

Where Next for the French Greens?

Article by Alain Lipietz

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The European elections were yet another confirmation that the future of French politics remain very much open. Populist forces, in their far-right and progressive neoliberal incarnations, led the pack, while the old parties failed to recover. But there were signs that the Le Pen-Macron axis can be overcome. After a campaign marked by climate activism and ongoing gilet jaunes protests, the Greens emerged as a strong independent force on a much divided Left. With elections on the horizon at all levels in 2021 and 2022, Alain Lipietz analyses the new cleavages beyond left and right, the limits of populist strategy, and what it all means for the future of political ecology in France.

For both good and bad reasons, France's 2019 European election felt like the most important in years. To start with the bad, national politics dominated this time around. A single proportional countrywide list replaced the constituencies used in previous elections. This new system personalised the debate around the lead candidates. With the exception of the Europe Écologie Les Verts (EELV), the candidates framed the vote as a re-run of the 2017 French presidential election. It did not always pay off, but it certainly spiced up the campaign.

More positively, the European question came back. The big losers were those calling for an anti-Macron referendum rather than a debate on European politics. President Emmanuel Macron presented the elections as part of a Europe-wide battle between populists, Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National (RN) on the far right and La France Insoumise (LFI) on the far left, and progressives, his La République En Marche (LREM). Marine Le Pen and her lead candidate happily obliged.

Rassemblement National received a similar result as in the first round of the 2017 presidential election, but this time it came out on top. RN won 23 per cent of the vote in May and LREM 22 per cent. In 2017, Le Pen achieved 21 per cent and Macron 24 per cent in the first round. The third and fourth-placed parties from 2017, which back then hovered around 20 per cent, were routed. Laurent Wauquiez's centre-right Les Républicains received only 8.5 per cent and Jean-Luc Mélenchon's far-left La France Insoumise only 6.3 per cent, poor showings in part explained by their lack of a clear pro-European message.

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European idealism, but a sort of insurance policy.*

The ceiling for RN and LFI votes was already apparent from the 2017 election, which revealed France to be Eurosceptic, but not drastically so. The RN grasped this, claiming to no longer want to leave the EU or the single currency, and referencing Matteo Salvini and Viktor Orbán's standing up to Brussels. By proposing to leave the treaties, Mélenchon condemned LFI lead candidate Manon Aubry to defeat, despite her moves to soften the position with talk of disobeying rather than rejecting the EU outright.

Disobedience is nothing new. It is precisely the tactic Salvini and Orbán use to trample over the EU's values. Not to mention French governments of all stripes, who have never subscribed to the dogma of a 3.0 per cent budget deficit. Britain's Brexit misadventures seem to have vaccinated other member states against leaving. Instead, they remain but do whatever they want. This is a dangerous basis for European integration, but explains the decline of movements calling for EU exit.

On a more positive note, Europe is beginning to represent a bulwark, not against war between European countries (an old argument that is, wrongly, deemed no longer effective), but against a hostile outside world dominated by authoritarian nationalism from China to Russia to the United States.

Unfortunately, opinion polls show that the French, with good reason, believe that Europe does not provide enough protection when it comes to foreign, social and environmental policies. The desire to remain in Europe no longer represents European idealism, but a sort of insurance policy.

The failure of left-wing populism

The RN's electoral victory should not mask both a slight erosion in support in percentage terms, down 1.5 per cent compared to the 2014 European elections, nor gains of hundreds of thousands of votes (turnout increased considerably). With its rhetoric on crime, its xenophobia, and its personalisation of politics, the RN seems to be satisfying its base: the economically insecure working class and the traditional lower middle class threatened by globalisation. This political position is called "populism" by the media, which makes sense as far as political style is concerned. But it is confusing and misleading when populism becomes a euphemism for extremist and anti-European. This is exactly the ideological, and unacceptable, ruse used by Macronists to put the RN and LFI in the same box.

La France Insoumise is left wing in that it is anti-racist, in favour of social progress, and even increasingly ecologist. But, like the RN, Emmanuel Macron, and the lead candidate for Greens Yannick Jadot, it eschews the description "left-wing". It claims that the 20th century right/left cleavage of social conservatism and free enterprise versus cultural liberalism and social legislation is obsolete. But then what has replaced it?

We should remember that populism is a term that dates to the period between 1930 and 1950. It describes a political force whose leader claims to represent 'the people' against the supposedly out-of-touch 'elites' of the business world and the state. Franklin Roosevelt in the United States, Lázaro Cárdenas in Mexico, Getúlio Vargas in Brazil, and Juan Perón in Argentina were all branded populists and implemented left-wing interventionist and illiberal social policies.

That definition still holds true, but with one important change: the populists of the 1930s relied upon vast civil society organisations such as unions or corporations. Today's populists have freed themselves from these organisations reducing Peronism's famous balcony politics to rallies and TV appearances. Notwithstanding this difference, the RN and the LFI are very much part of the populist tradition. As is Macron, who built his campaign without a party by embarking on a listening tour of the French heartlands, and who governs from the top down with contempt for civil society organisations.

This form of neo-populism now spans the political spectrum, left, right, and centre. Its success stems from the crisis in political representation caused by the mismatch between an essentially national political space and a globalised (though principally European) economic space. National representative politics has been left powerless. This impotence fuels either hope of a true European politics (something that André Gorz began calling for the labour movement to adopt in the 1960s) or calls for a strong leader like Orbán or Salvini who can show Brussels a

thing or two. [1] It follows that where support for the European Union has risen, as is the case across northern and western Europe with the exception of England, populism has been stopped in its tracks.

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But there is a deeper cause underlying the erosion of civil society. Economic liberalism has fragmented society and reduced individuals to simple sellers of their labour power. 150 years of advances, that had structured society as a place of dialogue and compromise between organised social classes, has been rolled back. France's *gilets jaunes* movement is the one of the first revolts against this uberisation of society, against a form of capitalism without organised labour. A similar configuration in 19th-century France led to the Bonapartism of Napoléon III, a phenomenon that Marx described as typical of a society structured like a "sack of potatoes".[2]

Like Bonapartism, the neo-populist style assumes that the people are not organised. This suits an RN espousing a form of xenophobic and economically interventionist Führerprinzip. It does not fit with Macron's centrism, nor with a left-wing movement that stands for democracy and self-organisation of the people. Chantal Mouffe, a former Gramscian, may advocate left populism that "constructs a people" through mass organisations and debates. But this neo-populist style appears unsuitable for a movement such as LFI that wishes to strengthen the people's control – through self-organisation – over the relationship between workers and employers and the relationship between humankind and the environment.[3] This contradiction was laid bare at the European elections when La France Insoumise proved unable to harness the *gilets jaunes* movement. Elsewhere, the slump of the Five Star Movement in Italy highlighted the incoherence of governing at the same time as purporting to be anti-systemic and in favour of disobedience and rebellion.

Left-wing populism attempts to resolve these contradictions with references to Carl Schmitt, the right-wing philosopher who provided the theoretical underpinnings of the Nazi regime. Carl Schmitt's critique of liberalism certainly has plenty to offer the Left. But his two key positive theses pose a problem:

1. *Sovereignty is the power to decide in a situation of exception.* This is the theoretical basis for the rhetoric of rebellion against the EU. But it can also be taken to mean that there are no rules, something that suits economic liberalism but is ultimately damaging to social justice and the environment, which require collective rules at a supranational level.
2. *The people are defined against their enemies (plutocrats, technocrats, and the like).* A politics based not on collective dreams, but on an enemy responsible for all ills, is susceptible to targeting the wrong enemies: immigrants, the Rothschilds (an anti-Semitic trope), and so on. The hysterical rhetoric against the "President for the rich, Macron-Rothschild" undermined the appeal of left-wing populism to an electorate that would rather attack social structures than individuals.

Nascent green success

Like in the rest of north-west Europe, green politics has made a leap forwards in France. The campaign took place against the backdrop of huge climate demonstrations and strikes. This new generation is the first to grasp that the crisis is no longer about the future but their own survival. But this success is by no means commensurate to the urgency of the crisis. With 13.5 per cent of the vote, EELV gained 4.5 per cent compared to 2014, 2.8 per cent short of their 2009 result.

Jadot and EELV's first handicap was that, overnight, every other party declared itself to be 'green'. Major figures from the 2009 European election list even came out in support of Macron's list. Its second handicap was that for the past decade the EELV leadership has worked with social democracy in order to reach elected offices. Many senior figures left to be closer to ruling parties, be it the Parti Socialiste (PS) or LREM, creating a crisis of ideas and morale.

The chief merit of the French Greens' electoral recovery lies in that they, particularly lead candidate Yannick Jadot, reasserted their freedom to rebuff the constant calls in the media to merge into a united left-wing list. Their decision was vindicated. With a 13.5 per cent vote share, they trounced a traditional left discredited variously by its historic slowness in understanding the importance of environmental issues (the French Communist Party), support for economic liberalism (Parti Socialiste), or anti-European left populism (La France Insoumise). Even the greenest of the centre-left breakaway parties, Génération.s, only managed 3.3 per cent on a left-green platform. The message from voters was clear. The 21st-century left can only be built around political ecology with its democratic, social, and environmental strands. Furthermore, as the dominance of EELV shows, the best party to represent this movement is the original, rather than all-too-recent imitations whose leaders were complicit in government in the growth-at-all-costs catastrophe.

President Macron's attempt to court the green vote by poaching several of its former stars failed miserably. Macron was elected on a "neither left nor right" platform but has only governed to the right in terms of social justice and the environment. As a result, he has broadened his base at the expense of the centre-right. But Socialist voters who supported him in 2017 switched to EELV in 2019 rather than going back to PS.

The widespread climate protests, some of which were joined by gilets jaunes, were the key factor in EELV's success other than its escape from PS subordination. Climate became the central theme of the campaign. Even some in the Catholic world, responding to the papal encyclical *Laudato Si*, voted green. This focus may even have been excessive: the school children were protesting more to save the living world from the Earth's sixth mass extinction event than the climate. It is hard to know why this is the case. But Communist poet Francis Combes suggested this answer to me: "Every social movement has its own poetic imaginary." That of ecology is the living world: the polar bear, not the ice floe.

EELV was successful across the board. Geographical analysis shows that it polled well in the bastions of the intellectual middle classes as in outlying regions (by renewing its pact with regionalist parties), in republican strongholds as in newly secular Catholic heartlands. This presents political ecology with the problem of finding common ground. Fortunately there is nothing populist in the structures from which political ecology emerged. EELV is the political expression of an autonomous movement made up of unions and organisations of varying shades of green.

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Europe Écologie Les Verts's first problem is its need to stabilise its relationship with the complex web of organisations involved with political ecology. Many members of organisations working on climate, the living world, social and solidarity economy, food transition, and solidarity with the Global South just will not join a party, because the very idea of a party is so discredited in France. This cooperation will necessarily have to be loose and flexible, as grassroots organisations and unions in France have jealously guarded their political independence since the early 20th century.

Political alliances pose another problem. Since the 1789 revolution, France has been divided into two main camps, right and left, each represented by parties. This representation is in crisis. Polls show that 75 per cent of people think that the right/left divide no longer makes sense. However, it remains powerful during elections due to France's national two-round electoral system. To attract voters, candidates indicate in advance with whom they will

ally in the second round. This is unlike in Belgium and Germany where proportional systems are used. There, candidates are elected based on their manifesto and it is only after the election that coalition platforms are negotiated.

Political ecology includes left-wing values from past centuries such as democracy, human rights, and social justice. To win a majority, it will need to ally with the modern heirs to these traditions. But to these values, political ecology adds a responsibility towards nature and future generations, something that the traditional left ignored. The Left pursued growth relentlessly in the name of progress or jobs. Then, by converting to economic liberalism, they left their core values behind.

In the face of today's evermore tangible environmental crises, every party wants to be green. This shift ranges from genuine commitment to simple greenwashing and varies within parties too. The next elections in France will be local and regional, before the national elections in 2022. This still leaves some time for the Greens to set out their goals and test the sincerity of their potential allies on the local level. Unlike Schmittian populism, political ecology must build alliances around its values: protecting the living world and promoting a society reconciled with itself and its environment. To do so the task is clear: unite the resolute, persuade the undecided, and side-line the diehard productivists with a politics for the common good.

Footnotes

[1] *Stratégie ouvrière et néo-capitalisme*, Seuil, 1964.

[2] *Le 18 Brumaire de Louis Bonaparte*, 1851.

[3] Chantal Mouffe, Iñigo Errejón, *Podemos: In the Name of the People*, Lawrence & Wishart Ltd, 2016.



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