

Beyond Fracture

Toward a New Progressive Coalition in France?

By Bruno Jeanbart

Over the past three years, France has undergone unprecedented political change. The old governing parties have almost disappeared, and the cleavage between the traditional left and right has narrowed as new political forces have emerged. A progressive president has arrived without the support of the traditional partisan and institutional machinery—a feat never seen before under the Fifth Republic.

These upheavals were a long time in the making. As early as 1992 and the creation of the euro under the Maastricht Treaty, a new political divide arose around the agreement. This new cleavage between supporters of national withdrawal from the European Union and those who supported greater integration was gradually added to and superimposed on the traditional left-right opposition. And it partly explains some of the most striking political events of the past 30 years: far-right leader Jean-Marie Le Pen's qualification for the second round of the 2017 presidential election; the rejection by referendum on the European Constitutional Treaty in 2005; and the results of the 2017 presidential election, when the candidates of the Socialist Party and the Conservative Party—traditional political forces that have produced France's presidents since 1965—were eliminated in the first round.

For many decades, the French political landscape was organized around three divides: ideological, social, and territorial. These sometimes overlapped perfectly: a left-wing France rooted in the working classes and regions indifferent to religion versus a right-wing France inserted into the various strata of the bourgeoisie and the peasant world and located in the territories of Catholic culture. These old political, social, and territorial cleavages have not disappeared. They still leave their mark on the political orientations and choices of French voters. For example, in the 2012 presidential election, the classic left-right confrontation reappeared in the second round and revealed, albeit imperfectly, a class cleavage and geography of votes that led to the runoff between François Hollande, then-leader of the Socialist Party of France, and the incumbent conservative president, Nicolas Sarkozy.

In addition to this traditional division, there are now more transversal divisions at work in many areas of social, cultural, economic, and political life in French politics. Three of them in particular make it possible to understand the decisive changes that have affected the political orientations of the French today: The first

stems from the globalization that began at the end of the 1980s and the reactions that it provoked in a context of economic and financial crisis (since the 1990s, more than 60 percent of the French have seen globalization as a threat).¹ The second refers to the construction of Europe, which over time has given rise to growing skepticism and opposition (73 percent considered France's membership of the EU in 1987 as a good thing, whereas only 45 percent did in 2020).² The third is rooted in a postmaterialist revolutionary movement that is producing a whole new set of expectations and demands from citizens.

The progressive narrative in France: Defensive and divided

Today's crises have disrupted and opened up spaces for the process of political radicalization. While we are far from the scenario of 1929 and the Great Depression years that followed, France today faces significant chances for protests: 55 percent of French people are ready to take part in a demonstration to defend their ideas.³ Over the past 10 years, the proportion of those ready to take to the streets has wavered between 50 percent and 66 percent of the population. Strikingly, 42 percent of French people think that a demonstration is the most effective way of exerting influence on policy decisions in France, while only 50 percent think that voting is the most effective way.⁴ France is one of the only countries in Europe where the act of public demonstration is adorned with so much virtue.⁵ Many French people are not happy with the world as it is and are looking for alternatives.

These alternatives involve questioning the capacity of the national political system to protect the country from the pernicious effects of globalization: 49 percent of French people want the capitalist system to be thoroughly reformed. Sixty percent of those polled have a poor opinion of globalization, and only 23 percent consider that France must open up more to the world today.⁶ For a majority of French people, globalization is associated with a litany of negative effects: Between 55 percent and 65 percent believe it has had a negative impact on the environment, purchasing power, employment, and wages.⁷ These responses cast French respondents as an ultracritical camp that has little equivalent in other countries. Already by 2011, compared with 10 countries, France came last in its positive perception of the market economy and capitalism and the country's place in global economic competition.

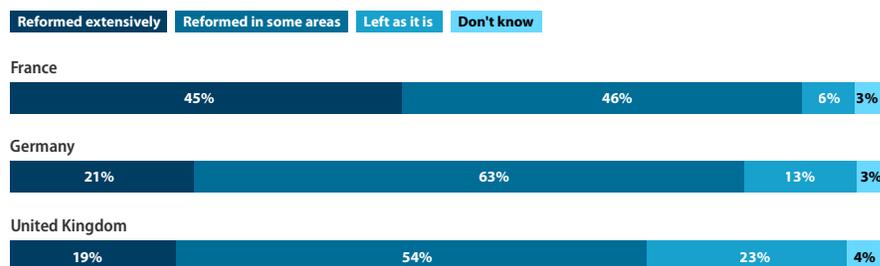
Yet progressives in France have been particularly uncomfortable for years on this subject. The progressive movement has not managed to respond to the concerns raised by globalization among the popular categories, which formed the electoral base of most progressive-leaning parties. It is badly affected by two consequences of this phenomenon: Globalization exposes workers to increased economic pressures, weakens the welfare state, and significantly reduces the productive and restorative capacities of public authorities. For a long time, progressives have given the appearance of verbally opposing globalization without having any policy

consequences against the forces of globalization when the party was in power. It has exacerbated the sense that politics is meaningless and politicians powerless in this new world. Instead, the progressive movement is stuck between a strategy of demon-globalization (and its corollary, the choice of a so-called Frexit, or even the rejection of the market economy) or a strategy of defending the beneficial effects for the country in order to better correct the upheavals it has induced.

FIGURE 1
There is strong support in France to reform capitalism

Support for reforming the capitalist system extensively or in some ways in France, Germany, and the U.K.

Question: "Would you personally prefer for the capitalist system to be..."? (N=1,766)



Permission: Granted by author and OpinionWay.

Source: OpinionWay, "Political Trust Barometer" (Paris: 2020), available at https://www.sciencespo.fr/cevipof/sites/sciencespo.fr.cevipof/files/Barome%CC%80tre_vague11b%20.pdf.

This has led many French progressives to adopt a purely conservative and defensive attitude toward the welfare state as it existed rather than one of transformation in order to make it more effective in protecting workers in the era of globalization. It has also made the majority of French progressives defenders of the achievements of the past rather than visionaries for the future. Since his emergence as a political leader, Emmanuel Macron has been trying to change this approach by tackling globalization at its core and making it a major cleavage with the populist extreme right. For the president of the Republic, it is not a question of refusing globalization—which would be illusory—but of accepting it, understanding the destabilization it brings to our societies, and responding to it. To date, however, he has not succeeded in convincing the voters who are concerned about globalization that the responses he proposes will lessen its most harmful effects.

Moreover, since 2002 and the end of Lionel Jospin's government, the left has not been able to bring together all of its elements—the Socialist Party, Communist Party, and ecologists—in a coalition. For Jospin, this coalition allowed him to govern the country multiple times (1981–1986, 1988–1993, and 1997–2002). But under the presidency of François Hollande, the Socialist Party ruled without the radical left and quickly without the ecologists. Today, these three political forces are competing and even opposing each other. Although the parties all agree on a number of important points such as immigration or climate change, strong divi-

sions are appearing on the issue of France’s relationship to the EU. The divide is now between a radical left that is almost secessionist on one side and the socialists and ecologists who remain in favor of European integration on the other.

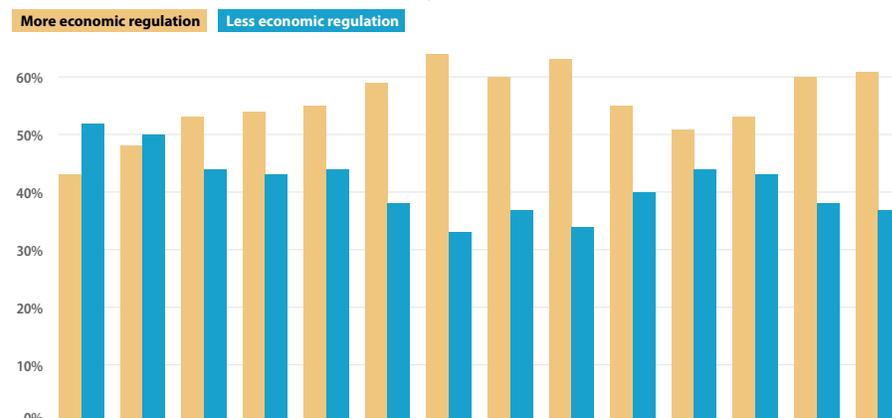
Former socialist Prime Minister Manuel Valls summed up this situation in 2016 by referring to the emergence of “two lefts” now irreconcilable.⁸ He answered with this expression to the radical left, which began to consider President Hollande as “worse” than conservative President Sarkozy or even the far-right National Front.⁹ There was no longer any chance to build a future progressive coalition with political leaders who denigrate the center-left so much and refuse to assume the reality and responsibility for the exercise of power. In addition to the divide between the traditional left-wing parties, there is also a divide within Macron’s movement. To win the presidential election, Macron brought together the left-wing (by capturing two-thirds of the socialist electorate) and center-left progressives in a movement that resembled former U.K. Prime Minister Tony Blair’s Third Way. But in a country that loves to wield symbols in politics, and in which social liberalism has always been considered heretical, the historic parties of the left have swung into radical opposition to the president by challenging, among other things, his economic policies.

The progressive-leaning parties in France have, however, significant assets that could allow them to become the country’s main political force. Over the past 20 years in France, and even before the collapse of Lehman Brothers, progressive ideas gained strength in economic and social terms, to the detriment of liberal ideas: Public opinion is now expecting more economic regulation to repair the fractures caused by the 2008 financial crisis.¹⁰

FIGURE 2
There is strong support in France for more economic regulation

Public support for economic regulation in France, 2006–2020

Question: “In order to deal with economic difficulties, do you think that we need...?”



Permission: Granted by author and OpinionWay.

Source: OpinionWay political polling conducted between 2006 and 2020. See Opinion Way, “Derniers sondages publiés,” available at <https://www.opinion-way.com/fr/sondage-d-opinion/sondages-publies/politique.html> (last accessed December 2020).

However, the advantage that progressives can gain is not absolute: While the French are getting closer to progressive positions, they are also getting closer to those of the Gaullist, neo-Colbertist right (favorable to the economic intervention of the government), embodied by Sarkozy during his 2007 campaign.

After the financial crisis at the end of 2008, these trends have become more pronounced: The demand for state intervention in the economy and the trust placed in the trade unions is becoming even stronger. There is, therefore, a real opportunity to seize upon the potential for confidence in collective institutions (the state, and trade unions in particular), especially as it counterbalances the rise of individualism in French society, to advance a progressive policy agenda.

Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

The temptation to retreat reinforced

The global coronavirus pandemic and the fears it raises are strongly aligned with international economic, cultural, and political issues that France already faced in the multiple challenges of openness and globalization.

OpinionWay's research shows a clear movement toward withdrawal in the French electorate during the COVID-19 crisis. Indeed, there has been a 10-point gain among those who believe that France should "protect itself more from today's world"—from 54 percent to 64 percent between February and April—and remains at these high levels in September 2020 (63 percent).¹¹ This demand for protection is expressed mainly on economic issues, with an increase from 55 percent to 69 percent among those who express a desire for more economic protection. At the same time, the demand for protection in the face of migratory flows remains at a particularly high level (83 percent).

This protectionist backlash seems to be affecting a specific segment of voters who were previously open to internationalization but who are concerned about the general economic situation of the country in the aftermath of the pandemic. This movement of closure is fueled by anger rather than fear and reflects, at least in part, the dissatisfaction of these voters with the government's management of the health crisis.

The crisis also reinforces a demand for protection, which potentially goes hand in hand with a demand for an increased role of the state, but not necessarily in the sense that the progressives understand it. Seventy-three percent of French people want more control of national borders and believe that it is up to the French state, and not the EU, to control them.¹² The issue of protection in today's world is not disconnected from the demand for state control. Eighty-five percent of those who want more protection believe that borders will have to be better controlled in the future, and 82 percent of respondents believe that it is up to the state and not the EU to do

so, even though this was not a self-evident consideration. This return to state power is also characterized by the fact that 82 percent of respondents think it is important to have strong executive power in the face of health or environmental crises.

A first analysis of the political effects of the health crisis linked to the coronavirus pandemic could lead one to think that the rejection of neoliberalism and globalization implies the return in force of progressive ideas. Certainly, there is a surge in confidence in major public services, especially in the hospital sector; a high level of trust in the information provided by doctors, much more so than in official statistics from the government; and a strong demand for economic protection. This could indicate that the French have shifted to the left of the political spectrum. However, the distribution of political positions has not changed between February and April 2020—and this stability is surprising: 19 percent of the French in both polling sets are on the left; 34 percent in the center; 27 percent on the right; and 20 percent outside the scale.¹³ There is therefore no evidence of a partisan shift, and the left remains a minority in opinion.

The state, yes—but an effective, not impotent, state

Because of the French welfare state, debates in France don't focus on health insurance but instead are much more about the ability of hospitals to care for people sick with COVID-19 during the emergency. This has been a huge issue in France because of an ongoing, yearlong social movement of hospital staff. Public spending on hospitals, wages of hospital staff, coordination between hospitals and general practitioners, and between public and private hospitals, are ongoing issues in the public debate. The French have always been taught that they have the best health system in the world, so many found it surprising that they were not doing better than other countries in fighting this virus.

To that extent, the COVID-19 crisis reactivated one of the most important issues addressed during the national debate last winter, following the yellow vest protests of late 2018. In a country where public spending is one of the highest in Western countries (56 percent of GDP),¹⁴ people are pretty disappointed by the weakness of the state's policies, especially on health. A tax revolt was at the roots of the yellow vest movement in a country where the anti-fiscal sling has historically enjoyed great legitimacy in France. Protests against taxes also played a major role in the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789; and at the end of the 19th century, leagues of taxpayers mobilized against the state's tax claims and extended their action when the income tax was created in 1907. It has resurfaced today, amid the pandemic. Many discovered on this occasion that France, for example, has only 5,000 resuscitation beds—four times less than in Germany. This situation has shocked the French in a country of both high level of tax and public spending, and this misunderstanding challenges, once again, France's national model.

French peoples' distrust in society is a key driver of populism

Political mistrust is a fundamental movement that affects all democracies, and, in particular, affects confidence in institutions and governments. The French situation combines a twofold mistrust that is much stronger than that of our neighbors: distrust of the government, which has been confirmed by the health crisis, and distrust in interpersonal relations. If the French trust their family circle, they find it much more difficult to cooperate in a society with strangers. Only 1 Frenchman in 5 says he can spontaneously trust others, compared with 1 Englishman in 2 or 2 Danes in 3. The French show a very high satisfaction rate when asked about their individual happiness but an incredible pessimism about their collective situation.¹⁵ This is partly due to their mistrust of the rest of the population. Only half of the French population considers that their fellow Frenchmen have shown civic-mindedness during the lockdown, compared with 80 percent in Germany or the United Kingdom.

This distinction between the inner circle and the rest of society is reflected in trust in institutions: The French generally place their trust in their mayor, at a close local level, while mistrust increases as the institution moves further away. The country's very vertically organized and hierarchical structure has not allowed a strong civil society to flourish. This disfunction is evident in the French education system, where pedagogical practices are still marked by the reign of the lecture. In the Programme for International Student Assessment surveys, 70 percent of teenagers say they have never worked in groups on collective projects—a far contrast from the cooperative efforts observed in northern countries or even in Italy.¹⁶ This vertical functioning is then found in companies with a degree of autonomy and delegation that is the lowest of all OECD countries and in a state where decision-making is highly centralized.

At every stage of their lives, the French are faced with a hierarchical power that does not cultivate mutual trust. The coronavirus crisis has also laid bare the mistrust of French institutions and government toward its own citizens. In no other country in Europe has the lockdown been accompanied by such bureaucratic surveillance, with multiple attestations to be signed for any permitted activity. This is a unique infantilization of the population, which reflects French authorities' lack of trust toward the citizens and their capacity for social cohesion. It is a brake on restoring citizens' confidence in democracy in order to combat the temptation of political authoritarianism that threatens the country.

In this context, it seems necessary to invent new ways of exercising democracy. Over the past two years, several experiments have been carried out in France to remedy this divide. In 2019, President Macron launched a national debate¹⁷ throughout the country to enable citizens to express their priorities for the country. In 2020, a Citizen's Climate Convention debated for several months on the solutions to the problem of climate change and drew up 149 proposals.¹⁸ The yellow vest movement in 2018 called for the implementation of a citizens' initia-

tive referendum to better take into account the expectations of the population. The referendum, which has not been used in France for 40 years (except on European treaties), is nevertheless a tool that has a long tradition in French political life and is rather defended by the conservatives (the first to use it was Bonaparte, hence its political inscription on the right). For now, neither the great debate nor the citizens' convention have helped to overcome this mistrust, as few of the demands made by these bodies have so far led to political decisions. One of the main difficulties for this is that the French distrust not only the elites but also other citizens, making the decisions taken or demanded by some of their fellow citizens suspect. In this sense, reactivating the use of referendums would probably be more likely to renew the democratic link.

The fight against climate change, more than ever, as an opportunity for political differentiation

Between 2010 and 2020, climate change has emerged as the main environmental concern of the French.¹⁹ This subject is now well ahead of natural disasters in polling responses. Indeed, the latter is proving to be less worrying than it was after storm Xynthia in 2010. Similarly, pollution of aquatic environments and the increase in household waste no longer seem to worry the French as much. However, citizens' sensitivity to environmental protection varies according to the socioeconomic context. When concerns about unemployment are high, the environment appears to be a less crucial issue. Conversely, the French are more concerned about environmental issues when the national economic situation improves. In fact, environmental awareness tended to decline after the 2008 crisis and in a context marked by the deterioration of the job market, while it has increased sharply over the past two years, when unemployment has been falling.

The French public has not yet been exposed to the potential seriousness of the economic situation thanks to government measures on partial unemployment. However, initial data on the economic impact of the lockdown show that France has experienced one of the deepest recessions in Europe in the first half of the year. One explanation is linked to the structure of the French economy, which is highly dependent on tourism. Labor relations is another factor; the French are very reluctant to return to work because they are suspicious of the ability of companies to enforce health regulations.

The impact of the coronavirus crisis on unemployment levels, which began to show up in public opinion in September, relegates the climate issue to the background once again, from the second to the fourth more important issue.²⁰ This will likely occur despite the fact that climate change constitutes a strong dividing line between progressives and populists and allows the former to impose their own agenda on an issue to which the populists provide no response.²¹ If climate change becomes less of a priority in France after this year's crisis, there will likely be a growing divide between the two camps, and positions are likely to become

increasingly irreconcilable. That could make the climate issue all the more an opportunity for political distinction for progressives. In France, however, it is the environmentalist party that embodies this political issue, and it is tending more and more to tip over into radical opposition to President Macron. This political difficulty will therefore have to be resolved in French politics moving forward.

The path for a new progressive agenda

The world is likely experiencing a paradigm shift: a moment when a society redefines its hopes and fears, classically happening in the crucible of crises. Deep tensions exist between health and work during the COVID-19 pandemic: Two rival definitions of security are at play, one older and one newer. To gain protection against some risks, we inevitably must expose ourselves to others. This is the core dilemma for numerous countries between returning to work or remaining confined. Today's dominant paradigm, directed toward low unemployment, is severely tested by the pandemic. Society's tolerance for environmental and sanitary disasters has become narrower, and some risks we lived with in the past are now unacceptable—and the 20th-century paradigm shaped around economic security cannot generate credible solutions alone. Moreover, a belief in prosperity, the very cornerstone of the 20th-century paradigm, is no longer convincing to many people. Growth may exacerbate regional, urban, and environmental problems; but without growth, the cost of confronting global warming—not to mention aging populations, emerging health problems, or the artificial intelligence revolution—will be more difficult.

The struggle to reconcile economic and environmental objectives is an intellectually sophisticated effort marked more by trade-offs than win-win outcomes. For the progressives in many countries, this means the construction of a new political coalition that allows this compromise.

In France, with the election of Macron in 2017, the political landscape is restructured into three poles: an ecosocialist democratic left, a globalizing liberal center, and an identity-conservative right. This recomposition has taken place under the influence of two cleavages—one dominantly cultural (cosmopolitan versus identity-based) and the other dominantly economic-social (anti-globalization versus liberal). Alongside the two poles of the main cleavage between national identities and liberal-globalizers, an ecological pole is developing that is likely to gather left-wing voters who despair of its current leaders and parties to take their concerns into account.

In order to advance a progressive agenda, the issue is therefore to succeed in the fusion or alliance between the historical left-wing movements and these new ecological currents. The advantage of this strategy is its sociological complemen-

tarity: On the one hand, environmentalist parties attract a young, educated, urban electorate that leans to the left but is not always easy to mobilize and is sometimes tempted by a radical left that is less and less in a position of exercising power but of purely protestant expression. On the other hand, the traditional parties of the social-democratic left could focus on winning back its historic electorate, namely the popular and middle classes.

In parliamentary democracies that use proportional representation, it is relatively easy to imagine such an alliance being established through government agreements. In countries that use majority voting, such as France, this is done through alliances between the two rounds. It has been done in several cities during this year's municipal elections, as in Paris, Lyon, or Montpellier.

This union between social democrats and ecologists is not new in France. But on the occasion of the local elections of 2020, it has taken on new strength for two main reasons. First, because this alliance is no longer just a rallying point for ecologists and socialists as a back-up force to win a runoff and thus a simple support for the social-democratic social political agenda. The balance of power between the Socialist Party and the greens is now more balanced and is therefore, depending on the territories, behind a leader who is sometimes socialist but sometimes also ecologist. In the 2020 local elections, it allowed the left to win the election, both with a socialist candidate as Anne Hidalgo in Paris or green candidates as Grégory Doucet in Lyon or Michaël Delafosse in Montpellier.

On the other hand, part of the French population seems tired of the old political parties and is looking for new forms of organization. In this context, greens have appeared to be better able to embody this political renewal than the Socialist Party, which is perceived nationally as a party of the last century, and their alliance makes it possible to get around this obstacle.

However, what this implies for the progressive movement is to rethink its place within the political landscape in depth, integrating environmental policies much more strongly into it. It is a question of finding a historic compromise between the usual priorities of the social democrats (the search for growth, increased employment, and improved working conditions for workers) and those of the greens, the preservation of the environment, of course, but also the defense of minorities (ethnic or sexual) or the fight against gender inequality.

This task will not be easy and today may be more feasible to implement in metropolitan areas, as was the case before, than at the national level. It is not only a question of promoting these new stakes for progressives but also, above all, of thinking about how to reconcile them so as not to abandon historical objectives that are more topical than ever with the post-COVID-19 economic crisis. If they don't, it could be deceptive for a popular electorate that has never enjoyed abundance and pushes it even more toward populist political offers.

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Endnotes

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