

# A hard right turn?

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**Is France heading to the right, as everyone seems to think? According to Vincent Tiberj, it all depends on how this rightward turn is defined. For now, the French prefer the left's values.**

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Reviewed: Vincent Tiberj, *La droitisation française. Mythe et réalités* (France's rightward turn: myths and realities), Paris, PUF, 2024, 335 p., 15 €, ISBN 9782130837954

Vincent Tiberj, a specialist of electoral sociology, offers, with his new book, an excellent illustration of Émile Durkheim's famous axiom that one must discard all preconceptions. In public debate, there exists, after all, a widely shared view that France is veering to the right. This claim, which seems confirmed by election results and polls,<sup>1</sup> is also supported by some specialists, such as Luc Rouban.<sup>2</sup> Tiberj, however, wants to show that, contrary to appearances, France is undergoing a largely invisible opposite trend: it is moving to the left "from below"--a development that is, admittedly, hidden by the fact that it is moving to the right "from above." How can this paradox be explained?

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1 For a recent example, see: [https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2024/11/25/les-idees-du-rn-s-installent-dans-l-opinion-mais-le-doute-grandit-sur-sa-capacite-a-gouverner\\_6412870\\_823448.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2024/11/25/les-idees-du-rn-s-installent-dans-l-opinion-mais-le-doute-grandit-sur-sa-capacite-a-gouverner_6412870_823448.html)

2 Luc Rouban, *La vraie victoire du RN*, Paris, Presses de SciencesPo, 2022.

## Questions of method

The case for this counterintuitive claim results from Tiberj's theoretical framework and method. He is one of a handful of French political scientists to draw on the work of Ronald Inglehart's "value change" theory, which prioritizes the study of cohorts through longitudinal preference indices (such as the European Values Study). Tiberj is not, however, an orthodox disciple of the American sociologist: he diverges from the theory of post-materialism on several points, notably the idea that socio-economic values should be relegated to a secondary role and the tendency to overlook the autonomy of politics, which, for Tiberj, is not simply a reflection of cultural change. Put differently, while acknowledging the fruitfulness of Inglehart's method and hypotheses, Tiberj reproaches him for embracing a teleological illusion (we are headed straight to a radiant post-materialistic future) and for failing to account for the way political actors politicize (or abandon) particular values.<sup>3</sup>

Tiberj does, however, embrace Inglehart's belief that it is necessary to think diachronically in terms of cohorts. It is by applying this method that he seeks to show that France is undergoing a vast turn to the left, due to generational renewal and higher levels of education. His argument proceeds in several steps. The first is key, as it establishes that France's population is indeed undergoing, as Inglehart theorized, a "silent revolution"<sup>4</sup> accompanied by increasing "cultural liberalism."<sup>5</sup> In concrete terms, this means that France is quietly moving towards support for equality between men and women, more tolerance for immigrants, their descendants, and Jews, and acceptance of sexual minorities. On economic issues, the trend is, according to Tiberj, more uncertain, as the French oscillate, from period to period, between more social democratic and free-market preferences.

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3 Vincent Tiberj, *Les citoyens qui viennent. Comment le renouvellement générationnel transforme la politique en France*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2017, p. 21 et ss.

4 Ronald Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution. Changing Values and Political Styles Among Western Publics*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1977. For a book in French by the same author, see *Les transformations culturelles. Comment les valeurs des individus bouleversent le monde?*, Grenoble, Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 2018.

5 Gérard Grunberg and Etienne Schweisguth, "Libéralisme culturel, libéralisme économique" in CEVIPOF, *L'électeur français en questions*, Paris, Presses de SciencesPo, 1990, p. 45-70.

## A rightward turn "from above"

Though a rightward turn "from below" has not occurred, there is evidence of a rightward turn "from above." To support this thesis, Tiberj begins by emphasizing the "conservative atmosphere" that pervades intellectual life and the media. It is hard not to hide one's frustration when reading the chapter he devotes to this topic: to call attention to the "moral panic" that is unique to sectors of the intellectual world, a laundry list or a description of conservative reappropriation of French republicanism will not suffice. The pages devoted to the transformation of the media landscape are more convincing, as Tiberj rightly insists on their role as the echo chamber of the very real rightward turn of the "fast thinkers" who enjoy privileged access to TV studios, the radio, and the press-, for which social media functions as a filter bubble. By influencing the political agenda and the framing of public issues, intellectuals and the media are clearly central figures in the rightward turn "from above" that Tiberj describes.

This phenomenon is also the result of choices made by political actors in constructing available options. Drawing on Elmer Schattschneider's work, as a corrective to Inglehart's disregard for politics,<sup>6</sup> Tiberj studies the way partisan actors frame values. This makes it possible to understand how France went from a multicultural consensus in the late twentieth century to focusing on immigration in the early twenty-first century. Tiberj observes a new paradox: while prejudice is declining in the broader population, it is now overtly embraced by a minority, which heightens the mistaken impression that the electorate is turning rightward. Another major factor that Tiberj puts forward is the disconnect between citizens, who since the 2008 crisis increasingly favor redistribution, and political parties, which still, to varying degrees, embrace free-market policies.

## The great resignation

Yet Tiberj's key argument is what he calls the "great resignation." He uses this term to refer to the ever-widening gap between citizens and the electoral process. This is why it is important not to proceed like mainstream political sociologists: the analysis

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<sup>6</sup> Elmer E. Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy*, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960.

of election results perpetuates the myth of a rightward turn, as elections reflect the outlook of the increasingly narrow segment of the population--which may soon be a minority--that still expresses itself through the ballot box. Declining turnout--not to mention unregistered voters--skews the lessons that can be drawn from elections. While baby-boomers continue to vote en masse, post-baby-boomers vote a good deal less often, and millennials even less. Tiberj explains that each new generational cohort becomes even further removed from voting, even as interest in politics continues. In Tiberj's work one finds Pippa Norris' claims about "critical citizens"<sup>7</sup> applied to France: increasingly educated citizens become less inclined to vote due to their dissatisfaction with the options and, when they do vote, they follow the logic of negative polarization--that is, expressing rejection rather than explicit support.

Dissatisfied with democracy in its narrowly electoral form, these "aloof citizens" turn away, practicing a form of protest democracy while holding out for a deliberative (or sortition-based) democracy. On this point, another frustrating aspect of the book is worth noting: Tiberj's proposals to democratize democracy (more national and local referendums, citizens' conventions) are not particularly original. Even so, the conclusion he reaches is convincing: electoral majorities (when they even exist) are now social minorities. Affluent baby boomers dominate, to the detriment of later generations. The post-baby boomers who do vote are the most well-off. Meanwhile, the working classes take refuge in systematically refusing to vote. This explains the observable disconnect between the dominant (leftwing) values and the (rightwing) values proposed by political parties and widely supported by voters. It explains the interminable agony of a left that seems incapable of returning to its socioeconomic priorities and is crippled by a lack of credible candidates. And it explains the ever-increasing success of the National Rally, which has succeeded in "de-demonizing" itself while entering the mainstream thanks to external factors (the center and the right's triangulation strategy, as well as Éric Zemmour's campaign, which allowed the National Rally to "recenter" itself).

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<sup>7</sup> Pippa Norris, *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Government*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999.

## The future of an illusion

It is not possible, within the limits of a book review, to refer in detail to all the points that the cohort analysis method brings to light. By way of conclusion, we simply note that one of this book's great merits is to call attention not only to values, but also of the problematic decline in the representativeness of elected officials. While presidential elections still draw high turnout, other elections often result in political majorities that rest on an increasingly narrow sociological basis. This situation is clearly untenable and requires us to rethink the foundations of political legitimacy and to exercise institutional and procedural creativity to get more recent cohorts to participate in a way that is not merely negative. It is necessary to invent what might be called a "new assertive policy."

If Tiberj's book encourages long-term optimism, it does not entirely assuage short-term pessimism. What will the future look like? It is most likely that, following a transitional moment during which the baby-boomers will continue to dominate the electorate by responding to the current "right-wing" options, they will gradually disappear before being replaced by cohorts that are more tolerant and open: this is a variant on Inglehart and Norris' thesis in *Cultural Backlash*.<sup>8</sup> But as Tiberj suggests at the very end of his book, the path towards a radiant future could be disrupted by an offramp whose consequences are unpredictable: a far-right party's victory.

The risk entailed by a rightwing turn "from above" is that, thanks to the logic of self-fulfilling prophecies, we find ourselves in a surreal situation: a society consisting of citizens who are increasingly progressive and increasingly critical and distant from the political game that is governed by an inexperienced elite that leans dangerously towards to "illiberal democracy." While Tiberj's analysis is likely to reassure (progressive) readers with long-term outlooks, it is insufficient to dispel the fears of those who see dark clouds gathering in the skies of French democracy.

First published in [laviedesidees.fr](http://laviedesidees.fr), January 15<sup>th</sup>, 2025. Translated by Michael Behrent with the support of [Cairn.info](http://Cairn.info). Published in [booksandideas.net](http://booksandideas.net), January 8<sup>th</sup> 2026.

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<sup>8</sup> Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash. Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019.