IPS

INTERVIEWS 07.04.2022

‘Let’s be careful with the idea of a right-wing shift’

Political scientist Vincent Tiberj cautions against the notion that French society is becoming increasingly right-wing. Here’s why

On 10 April 2022, the first round of the French presidential elections will take place. With three right-wing candidates – Valérie Pécresse, Eric Zemmour and Marine Le Pen – accumulating almost 40 per cent of voting intentions in recent polls, it seems legitimate to speak of a right-wing shift in French politics. You, however, argue it difficult to base this analysis on polls. Why?

First of all, it is clear that something is happening – at least at the political level. We talk more about immigration, integration, identity, what it means to be French, and conspiracy theories like the ‘Great Replacement’. That’s clearly something new in French politics. But I have some questions when it comes to the notion of a right-wing shift.

First, there’s the polls themselves. They have been conducted by using only one method of interviewing: via the internet. We remember the last regional elections, when the polls overestimated the score of Le Pen’s *Rassemblement National* by nine to ten points.

So we need to interrogate a possible bias of these kind of polls. A colleague and I have been working on a Commission National Barometer. This is an annual barometer on racism. We usually conduct interviews face-to-face – except for the last five years, when we were able to have both a face-to-face and an internet survey. The result showed that, systematically, the face-to-face method favoured the left. This tells you something about the process of recruiting people or, to put it simply, the people who open their door. At the same time, the internet poll was always much more on the right.

The second problem is that we have a difference between people who say they will participate and the rest. So far, it has always been difficult to predict electoral turnout, particularly in France. What we are missing in the opinion polls are working-class people who say they will

abstain, young people who say they will abstain, and even a segment of the left-wing citizens who my abstain because they are not convinced by the political offer on their side.

These two arguments change the perspective on what's going on in terms of voting intention.

In a recent study, you also mention surveys that are rarely picked up in mainstream media. In 2021, for instance, voters were asked what their most important issues are. If looking at the mainstream media, one would assume that it must be immigration. But actually immigration was only the fifth most important topics, behind social security, climate change, and purchasing power. In this context, what exactly then lies behind the idea of a right wing shift in French politics?

First of all, there are some political actor, who are very pleased with the notion of a right-wing shift. They are pleased because this is their voters, their agenda, and their solutions. If I was Éric Zemmour, I would be very glad that we are talking about immigration. And I will use every possibility to talk even more about immigration. At the moment, he is proposing a new shocking measure every two weeks. Recently, for example, he proposed to create a 'Ministry for Remigration' that would be in charge of bringing back people to their supposed countries. This is called deportation. And he probably knows that he would have a lot of constitutional problems. But this is not the point. The point is to be at the centre of the news cycle. This is the exact strategy that Nicolas Sarkozy used in the 2007 election.

A rather new problem, however, is the French media system. We know this well from American politics. Something happening regarding the cable news networks. The news is not supposed to be entertainment or opinion, but an information network. But they have clearly developed their own political agenda. This was impossible in French public and private media in 2007. Now, you sometimes have people who are presented as experts on the news, but they are just a member of Zemmour's party.

In short, let's be careful with this notion of a right-wing shift – in terms of agenda and in terms of values, such as: are you in favour of or against redistribution? Are you in favour of or against immigration? Are you in favour of or against gender equality? What you actually see is that the level of support for the left-wing socio-economic values, but also cultural values, is very high.

You have developed an index for tolerance in French society. It actually shows that tolerance in French society has been increasing in the past 30 years. Can you explain why?

First, let me say that this index is very reliable. It measures the evolution of tolerance from 1990 to 2019. It shows a trend toward more tolerance fuelled by generational renewal. The younger you are, the more tolerant you are. This is also a question of education. With the French public getting more and more educated, the level of tolerance is increasing. Last but not least, even the oldest persons are more tolerant today compared to 20 or 30 years ago because they have integrated in their mind that's okay, for example, to be a gay or to be a Muslim.

You have some variation depending on who is governing. Usually when the left governs, tolerance decreases. When the right governs, tolerance increases. It says a lot about the way society is actually making sense of its inner diversity. This is particularly striking when you look at what's going in 2015, and later, during the terrorist attacks in France. It could have been just like in the US, an increase of Islamophobia. But it has not been the case. French society at large was able to make a distinction between terrorism, Islamism, and being of Muslim faith.

This sounds like a conducive environment for the left to gain strength. Why is it failing to do so?

What is striking is the traditional right – and even Marine Le Pen and Éric Zemmour – are what you could call 'the last side standing'. By that, I mean that most of the French electorate has now problem with the political offer in general. This is clear when you ask them about partisan proximity: do you think you are on the left or on the right? People know who is who, who is where, but they don't want to place themselves anymore. Even when they are aligning in terms of values – being strongly in favour of redistribution or cultural diversity.

In the past, these people used to be close to a political party. This is no longer the case – and it affects the left more strongly. It is also the case for the right but less so, partly because the right is very connected to the oldest and rich people. But when you are on the left, your natural electorate is young people. And millennials don't trust the political offer anymore.

That means the right could win by default – just because the other side is not able to create a new electoral connection with a lot of French citizens. This is really troubling.

That's what makes the left so weak these days?

It's not reserved to the left. When you look at *La Republique En Marche!*, *Les Républicains* or even the *Rassemblement National*, they don't have a real strong connection anymore with French society. We

used to talk about the party as a society. Those days are gone – and it affects the left in particular.

Take Jean-Luc Mélénchon of *La France Insoumise*. This is his third campaign. Everybody knows him. Everybody knows his qualities and shortcomings. But he's not the kind of guy who will sit at a table and ask for people's advice. He does whatever he wants. The same thing is true for the Greens. The number of French citizens who are close to green associations, who buy local products and so on is in the millions. But when you look at the party, it has less than 10,000 members. This is nothing. And what about the Socialist Party, which used to be the main French party? It is polling at almost two per cent. When Benoit Hamon received six per cent in 2017, it was considered an industrial accident. What's happening now is a catastrophe.

Clearly, the left as a political offer has a lot of work ahead.

This interview was conducted by Daniel Kopp.



Vincent Tiberj
Bordeaux

Vincent Tiberj is a university professor, researcher at the Centre Emile Durkheim and research associate at Sciences Po Bordeaux.