A "majority strategy" for the environmental transition : moving beyond minority-based approaches

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IDDRI

Executive summary

This *Note* examines the strategies adopted by environmental actors in France. It argues that we are entering a new phase, in which traditional minority-based strategies are reaching their limits and need to be complemented by a "majority strategy" : a shift towards approaches capable of engaging and sustaining broad-based support. The analysis proceeds in two steps. First, it seeks to understand this new dynamic; second, it outlines possible directions for the next phase of the environmental movement.

1. The limits of current strategies

Minority-influence strategies, in which a coherent and persistent minority seeks to challenge prevailing norms and influence the majority, have been crucial in placing environmental concerns on the political agenda and embedding them more firmly in public opinion. However, these strategies now appear to be reaching their limits. While public interest in environmental and climate issues remains high, it seems to have plateaued after years of growth.

From the perspective of public opinion, several mechanisms help to explain this situation :

- the growing targeting of environmental issues by certain actors;
- political polarization around environmental issues;
- the transformation of environmentalism into a marker of social distinction;
- militant tactics that can reinforce existing divisions in pursuit of political and media visibility;
- the formation of a "bubble" that tends to isolate the movement.

A further set of factors, linked to underlying theories of social change, may also help to explain this sense that a phase is reaching its limits :

- The promotion of environmentalism has gradually favoured a "responsible consumer" approach, emphasizing individual behaviour. This approach has clear limitations, as consumers are constrained by the contexts in which they operate;
- Environmentalism has often been treated as a stand-alone, single-issue concern, with insufficient consideration given to broader social and economic questions. This has contributed to the isolation of the environmental cause and made it difficult to embed it within a wider social project. We therefore propose using the lens of the social contract to better align environmentalism with social concerns, recognizing that an ecological transition reshapes the rules of the game and calls for a collective renegotiation of our social pacts as a whole.

2. Opportunities for building a "majority strategy"

In light of these limitations, this *Note* identifies several avenues for building a "majority strategy" for the ecological transition :

- Embodiment, diversity and adaptation : diversify the figures who embody environmental action, recognize the range of approaches, and acknowledge that environmental action evolves and adapts as it reaches new groups;
- "Where there's a way, there's a will" : act on the environments and contexts in which people operate to make sustainable practices both possible and desirable, rather than relying solely on individual injunctions. Collective change must be made realistic and easy to adopt;
- Moving beyond single-issue politics : integrate environmental objectives into a broader project rooted in everyday concerns (employment, purchasing power, etc.). The aim is to reconfigure political divides based on living conditions rather than solely on environmental issues;
- Justice and agency : take account of social inequalities in the face of transition costs, extend forms of support beyond financial assistance, and strengthen people's capacity to act by recognizing multiple pathways and forms of engagement.

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Introduction

At a time when the promotion of environmental issues is at a crossroads, and when civil society actors are questioning their methods and strategies, this *Note* seeks to contribute to the collective debate, drawing on recent work by Parlons Climat and IDDRI.

In recent months, media discourse has increasingly focused on a single term and a single idea : the *environmental backlash*. This is often understood as a reversal of public opinion on issues related to the ecological transition. However, this interpretation is inadequate in two respects : first, it does not accurately reflect actual public concern in France, as shown by the work of Parlons Climat. Second, it offers a misleading interpretation of the current situation. Framing recent developments primarily in terms of a backlash in public opinion[1] neither helps us to understand what is actually taking place, nor does it provide a useful basis for thinking about what comes next.

This *Note* proposes an alternative interpretation. We argue that the ecological transition is undergoing a phase change, marked by the gradual exhaustion of minority-influence strategies and the continued politicization of environmental issues. To encapsulate this shift, we introduce the notion of a "majority strategy", which captures the transition to a new phase in the ecological transition.

In short
We argue that this is not a moment of collapse in public support for the transition project, but the end of a phase characterized by agenda-setting, awareness-raising and mobilization. Now that environmental issues are highly visible and firmly established, further expansion of the cause is encountering new limits and, in some cases, generating forms of backlash. At the same time, environmentalism is becoming more deeply politicized and divisive. We are entering a new phase focused on the politicization and implementation of an issue that, having moved from the margins to the centre of public debate, now faces different kinds of obstacles. In this context, we propose the idea of a "majority strategy" and outline several courses of action for navigating this new phase.

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1   This perspective does not fully capture the risk of opposition to the transition when public policies are implemented unfairly or when the distribution of contributions is perceived as inequitable.

1. The limits of current strategies

Limits and risks from a public opinion perspective

As outlined in the box below, it is above all the combination of two approaches (minority action by civil society actors, and the role of experts in raising awareness among the general public and decision-makers) that has succeeded in placing climate and environmental issues on the political and media agenda and ensuring broad public awareness. These approaches have produced strong agenda-setting effects and sustained high levels of public interest and concern. But what are we observing today?

The strategies of environmental actors for bringing these issues to public attention

This box is not intended to trace the full genealogy of social mobilization around environmental issues, which lies beyond the scope of this Note. Rather, it provides a framework for understanding the logic of minority influence.

To propose a new interpretation of the current situation and identify strategic avenues for action, it is first necessary to revisit the strategies that have led to the current level of attention given to environmental issues, particularly since the 1970s. Broadly speaking, and while recognizing that a wide range of social movements and professional groups have been involved from the outset, environmental issues were initially taken up primarily by experts and scientists (Comby, Dubuisson-Quellier and Ollitrault). Their mobilization led to these issues being placed on the agenda for the first time, both internationally and nationally. Organized around political decision-makers, this phase resulted in progress at various levels (e.g. the establishment of legal frameworks and the launch of international negotiation processes).

Subsequently, organized civil society brought environmental demands into the public sphere, seeking to engage public opinion through both institutional advo-cacy and popular mobilization, offline and online. Over time, their repertoire expanded to include increasingly diverse tactics, aimed at shaping public opinion and leveraging media attention to exert pressure on policymakers. Drawing on S. Moscovici's approach, this trajectory can be described as one in which environmental mobilization has largely relied on a logic of minority influence: the idea that a consistent and persistent minority, holding firm in the face of dominant discourses and resisting co-optation by particular interests, can contribute to shifts in social norms (Lalot et al., 2017). Strategically, this approach tends to avoid compromise on core principles, with the aim of reshaping majority norms. Its influence on the majority therefore operates through the deliberate creation of a form of conflict.

Turning now to the idea of a widespread backlash : while this has become a dominant media narrative in recent months, the reality of public opinion appears more nuanced. Levels of concern for environmental issues, their prioritization and support for public transition policies remain historically high[2]. To date, there is no evidence of a general collapse in public support. However, after years of sustained growth, we appear to have entered a plateau phase.

To understand the mechanisms at work, it is necessary to examine the available data more closely. While the importance attached to environmental issues has increased steadily over the past twenty years, this growth dynamic now seems to have stalled. **A number of indicators and weak signals suggest that we may be reaching the end of a cycle[3]** :

- the importance attached to environmental issues, rated by respondents on a scale from 1 to 10, has fluctuated between 7.6 and 8.1 over the past ten years, remaining at a high but stable level;

- although the proportion of French people who consider climate and environmental issues to be a priority remains high (above 25% in most surveys), it has begun to decline slightly;

- while the share of climate sceptics had been falling in recent years, it now appears to have stabilized or even increased;[4]

- there are now roughly equal proportions of respondents who believe that climate issues receive too much media coverage and those who believe they are not covered enough – whereas a few years ago the latter group was far larger;

- since 2016, the proportion of French people who say they sympathize with environmental movements has declined, with those expressing critical views sometimes outnumbering those expressing favourable ones.

This situation can be partly explained by external dynamics and contextual factors, particularly current economic and geopolitical tensions, as well as the growing cultural opposition to environmentalism articulated by some political actors. However, the focus here is on a set of internal mechanisms that may help to **explain why this phase of growth is coming to an end and why minority-based strategies are now reaching their limits**. These strategies no longer appear sufficient to sustain further expansion in public support.

+ Gaining influence = becoming a target.
First, environmental and climate issues are closely tied to public policies that alter existing economic and social balances. In earlier phases, when these issues had limited traction in public opinion and attracted relatively little attention in policymaking, they generated little organized opposition. As their importance has grown, however, they have increasingly been perceived as a threat by certain sections of society. These groups have since mobilized and developed strategies aimed at discrediting both the goals of the ecological transition and its proponents. This is one of the key limitations of minority tactics : the more influence a movement gains, the more its opponents tend to organize to keep it in a minority position. This dynamic is reinforced by the fact that social movements, particularly in their early phases, often need to maintain a high degree of internal coherence or "purity" to exert influence and shift the Overton window.

2   Looking over a longer time frame, the most recent ADEME barometer shows that 25% of French people consider this issue a priority. This figure is 13 points lower than in 2019, the peak year of the climate movement, but remains higher than in earlier periods such as 2015–2018. The importance attached to the environment, rated by respondents on a scale from 1 to 10, has fluctuated between 7.6 and 8.1 over the past ten years, and has in fact increased slightly between 2023 and 2024. In our most recent study, we tested support for 13 public policies related to the ecological transition. On average, respondents supported an average of 8.8 of these measures. Most of the policies tested are supported by a majority of respondents and many enjoy a broad consensus (over 70% support). Looking at trends over time for ten transition polices, average support has increased from 58% in 2018 to 64% in 2024 (ADEME).

3   ADEME, *Représentations sociales du changement climatique.*

4   https://www.parlonsclimat.org/etude-climatosceptiques

+ Polarization of the political spectrum : A second mechanism at work is the political polarization that has developed around climate and environmental issues. In its initial, highly technical and scientific phase, action on climate change was largely perceived as non-partisan. Today, however, it has become a core priority and part of the political "DNA" of left-wing voters[5] and, to a lesser extent, centrist voters. Actors on this side of the political spectrum have recently invested more heavily in these issues, proposing transition policies aligned with their historical values and ambitions. By contrast, while this has not always been the case over the past thirty years (as illustrated by initiatives such as the Grenelle process under Nicolas Sarkozy or Jacques Chirac's famous 2002 speech), some actors on the right and far right now either avoid these issues altogether or engage with them only in negative terms, criticizing proposals put forward by other parties. We are thus witnessing a move away from a form of "soft consensus" around environmental issues.[6] While this polarization is particularly pronounced among political elites, it is less marked among the electorate, which remain largely supportive of public transition policies (see Parlons Climat, 2025). However, there is a risk that the polarization observed among political elites, and the discourse it generates, may ultimately influence voters.

+ Distinction : A third mechanism at work is symbolic in nature. While environmental issues, in terms of practices, concerns and levels of commitment, have spread widely across society, it is nevertheless clear that some groups have adopted them in a specific and particularly visible way, through consumption or activism, self-education, or (more rarely) significant lifestyle changes.[7] In particular, we have witnessed the development of forms of environmentalism rooted in urban lifestyles, expressed through specific (more "sustainable") consumption practices and the accumulation of specialized knowledge. These trends initially emerged among more affluent groups with high levels of cultural capital. For some, such practices have become a key part of their social identity. As a result, sustainable consumption, familiarity with environmental issues, and even their politicization have come to function as markers of political and social distinction. This, in turn, makes it more difficult for segments of the population that are furthest removed from performative forms of environmentalism (even when they may be frugal and resource-efficient in their everyday practices) to adopt these modes of consumption or lay claim to the associated forms of knowledge.[8] When they do engage in such practices, they may not derive the same symbolic benefits, as their actions are not framed in terms of explicit political or moral commitment. Indeed, the distinctive practices of some groups tend to generate forms of rejection among others, which play an important role in the maintenance of social identities.[9] The often-invoked, frequently derided but rarely defined figure of the "bobo" illustrates this dynamic, as do caricatured portrayals of "eco-warriors" in comedies and popular culture.

5   See https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2024-06/Ipsos-Comprendre-le-vote-des-Franc%C-C%A7ais-9-juin-2024-20h.pdf and https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2024-06/ipsos-talan-comprendre-le-vote-legislatives-30juin-2024-rapport-complet.pdf

6   J-Y. Dormagen, 2023, https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2023/11/07/comprendre-le-nouveau-clivage-ecologique-donnees-inedites/

7   https://shs.cairn.info/revue-francaise-de-socio-economie-2019-1-page-85?lang=fr

8   https://www.iddri.org/en/publications-and-events/blog-post/public-decision-makers-must-change-their-food-transition

9   Jean-Baptiste Comby and Hadrien Malier, « Les classes populaires et l'enjeu écologique : un rapport réaliste travaillé par des dynamiques statutaires diverses », in Sociétés contemporaines, 2021/4 N° 124, 2021, p.37-66.

+ Tactics : In militant strategy, the activist's dilemma is central : the more radical an action, the more likely it is to attract media attention, but also the more likely it is to generate polarization or provoke rejection. Several studies have shown that the actions of climate activists play an important role in raising public interest in environmental issues through media coverage. Today, however, highly radical actions that receive intense media attention and are often framed negatively, particularly when amplified by opponents of the transition, risk undermining public support for climate activists and for ambitious climate policies, especially among groups facing greater economic constraints. By portraying climate activists in a negative light, coverage of certain tactics can also fuel antipathy, and at times even hostility, towards environmentalists, potentially leading to forms of rejection, political or otherwise, and in some cases, extending to climate scepticism.[10]

+ Bubble : At the outset of any movement, winning over new audiences is essential. When numbers are small, the primary challenge is simply to grow. Environmental movements have been highly successful in this respect. Today, the environmental minority has grown large enough to constitute a durable and significant part of society. As a result, it has become increasingly structured, developing its own media, preferred brands and distinctive cultural productions. It has also generated strong forms of collective engagement, giving rise to tightly knit communities. As these communities have expanded, they have fostered more intensive debate among those already engaged with these issues. Environmentalism has thus reached a level of commitment strong enough to sustain itself in relative isolation, creating a "bubble" effect, in which the movement struggles to expand further.

For each of these mechanisms, it is essential to stress that while they are now having a negative effect on collective perceptions of the environmental transition (among both public and political actors), they previously played a positive role. Confrontational activist tactics helped to place environmental issues firmly on the media agenda by generating polarization, and the environment has since become an established and essential theme (Lalot *et al.*, 2017). Similarly, sustainable consumption has given rise to new markets and products that did not previously exist (organic food, eco-design in the textile sector, green tourism, etc.). Growing engagement from parts of the political sphere has also contributed to turning the environment into a subject of debate. Minority strategies have therefore been highly effective. They have played a decisive role in bringing climate change onto the agendas of politics, the media and public opinion.[11] The fact that the environmental movement has now become a target is, in many respects, simply the price of its past successes–and, in turn, a sign that a new phase is now required.

Now clearly identified and firmly established in the political arena, the various spokespersons for the environmental movement have come under sustained criticism from political and economic actors seeking to capitalize on the strategic polarization on which minority-based approaches have so far relied. From this perspective, minority strategies were effective up to the point at which the actors driving them became identifiable and, through their successes, were increasingly treated as adversaries and caricatured by their opponents. By freezing environmentalist identities into fixed stereotypes, these dynamics make the cause less permeable and less open to broader appropriation. This is the situation we face today. The time has come to enter a new strategic phase.

This first level of analysis, focused on the formation of environmental opinion and mobilization, must therefore be complemented by a second level of reflection examining models of social change and the challenges of implementation. The inclusion of environmental issues on the political and media

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10   https://www.parlonsclimat.org/etude-climatosceptiques
11   https://www.nature.com/articles/s41467-024-46477-4

agenda, together with the mobilization they have generated, has played a major role in pushing policymakers to adopt a range of laws and regulations over the past decade. From the Paris Agreement to the European Green Deal, minority strategies have succeeded in exerting significant influence on political decision-makers, leading to far-reaching commitments and a substantial narrowing of the "ambition gap". As a result, environmentalism has gradually moved beyond its former "minority" status. However, once adopted, these commitments must be translated into concrete public policies. From this perspective, the strategies of environmental movements, which have primarily targeted legislative change and therefore political elites, have been effective, but they are now reaching their limits. The implementation phase requires forms of appropriation and majority support that have not, until now, been central objectives, yet are essential to counterbalance the interests opposed to these changes. At the same time, practices of public debate and policy education have largely remained rooted in a "minority" mode. As a result, the "implementation gap" has been further reinforced.

Limits and risks from a social change perspective

Beyond these constraints linked to public opinion, there are also challenges related to how the transition, and associated processes of social change, are conceived. In particular, we wish to draw attention, first, to the limits of an approach centred on the figure of the "responsible consumer"; and second, to those of a single-issue transition project that does not always take sufficient account of other social and political concerns. This way of advancing the transition, and of designing related public policies (including only partial treatment of justice issues) and the effects these approaches generate within society contribute to the ceiling that has now been reached and reinforce the need to open a new phase.

Limits of the responsible consumer approach to changing lifestyles

Promoting the transition has gradually gone hand in hand with a dominant vision of social change centred on individual behaviour and consumer responsibility, based on the diffusion of a new norm (Lalot *et al.*, 2017). This dynamic has been reinforced by the uptake of environmental discourse by actors with the greatest communication power, notably businesses and the state. One advantage of this approach is that it connects efforts to mobilize and reinforce environmental concern with concrete forms of individual action. It also makes it possible to avoid direct confrontation with economic actors (unlike regulatory approaches, for example) and to promote levers for change that appear to be within everyone's reach, particularly in a context of public-sector inertia.

This vision of social change relies on communication, information and awareness-raising, but it can also take the form of injunctions or moralizing messages. It assumes that repeated appeals to adopt sustainable individual behaviours will, over time, generate rising levels of concern across a broad swathe of the population, and that virtuous practices, initially minority and marginal, will spread from the bottom up : from individual to individual, and then through the media. Ultimately, this diffusion is expected to encourage economic actors to adapt their offerings. From this perspective, the central challenge is therefore to prompt individuals to change their diet, shift away from car use, and so on.

The concept of the "consumer citizen" encapsulates this approach to the transition. However, such an approach has significant limitations. In practice, there remains a substantial gap between stated support for change and intentions to act, on the one

hand, and observed behaviours on the other (see, for example, the French General Secretariat for Ecological Planning *Note*). This gap is well documented, as broad support for a minority cause does not automatically translate into behavioural change, which remains highly constrained (Lalot *et al.*, 2017). In other words, however informed or motivated they may be, individuals are often unable to fully translate their intentions into action.[12] In reality, consumer power and the potential for the diffusion of behaviours within society are limited by existing structures and by the influence of supply-side actors. They also face numerous practical obstacles, including the availability of alternatives, ease of access and affordability (see IDDRI, 2023, on the food sector). This situation can generate frustration among citizen-consumers who find themselves unable to meet the expectations placed upon them (see the verbatim material in *Dans la tête des laissés pour compte*),[13] or even resentment towards groups that are increasingly associated (rightly or wrongly) with practices perceived as socially distinctive, as described above. This helps explain the paradox whereby high levels of concern about climate change are not accompanied by rapid behavioural change. It also highlights both the limitations of "incentive-based" approaches to lifestyle change and those of the measurement tools (surveys, barometers) built around them.

Limits in addressing social issues

Added to this impasse are limitations linked to the way social issues are framed within minority strategies. The cause these strategies defend tends to occupy the centre of the argument, sometimes at the expense of broader contextual considerations, and is promoted according to a hierarchy of concerns that is not necessarily shared by the majority. The climate emergency is often treated as sufficient, in itself, to mobilize citizens around the transition, without being systematically situated within a wider social perspective. As a result, environmental issues are insufficiently connected to–or confronted with–concerns such as fears of social downgrading, perceptions of injustice, or democratic frustrations.

This tendency isolates the cause being defended (the single-issue problem) by failing to link it to the social and political contexts that most directly shape people's lives, and which may therefore take precedence over the ecological project, as is often the case today. By contrast, attempts to build alliances around climate marches, through slogans such as "end of the world, end of the month, same fight", frame the climate emergency and the challenge of making ends meet as part of a single political struggle. Along with initiatives like the *Pacte de Pouvoir de Vivre* (an alliance between environmental and social NGOs and unions), they point towards a more promising direction when pursued with genuine commitment. Simply framing social issues as co-benefits of the ecological transition, however, is not sufficient.

One way to overcome this limitation is to adopt the lens of the "social contract" to better connect the ecological cause with social issues. This perspective highlights the existence of shared "rules of the game" that organize life in society : i.e. a set of collective expectations and compromises encompassing the rights we enjoy, the duties we accept, the responsibilities assigned to institutions, and the narratives that sustain them. For example, in the sphere of work, individuals expect recognition in exchange for the tasks they perform; similarly, residential choices are often organized around an implicit promise

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12   According to the latest Parlons Climat study, 75% of French people say they feel fairly well informed about what they can do, at their own level, to take effective action on environmental and climate issues.

13   Frustration and resentment are often expressed through economic constraints, as illustrated by the following excerpts : "I try to do my best, but it's true that being environmentally friendly also has an economic dimension. Unfortunately, it means additional costs, and you quickly see that as soon as you try to buy local products or bulk buy, the price is not the same…"; "I can't afford to buy an electric vehicle that costs €40,000. Do they realize what they're expecting of people?"

of facilitated mobility. Viewed through this lens, society can be understood as a set of interconnected social pacts[14] on which public action can intervene to advance the ecological transition. This perspective is particularly relevant in a context of heightened social tension, where feelings of unequal access to the benefits of the social contract, or of benefiting less than others, are now widespread (IDDRI, 2024), fuelling discontent and, at times, open crisis, as illustrated by the Yellow Vests movement. The "social contract" lens is all the more necessary because the ecological transition is profoundly shaking up existing rules of the game (affecting lifestyles, economic sectors and jobs, and long-standing social promises, etc.). Moreover, promoting and implementing the transition in a society already under strain is especially challenging. Mobilizing this perspective therefore means fully integrating these social dimensions into the design of the transition project and into collective debate (e.g. in terms of justice, legitimacy, security of life trajectories, autonomy and agency), rather than treating social issues as an afterthought. More broadly, this implies moving away from viewing the ecological transition as a single-issue social movement advanced through a dedicated set of policies, and instead conceiving it as a process of collective and more general renegotiation of the social contract, within which ecological issues are fully integrated.

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14   Two promises of the social contract are particularly central : the security of life trajectories and autonomy, understood as the ability to exercise control over one's life and to plan for the future. These derive from the functioning of the Labour, Security, Consumption and Democracy pacts.

2. Opportunities for building a "majority strategy" and their practical implications

All of these observations and interpretations point to the end of a phase in how environmental issues are addressed and debated. In practice, we have already entered a new phase marked by the implementation of public policies and by growing resistance, as these policies disrupt the established order. However, the strategic implications of this shift have not yet been fully articulated.

It is worth recalling that there has always been a diversity of theories of social change and, accordingly, a diversity of strategies designed to bring it about. The analyses developed in the previous section, together with the proposals outlined here, are intended as contributions to interpreting the current moment and identifying possible ways forward. They are offered as a basis for discussion.

What principles could guide ecological action in all its diversity? What new approach should be developed? And what might constitute a majority strategy? In response, we outline four possible avenues, complementary or alternative, aimed at different types of actors, to stimulate debate.

Embodiment, distinction and diversity

Current criticism, as well as growing polarization in public opinion, increasingly targets environmentalists themselves rather than their ideas. It is therefore crucial to pay attention to who embodies environmental and climate issues, as rejection of the messenger can ultimately undermine the message itself. This makes it essential to highlight the diversity of those who promote environmental causes (and to further encourage this diversification across age groups, social backgrounds, professions and political affiliations). This work has already been underway for several years, as illustrated by the emergence of initiatives such as The Shift Project, Banlieues Climat, Mouvement Impact France and Église Verte. Each of these initiatives, in its own way, embodies forms of environmentalism rooted in political and social milieus whose voices were previously under-represented in France.

To support the development of these new ways of embodying environmentalism and enable them to play their full role, two additional points are essential :

>> First, it must be acknowledged that as the ecological movement reaches new political and social groups, it inevitably changes, becoming more diverse in its forms and expressions. From the environmentalism of the 1980s, largely driven by actors from scientific and legal circles, to a wide range of more recent strands shaped by social justice, political, religious and anti-globalization perspectives, the movement has already evolved as it has been taken up by new social or political groups. This process will continue as the issue is reappropriated by others. As a result, environmentalism is becoming increasingly multifaceted, sometimes in ways that do not align with the expectations of other activists who are nonetheless equally committed to these issues. While this diversity can give rise to internal debates between different strands of the movement, it is also clearly a factor for growth, provided that a minimum common ground, such as respect for planetary boundaries and democratic principles, is maintained.

>> Second, it is important to counter the tendency for the environmental movement to be perceived as a monolithic bloc, when this is not the case in reality. Its relative social homogeneity, the limited differentiation between its various organizational brands, and the frequency of joint actions nevertheless contribute to presenting it as a unified whole. By making visible the diversity of sensibilities and approaches within environmental organizations, it becomes possible to multiply points of entry and make the boundaries of this environmentalist space more permeable. These distinctions are crucial, as they reveal a range of options that enable a growing number of people to appropriate these issues. This diversification does not concern organizations alone. At the individual level as well, understandings of what constitutes an environmentally-friendly lifestyle vary widely–from engaged consumers to climate activists, from "modest savers"[15] to farmers in transition. Recognizing and highlighting this plurality of meanings attached to environmentalism is therefore essential.

One of the key challenges in the transition from minority to majority practices is enabling people to adopt norms initially associated with a minority group without having to identify with that group. This challenge lies at the heart of the ecological transition today (Lalot *et al.*, 2017).

"Where there's a way, there's a will"

What we capture with the inverted proverb "Where there's a way, there's a will" is the idea that lifestyles evolve primarily through changes to people's environments, everyday practices, planning and land use, what's available on the market, living spaces, and so on, rather than through simple injunctions to modify individual behaviour. Sustainable practices must be made possible and easy to adopt if they are to become desirable, which requires coordinated action by public authorities and private actors. What is therefore needed is not so much to push individuals to commit to personal change, but to secure a majority mandate to transform the environments that make collective change realistic and achievable. This shift is already beginning to emerge. As highlighted by the ADEME barometer (see the article in *Le Monde*), while mobilization around individual actions is declining, support for public policies is growing. This has significant implications for strategy, discourse and policy design. IDDRI and I4CE illustrate this clearly in their TRAMe2035 food transition scenario, which shows how to engage not only groups already predisposed towards sustainable food, but much more broadly across society. The scenario identifies twelve trajectories of change in practices, corresponding to different social groups, each responding to changes in food environments. This approach, which takes the diversity of aspirations and constraints into account, also has the advantage of relying less on fixed identities and on the distinctions associated with a minority. In doing so, it reduces the risk of rejection identified in Part 1. To follow this logic through fully, it will likely be necessary to renew the tools used to measure and monitor opinions and lifestyles (such as surveys), so that they better capture the dynamics at stake in this majority shift.

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15   See the work of Fanny Hugues.

Moving beyond single-issue politics and reconfiguring political divides

In this new phase, where environmental issues are high on the agenda, the central challenge is to identify political divides capable, in practical terms, of generating sufficient political power to implement a broader social project that includes the ecological transition. This makes it essential to broaden the environmental movement by engaging new audiences. To achieve this, it is necessary not only to rework communication strategies, but also to create new dividing lines through a political and social project that extends beyond the environment alone. In a context where the figure of the "environmentalist" is now well established, often caricatured and increasingly associated with a specific political camp, and where sympathy for environmental movements is tending to decline, it becomes crucial to define a new, more inclusive "us". This means articulating a different divide, one capable of forming a majority, rooted not solely in environmental concerns but in living conditions more broadly. In a world marked by multiple crises and strains on the social contract, our conviction is that environmental issues will never, on their own, become the primary concern for a majority of the population. Immediate issues such as pressures and loss of meaning at work, constrained household budgets, vulnerability to economic shocks, and fears of downward mobility are unlikely to recede in favour of climate anxiety, which presupposes a capacity to project oneself into the future that is not equally shared across all social groups.

Although this assessment is now widely shared, and tangible progress has been made (for example, through collaborations between "social" and "green" NGOs), it remains difficult to translate this into practice. Climate issues continue to be treated as the main indicator of commitment; social dimensions are still framed as co-benefits rather than central objectives; and alliances are largely built around environmental causes. However, a majority political project cannot operate as a single-issue campaign. It must bring together social, political and economic concerns around a shared core that makes sense of them and gives them particular meaning. As shown in the work of Félicien Faury,[16] this capacity to create resonance has been particularly effective for the Rassemblement National. Issues such as employment, purchasing power, trade, Europe and the transition are reframed through the lens of immigration and the role of technocratic elites, enabling an alternative social contract narrative to be constructed. To move beyond single-issue framings and to overcome the limitations of existing environmental narratives, we put forward a new narrative approach in a recent study by IDDRI and *Étonnamment, Si* (2025). The study highlights two key findings. First, that any powerful political narrative is fundamentally a social contract narrative, i.e. it centres on the relationship between the governing and the governed (rights and duties) and on collective organization (constraints, autonomy). Second, it shows that new narratives can be built by drawing on the narratives expressed by citizens themselves, particularly in the domains of democracy, work and consumption, which play a central role in their life trajectories (see the IDDRI-HotorCool survey, 2024). These elements can then be assembled, step by step, into renewed social contract narratives within which ecological issues are fully integrated.

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[16] Benoît Coquard (2019). *Ceux qui restent*, Paris, La Découverte ; Félicien Faury (2024). *Des électeurs ordinaires*, Paris, Seuil.

Justice and empowerment

The costs of the transition are unevenly distributed : some social groups are more exposed than others and have greater or lesser financial and non-financial room for manoeuvre. And yet, in the face of inequalities in terms of cost and capacity, the responses proposed are often uniform : expectations of virtuous behaviour, sometimes accompanied by financial support intended to make such behaviour accessible. This approach raises two main problems.

First, it is poorly suited to a context marked by high levels of social and institutional mistrust. In such a setting, top-down and standardized injunctions from the state may appear illegitimate or even counterproductive. Moreover, targeted support schemes designed to reduce inequalities in access to "virtuous" practices are increasingly viewed negatively, particularly among less affluent groups. For some, not relying on assistance is itself a source of social distinction, operating through a logic of differentiation.[17] It is therefore necessary to broaden forms of support beyond direct financial payments by instead investing in infrastructure, public services and collective measures that genuinely transform living environments.

Second, the range of actions promoted is often narrow and sometimes inaccessible, conflicting with the fundamental aspiration to have control over one's own life and the capacity to act. It is therefore essential to promote a plurality of pathways and forms of engagement. This means expanding the range of possibilities rather than imposing a single ideal, while fully recognizing practices that are often undervalued, such as repair, producing for one's own use, career choices and local forms of solidarity. Only under these conditions can the transition be perceived as fair : by opening up choices, adapting to people's lived experiences, and restoring to everyone the power to act.

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17   https://vacarme.org/article1118.html