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“PRIMARIES”: A TOOL FOR PARTY UNIFICATION?

*SOME THOUGHTS BASED ON THE CASE OF EUROPE
ÉCOLOGIE-LES VERTS*

An import from the United States and now widely held throughout Europe, primaries are said to resolve the double crisis of representation and “political demobilization.”(1). By providing registered party members, groups including members and sympathizers, or the voters at large with the opportunity to select a candidate for a presidential election directly in closed, semi-closed, or open primaries respectively, they supposedly help transcend the logics of the party “apparatus” and revitalize democracy. However, comparing the primaries of recent years helps put their effects into perspective. By making the selection of candidates over-rely on the logics of the media and offering an ever-renewed environment for the internal race for leadership, they have above all stripped activists of their prerogatives in the selection of political personnel and increased the personalization of politics (2). Looking beyond party rhetoric at the latest analyses, one clearly sees not only the multifariousness, but also the cyclical and strategic nature of primaries.

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In this respect, Europe Ecologie-Les Verts (Europe Ecology-The Greens – EELV) provides an ideal topic for an investigation of this mode of candidate selection, and this for at least two reasons.

First, as a party concerned with showing its avant-garde nature, EELV claims to have long and systematically conducted primaries. Indeed, the environmentalists have experimented all types of primary elections, with the notable exceptions of the unaffordable open primary and the upcoming 2017 “left” primary. Therefore, detailed analysis of all green primaries allows one to understand what the candidates’ legitimization within or outside the party owes to political configurations, electorate delimitation, and vote modalities.

Next, having no chance of winning the presidential race, EELV does not seek to select a candidate among its members most likely to become president. The point here is to select a candidate capable of publicizing environmentalism with the general public and those voters who do not necessarily cast their vote for the green party despite a certain sensitivity to the environmental cause on the one hand, and on the other hand, to claim the party’s monopoly of environmental representation in the political sphere. The EELV candidate must indeed be able to rally the “environmental people” and – at least during the presidential campaign – show the unity of political ecology, a unity all the more mythicized as it has never existed.

Thus, the media’s and party’s stakes closely intertwine on the occasion of green primaries. Therefore, one must not only pay attention to the environmentalists’ relation to the communication constraints imposed on them by the media under the pretense of maximizing electoral performance, but also apprehend the issues, either inherent or external to the party, that structure the primary election process. The EELV case provides an opportunity to reexamine the method of selecting candidates through primaries at a time when political insiders implement and seek to impose the renewal of democratic practices and alternatives to party oligarchies.

FROM ONE PRIMARY TO THE NEXT

In 1988, the Greens had a quasi-monopoly on environmentalism. For their first participation in the presidential election (environmentalists were present in 1974 with René Dumont and in 1981 with Brice Lalonde, but the party was only created in 1984), they wished to rally the environmental movement around a consensual candidate from within their ranks. However, local representative and spokesperson of the party Antoine Waechter, who won the first closed primary of April 11, 1987 with

(1) Political demobilization is measured in terms of irregular voter turnout, failure to register to vote, improperly filled out registration forms, and the decreasing number of party activists. See Frédérique Matonti, ed., *La Démobilisation politique* (Paris: La Dispute, 2005), 16.

(2) Rémi Lefebvre, *Les Primaires socialistes: La fin du parti militant* (Paris: Raisons d’agir, 2011) and “Du PS à l’UMP. De quoi les primaires sont-elles le nom?,” *Savoir/agir*, 32 (2015): 21-28.

59 percent of the ballots, failed to drum up the support of the entire environmental community for his run for presidency. Indeed, many activists and sympathizers opposed his “neither right nor left” line and preferred campaigning for Pierre Juquin, a former member of the Communist party who ran on his own platform. Aided by his close staff and, for the first time ever in the history of the environmental movement, by a communication consulting-firm, Antoine Waechter received 3.78 percent of the ballots.

In 1995, Dominique Voynet ran in the presidential election for the first time as “the party’s leading figure.” At the time, political ecology was still straddling several party organizations and as the Greens were anxious to rally the entire “left-green” community, they took part in the Political and Social Ecology Conference and the environmental primary organized immediately thereafter. The implementation of the primary was entrusted to a coordinated alliance of seventeen members comprising eight Greens and a pluralist vote organization and monitoring committee including three Greens, two members of *Alternative rouge et verte*, and one delegate representing the “non-affiliated.” (3) Dominique Voynet, who had beforehand been selected by green members through mail vote, won the election with 79.8 percent of ballots. Despite several weeks’ negotiations, only a few minor environmental organizations (*Ecologie autrement*, *Ecologie fraternité*, *Convention pour une alternative progressiste...*), activists of the *Ligue communiste révolutionnaire* acting not in the party’s name but theirs, and prominent figures (Daniel Cohn-Bendit, Théodore Monod, René Dumont, Charles Piaget, Pierre Rabhi, Susan George...) supported her candidacy. Dominique Voynet was the sole environmental candidate running for presidency – as Brice Lalonde and Antoine Waechter withdrew from the race – and only polled 3.32 percent of the vote despite the support of the communications agency *Agence verte* and several recognized political analysts.

In 2002, after temporarily opting for a ranking of their candidates by a simple vote, the Greens organized a closed primary that had been in the making since June 2001. Bègles Deputy Mayor and former anchorman Noël Mamère came first with 6,015 votes (out of 10,372 registered activists) and 42.78 percent of the vote, while Alain Lipietz obtained 25.65 percent. A second round was organized in accordance with the Green party’s bylaws, which stipulated that candidates must get more than 50 percent of the vote. This time, 6,494 out of the 10,372 registered green activists (or 64.9 percent) took to the polls. With 3,258 votes, Alain Lipietz led Noël Mamère (3,183) by 75 votes. However, as green bylaws also required that blank votes be included in the tally (52 in all), Alain Lipietz’s margin of victory was reduced to a mere 23 votes – but this thin advance did not jeopardize his nomination. However, discontent among many activists and causing his thin victory at the primary to be

(3) In order to run, candidates had first to gather a hundred signatures from party members in three different regions (with a minimum of ten members per region) and be members of the electoral body, which comprised all the registered members engaged in the Conference process individually or as members of one of the participating organizations. Local individuals or groups that had not taken part in the process yet but wished to vote could do so provided they signed up before October 4, 1994, as the formal vote was scheduled for October 23.

challenged. The Green leadership then decided to schedule an internal referendum in October 2001 asking “Do you want Alain Lipietz to continue running for office?” Out of the 8,772 mobilized registered members, 64.4 percent responded negatively, and Alain Lipietz was replaced by Noël Mamère. A media favorite, the popular former journalist won a record 5.25 percent of the vote, while the other environmental candidate, Corinne Lepage (Cap 21), only polled 1.88 percent.

The 2007 presidential election context was particularly difficult for the Greens. Memories of the 2002 primary and of the results of the first round of the presidential election on April 21 gave a specific orientation to debates and reflections very early on. The Green party knew that the media coverage of the competition between candidates would be unfavorable, focusing on useful vote, possible duels, or the relevance of a unique candidate for the left... In spite of it all, many were the candidates seeking nomination. As early as November 21, 2005, Dominique Voynet officially announced in a letter to the activists that she was running in the primary. She was nominated after a closed primary whose modalities were fixed as early as January 2006 even though there were still many people supporting a withdrawal in favor of the Socialist party’s candidate and militating for a unique candidate representing the anti-globalist and anti-liberal left. Five candidates having received the required 100 signatures – from at least five regions – competed in this two-round election. After two months of internal campaign, Dominique Voynet was in leading position with 35.45 percent of the vote and faced a runoff against Yves Cochet, who had polled 28.33 percent. They tied in the runoff with a two-vote difference. After a recount and validation of disputed ballots by the party’s statutory committee, the executive college decided to organize another second round of voting on the advice of the interregional national Council (the party’s parliament). The vote resulted in Dominique Voynet’s victory (by 57 votes) with 50.59 percent of ballots. The twists and turns of the recount and the candidate’s low final score naturally led anti-globalist José Bové, who had the official support of several party cadres and leaders, to heckle her presidential campaign. Dominique Voynet eventually polled a low 1.57 percent.

In contrast with the preceding episode, the 2012 presidential election context was favorable to the environmentalists. They effectively achieved electoral success on several occasions, polling 16.28 percent in the 2009 European parliamentary elections and a more modest 12.5 percent in the 2010 regional elections. The emblematic leader of this success and founder of the 2009 environmental coalition was MEP Daniel Cohn-Bendit. According to the media, he was a likely EELV candidate in the case of a primary involving all “left-wing” parties but he immediately declined the offer. Several candidacies for nomination were filed then withdrawn in favor of other candidates, and in the end a semi-closed primary pitted Eva Joly (former examining magistrate), Henri Stoll (Kaysersberg’s ecologist mayor), Stéphane Lhomme (representing the Sortir du Nucléaire network), and Nicolas Hulot (former host of the television show Ushuaia) against each other. All four candidates had obtained the 200 required endorsements. After three debates and a postal or Internet vote by 25,269 voters (representing a turnout of 77.33 percent), Eva Joly polled 49.75 percent (or 12,571 votes), Nicolas Hulot 40.22 percent (or

10,163 votes), Henri Stoll 5.02 percent (or 1,269 votes), and Stéphane Lhomme 4.44 percent (or 1,172 votes). Supported by the party's leftmost members – and the most attached to the purist forms of political ecology, Eva Joly beat the “Ushuaia candidate” in the runoff with 58.16 percent of the vote. This last primary – the most professional in terms of communication, cost more than 200,000 euros (4) and inflamed the media to a much greater extent than the environmental campaign itself, which ended with Eva Joly's receiving 2.31 percent of the vote (5).

ARE PRIMARIES A STRENGTH FOR THE WEAK ?

Thus, whether they were a search for a personality external to the party but emblematic of the environmental struggle or a legitimization of a party “figure,” individual primaries were less an occasion for mobilizing activists and sympathizers unevenly interested in an election lost from the start than an opportunity to promote a radical form of environmental commitment and assert the legitimacy of the green party over the other political parties and the numerous associations making up the environmental activist movement.

One notes that the leading “figures” of the party did not necessarily receive the highest scores in the primaries and on the first rounds of the presidential elections. In fact, they very often crystallized the discontent of activists opposing their political lines and the negative stereotypes of the media and the general public. Therefore, nominating figures emblematic in one way or another of the environmental struggle but peripheral to the party was not that unproductive after all, especially as the candidates could pride themselves not only on the activists' votes but also on a legitimacy acquired outside the political sphere. For example, Noël Mamère's concern for human rights and Eva Joly's integrity were highly valued regardless of their final scores.

It also comes out that beyond the diversity of political configurations and party choices, none of the green candidates' victories in the primaries have allowed the party to claim a monopoly of environmental representation in the political sphere. Indeed, if this mode of selection contributes to assigning a temporary ranking to leaders and staging a certain form of internal democracy in this and other parties, it does not help EELV assert its legitimacy over and in the name of political ecology. All the candidates ran against opponents claiming that they too adhered

(4) The 2007 primary only cost 8,000 euros, spent exclusively on transportation at the rate of 1,500 euros per candidate.

(5) See Vanessa Jérôme, “Mécanismes d'investiture et principes de légitimité chez EELV: Du partisan au médiatique?,” AFSP 2011; “Penser les meetings comme des émissions de télévision: Le tournant médiatique d'EELV,” AFSP 2013.

to political ecology, and the fact that Noël Mamère and Dominique Voynet were the sole candidates to face these opponents concretely in the first rounds of the presidential elections is due to Corinne Lepage's and José Bové's being the only ones to receive the 500 endorsements required by law. Thus, paradoxically, EELV candidates owe their apparent monopoly to the letter of the institutions of the Fifth Republic – institutions that they also harshly condemn.

One may then wonder about the relevance of a mode of candidate selection that is costly in many respects, not only for EELV but for any other “small” party. Most probably, the stakes of the primaries are solely to build the widest consensus possible around a candidate likely to prevail in a competition that is more symbolic than electoral and to turn the candidate's party into a more or less lasting rallying point. Similarly to what happened with the emergence of campaigners for the “No” vote at the time of the European Constitution referendum, each definition of the electorate is a likely attempt, at least formally, to cross party lines, and each setting of the nominating calendar a means to exert influence in the negotiations between the various organizations. The use of primaries would then merely be a means to ascertain that minor parties respond to the rallying cry of the presidential election and submit to its political and media logic, and to gauge their willingness to take the risk of uniting at the expense of their own organizational interests.

(6) The party's membership has always oscillated between 8,000 and 10,000.