tragedies of the southern hemisphere's summer (particularly in Australia) were ignored. *Don't Look Up* was an understatement. History will judge those journalists who fell short. Deprived of his strongest issue, Yannick Jadot increasingly found himself fighting on political ground that favoured his opponents.

For the year running up to the vote, the Socialist Party (PS) was expected to return Jadot the favour after he stood aside in the 2017 presidential election for Socialist Benoît Hamon, who was the leading left-wing candidate in the polls at the time. However, after holding on to all its regions in the June 2021 elections (amid very low turnout), the Socialist Party believed itself revived, without noticing that the Greens were the ones leading the resurgence of the Left. The Socialist Party had not yet understood it would pay a price for François Hollande (the last socialist president, elected in 2012, who implemented anti-welfare economic policies) for just as long as it had paid for Guy Mollet (leader of the 1957 Socialist government that continued the war in Algeria which it had promised to end).

An excellent campaign by Jadot in the Green presidential primaries caught the media spotlight at the end of summer 2021. But disaster struck again: the day after Jadot won the Green primaries, the defeated candidate Sandrine Rousseau began publicly criticising him. She was relentless in her criticism, going as far as summoning seven journalists to brief against him (off the record, of course). It is, alas, a tradition among French Greens, who are

incapable of remaining united for the duration of an election campaign. The campaign stalls.

In September, backed by a well-organised and initially successful media campaign, Emmanuel Macron relaunched France's nuclear power programme, which Greens had long thought discredited in the eyes of the public. Jadot had to recalibrate all his climate arguments faced with this ineffective and dangerous technological solution.

Nicolas Hulot was one of the most media-friendly green-leaning public figures. His right-hand man, Mathieu Orphelin, leader of a second-round list in the regional elections encompassing the entire Left including LFI, was the face of green progressives who had become disillusioned after a stint with Macron's La République En Marche party. Then, the Hulot sex scandal, which had been brewing for two years, breaks. Jadot had to distance himself from Hulot and suspend Orphelin from his campaign team as a precaution. Jadot falls again in the polls.

At the same time, the "People's Primary" (an initiative for a primary vote to designate a single candidate from the Left) was resuscitated on the whim of Anne Hidalgo, who endorsed it. And, from out of nowhere, Christiane Taubira (a socialist former minister who introduced same-sex marriage) entered. Neither Jadot nor Mélenchon entered the primary, but only Jadot faced calls to take part from organisers, the press, and a significant number of climate activists.

Taubira, who had the advantage of not belonging to any party and thus had an easier time building a coalition, won the primary. Jadot came second, far ahead of Mélenchon and Hidalgo. In a matter of weeks, completely unprepared, Christiane Taubira sank in the polls. Without a local power base, she was unable to gather the 500 nominations signatures from elected officials. The logic of the majority judgment voting system would have it that Jadot, as the "best second choice", should replace Taubira. Yet another disaster: an internal putsch sees third-place candidate Mélenchon designated as the choice of the Left, with Taubira throwing her support behind him. Mélenchon edged forward slightly and could play the tactical vote card.

His formidable oratory skills, an American-style campaign full of special effects, and a media operation honed over 11 years did the rest. This technologist personality cult is utterly repellent to Green culture, but those are the rules of the game in the Fifth Republic. And if you play the game, you accept the rules. In the end, exit polls estimated that 50 per cent of the vote for Mélenchon was tactical.

The Green campaign was underwhelming in a few areas: there was no courting of figures who had been close to the Greens for years, subpar communication, and an official poster that featured neither the words "climate" nor "ecology". But as we can see, these external causes only had an effect through internal causes: the inability of certain Greens to be team players, the awkwardness to manage demands for left unity, the refusal to play the role of naysayers in that most traditional of ceremonies in the much-denigrated Fifth Republic. Those are the underlying problems that must now be addressed. They are not simple.

The question of a united Left

There are two dominant narratives on social media. From Mélenchon: “We won [sic] because we never got mixed up in grubby deals for a united Left.” And from voters who first and foremost see another first-round defeat for the Left: “It’s because there was no unity.” Yet they voted for someone who did not want unity. Firm in its belief that the left/right cleavage has been replaced by a populist divide (in the Latin American/Podemos sense) that pits the people against elites, all that LFI talked about was defeating the far right.

But it is a “left-wing” (and you might say “republican”) marker that is enough to have it both ways: unity of the people, supposedly free of political allegiance, and unity of the Left. Given the far right’s dominance among working-class voters, Mélenchon owed most of his success to the “united left” vote, despite having scorned this terminology. He also picked up a sizable share of the second-generation immigrant vote which previously went to the Greens, seen as the party fighting for their parents’ right to vote and against Islamophobia.

Although Yannick Jadot lost, the blame lies with the Green Party (Europe Écologie – Les Verts) leadership. The 13.5 per cent won at the 2019 European elections was a resounding success for Greens when compared to the 6.5 per cent of the Socialists. Consequently, the very young party leadership with no experience of electoral volatility (the Greens had achieved equivalent or better scores in the past) thought they were kings. Despite pleas from within the party not to make the same mistakes as the Socialist Party over the years and LFI in 2017, they behaved as if the 21st-century Left (which must undoubtedly be rebuilt around political ecology) had already won. At the 2019 local elections, they insisted on purely green coalitions in the first round. It worked in some places, but in Marseille, Green candidate Michèle Rubirola was suspended for heading up the Printemps Marseillais list (a united left-wing list), while Montpellier was lost amid squabbles over the alliance with LFI.

More realistic, Yannick Jadot quickly understood that despite the Greens’ success in the European elections and even more spectacular gains in most major cities, the presidency could only be won by a united “greened” Left. To that end, he organised a meeting of the Left in April 2021. For his trouble, he was scolded by the party leadership. Borrowing from Éric Piolle (the Green mayor of Grenoble since 2014, thanks to a pact with LFI), Jadot called for an alliance of “all humanists”, an old euphemism designed to court the traditional Left. But no overtures were made in their direction – nor towards the intellectuals, artists, economists and trade unionists traditionally sympathetic to the green movement – to bring them on board with a campaign limited to Greens, Socialists, and the Communist Party.

This hyperfocus on political parties was a serious error by the Greens. Nebulous and associative, the green movement is naturally averse to political parties. The Greens grasped this in their 2009 European election campaign and proposed the idea of a “cooperative” to circumvent the restrictions inherited from the 1907 Charter of Amiens, which stipulates that unions must be independent of political parties. But the leadership at the time, Cécile Duflot and Jean-Vincent Placé, dismissed this innovation out of hand. Yet participating in the People’s Primary were many activists involved in climate marches and other civil-society initiatives, confident that Yannick Jadot would easily win. However, the Jadot campaign treated the primary with contempt, squandering an opportunity to breakthrough as the tactical vote on the Left, as well as the thousands of non-partisan volunteers whom he would lack.

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The question of radicalism

Sandrine Rousseau and others criticised Jadot for “A lack of radicalism. We’re selling boilers.” Although selling insulation and solar panels is a more accurate portrayal of Jadot, the underlying point is correct. Like the question of unity, however, it is complicated. In reality, the Greens appear too radical for many people. Voters cited “degrowth”, the Green mayor of Bordeaux’s refusal to put up a Christmas tree, the shunning of foie gras by Green-led city councils, and the hike in petrol prices proposed by Rousseau as reasons to opt for Mélenchon.

It comes back to an age-old problem for the Greens. It has taken them 40 years to convince people of the environmental emergency. At the 2019 European elections, left-wing voters expressed their preference for the Greens and for tasking Europe with the international *coordination* of a quiet revolution. Since the 2020 local elections, they have been willing to elect Green mayors who will *protect* them from environmental disasters. But they are not yet ready to vote for a head of state who will *impose* the lifestyle changes that the climate agenda demands. This national hole in the electoral racket is an especially serious problem because a green revolution based on the principle of “think globally, act locally” can only succeed with finely tuned coordination between the international (the EU being the only sufficiently powerful lever), national, and local levels.

Jean-Luc Mélenchon understood this perfectly; he promised more organic food and kept his 12 key pledges focused on social benefits and employment rights (wages, working hours etc.). Out of the question, however, was Jadot’s approach of asking people to give up the “comforts” (like putting on a jumper instead of the heating, driving at 100 rather than 120 kilometres per hour on motorways) in solidarity with the Ukrainian resistance while also abandoning natural gas and nuclear power. Caution that carries more of that a whiff of Georges Pompidou (who famously counselled: “Don’t piss off the French”) than it does the Munich Agreement: Engie, France’s biggest gas supplier, stated that it is mainly businesses who would have to ration energy in the event of an embargo on Russian gas.

The radicalism of Jadot’s campaign was to strive to take power now to immediately implement the 149 proposals from the Citizen’s Convention on Climate. The latest IPCC report should have strengthened him but the electorate is still not ready. Yet the desire for a revolution, a green one, is there too. Macron even titled his 2017 manifesto *Révolution*. Aware of the problem, Yannick Jadot spent his time explaining the sensible, technical solutions offered by a radical programme. But as Jacques Lacan said: to be erotised, the real must wrap itself in the imaginary and the symbolic. The word revolution perfectly encapsulated this aspiration.

Reconciling revolution and tranquillity, or other oxymorons such as “joyful frugality”, has been a challenge for political ecology for the past 40 years. It has still not been resolved, neither by Yannick Jadot, nor by Jean-Luc Mélenchon.



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