

French climate policy: diplomacy in the service of symbolic leadership?

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1. Introduction

As the host of the 21st Conference of the Parties (COP 21) in December 2015, France has been acclaimed for its leadership in brokering the first universally binding climate agreement (e.g. Stothard and Chassany 2015). French climate diplomacy was set in motion long before the start of the 2015 Paris climate conference, mobilizing important administrative and political resources. Prime Minister Manuel Valls declared the fight against climate change a ‘major national cause’ for 2015,¹ whereas the Ecology and Energy Minister, Segolène Royal, considered the adoption of the French Law on the Energy Transition in July 2015 as a new step towards becoming a ‘nation of environmental excellence’.

France can boast of its relatively low levels of greenhouse gas emissions (GHGE) per capita and carbon intensity – in most part due to its electricity sector dominated by nuclear and hydroelectricity – which have contributed to position it as an ‘inadvertent climate pioneer’ (Szarka 2011). On this basis, the French government and administration have often claimed to assume ‘*leadership by example*’. France’s bid for leadership has also been driven by ambitions for diplomatic prestige and international ‘*grandeur*’. It has opportunely assumed the role of an entrepreneurial, and, at times, heroic foreign policy leader, notably during the EU Climate and Energy Package negotiations in 2008 as well as during COP21. However,

¹ ‘Climate disruption/COP21/Major National Cause label for 2015’, Communiqué issued by the Prime Minister’s Office: <http://fr.ambafrance-us.org/spip.php?article6696>

France has tended to follow, rather than anticipate or trigger, European and international climate developments. Moreover, ambitious rhetoric has not always been matched by sustained political commitments and implementation. French climate policy developments remain characterized by acute controversies – for example on environmental taxation – and by a humdrum process of policy change.

Applied to the French case, the distinction between pioneers and leaders (see Chapter 1) raises the following question: Is it possible to pretend to be a leader without being a pioneer? It is indeed this paradoxical approach that seems to characterize most accurately the French strategy. This raises two further questions: How has the gap between French ambitions and achievements been managed? And how have French international pledges influenced domestic developments? This chapter discusses these questions and argues that France should be characterized mainly as a symbolic leader. It aims to explain the convoluted French approach to climate leadership, as well as the country's attempts at closing the gap between its international leadership stance and its reactive national policies, often developed in fits and starts.

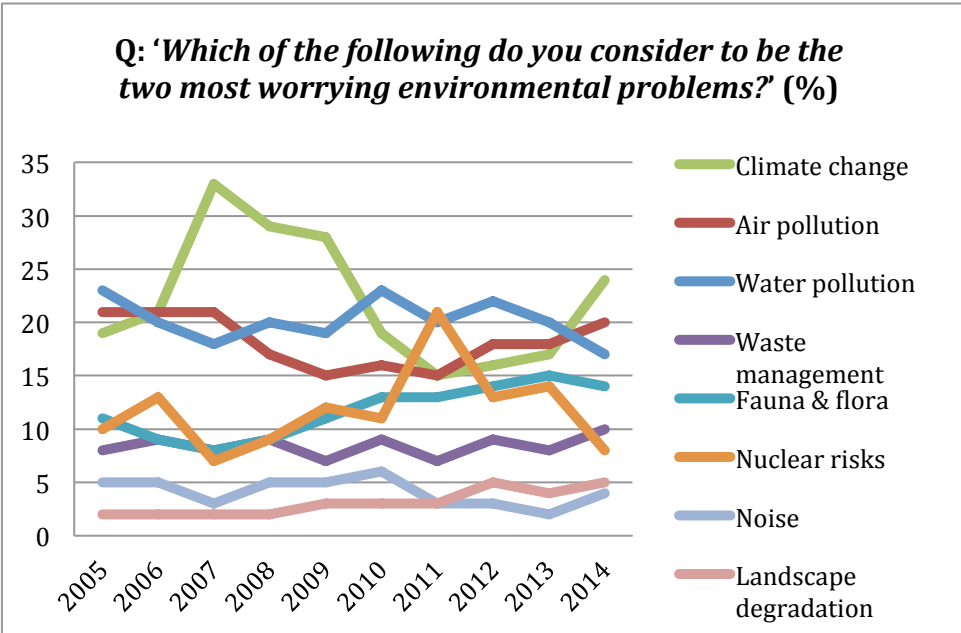
2. National attitudes to climate change

In France climate change has been politically and socially constructed as a consensual policy problem. During the 1990s, few prominent climate voices had access to the mass media and, the issue was mainly framed through scientific arguments. Media coverage was largely determined by international conferences. In the second half of the 2000s, due to international factors (e.g. ongoing international climate negotiations on a post-Kyoto agreement and the release of the IPCC's 4th assessment report), and internal factors (e.g. the importance of environmental issues in the 2007 Presidential campaign) media coverage has increased slowly

but steadily, with major peaks of attention around international conferences (Aykut et al. 2012). Climate issues have been picked up by journalists (in general media outlets) who have tended to depoliticize the issue, framing it primarily in terms of individual behaviour and ‘eco-citizenship’ (Comby 2015).

According to a yearly survey published by the French environmental agency, ADEME (*Agence de l’Environnement et de la Maitrise de l’Energie*), in French public opinion climate change has been consistently ranked as one of the three most ‘concerning’ environmental issues (together with air and water pollution) since the mid-2000s. However, the survey also shows that there have been significant variations (Figure 1). The most striking constitutes a peak in 2007-2009 in the run up to the 2009 Copenhagen UN climate conference when climate change became the most salient issue for more than 30% of the respondents. In 2010 it dropped to about 17% and since then has not regained its 2009 peak.

Figure 1: Public perception of environmental problems (2005-14)



Source: ADEME (2014)

This downward shift resulted from a combination of domestic and international factors. The post-2009 period has been characterized by several governmental renouncements in environmental policy (Halpern 2012), while the failure of the 2009 Copenhagen climate conference, combined with the financial and economic crisis, have also contributed to a shift of French public attention away from climate issues. Yet, the attention to climate issues was building up again in preparation for the 2015 Paris climate conference.

Although conducted using other methods compared to the above mentioned French opinion polls, Eurobarometer surveys allow for comparative analysis. With 14% of respondents considering climate change as the most serious problem in 2013, France lies below the European average (16%), and even more markedly below EU climate pioneers such as Sweden (39%) and Germany (27%) (Eurobarometer 2014). Between 2011-13, the decline (-6%) in climate awareness was stronger in France than in the EU-28 and placed the country alongside Southern and Eastern European countries. Most recently, the 2015 Paris climate conference has helped to reverse this trend although it remains to be seen how long this will last in the face of enduring economic uncertainty and security concerns fueled by the November 2015 terrorist attack in Paris.

3. Phases of domestic climate change policy: institutional responses, policy instruments and programmes

French climate policy has been so tightly embedded in European and international contexts that it is difficult to separate domestic and foreign policy dimensions. Indeed, domestic

policies have been either directly (or indirectly) a consequence of European and international agreements; or have been formulated to establish a foreign policy stance.

From the 1980s to the 1997 Kyoto Protocol: reactive policy, defensive strategy

In France until the end of the 1980s climate change was almost nonexistent as a policy problem, and attention was mainly driven by international climate conferences. Although initially a latecomer and follower, from the early 1990s onwards France developed the ambition of displaying international climate leadership. A working group, the *Groupe Interministériel sur l'Effet de Serre* (GIES), was set up in 1989, and upgraded three years later to the status of an inter-ministerial mission (MIES). On the occasion of its creation, Prime Minister Rocard stated: *'France has actively contributed to international action in this area. It must set an example through an efficient domestic policy'* (Virilouvet 2015: 82). Yet, despite such ambitious rhetoric, French climate policy remained mostly reactive and defensive, the country appearing to 'rest on its laurel with little climate innovation' domestically (Szarka 2011: 115).

This ambiguous attitude reflected the specificities of the country's energy system (Giraud et al. 1997). France is heavily reliant on nuclear electricity, a low-carbon source of energy that accounted for three quarters of the country's electricity mix in 1990. Large hydro represented another 15%. Due to the development of the electronuclear programme from 1974 onwards, French emissions fell by 23% in the 1980s, making the country's economy one of the least carbon intensive in Europe.² This position of 'inadvertent pioneer' (Szarka 2006) did not foster a proactive attitude however. One of the main goals of French climate diplomacy was even to prevent the adoption of precise emission reduction targets. According

² In terms of carbon intensity – both per GDP unit and per capita – the country ranks in the same category as an environmental pioneer such as Sweden.

to public authorities, there was little room for further improvements in terms of GHGE reductions.

The Kyoto Protocol's mixed impact: higher public attention, uneven implementation (1997-2007)

In the context of the Kyoto negotiations, it was impossible for France to uphold the above-mentioned strategy. The 1997 Kyoto climate conference contributed to a rise in public attention to climate change. Moreover, the participation of the Green Party in a left-wing coalition government – the government of *Gauche plurielle* (1997-2002) which included the Green Minister for the Environment Dominique Voynet – influenced the country's position (Evrard 2012). France endorsed the EU burden sharing mechanism in 1998, but it agreed to a mere stabilization of its CO₂ emissions at 1990s level for 2008-2012. To implement this modest commitment, a first Climate Plan was adopted in 2000: the *Plan National de Lutte Contre le Changement Climatique* (PNLCC). It set general orientations – developing renewable energy, increasing energy efficiency – and promoted new market based policy instruments – including environmental taxation, the setting up of a carbon market and creation of feed-in-tariffs for renewable energy (Szarka 2006: 630; Evrard 2013; Bocquillon and Evrard 2016).

However, as with other environmental issues, the changes fostered by this new political context were far from radical due to the heavy weight of institutional legacies (Evrard 2012; Aykut and Dahan 2015: 551). For instance, a carbon tax adopted by Parliament in 2000 was eventually rejected by the Constitutional Court in view of its incompatibility with the principle of equality of taxation (due to exemptions for large companies) (Deroubaix and Lévêque 2006). As for the feed-in-tariffs, they were set too low to trigger large-scale

renewable energy developments. Humdrum domestic policies remained at odds with the flamboyant public speeches given at the international level. At the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg (2002) for instance, President Chirac started his voluntarist speech with the famous quote: *‘Our house is burning and we look elsewhere’*.

The consolidation of French climate policies in the 2000s was a direct consequence of the increasing discrepancy between the Kyoto target and rising emissions due to economic growth (see Figure 2). A Climate Plan, adopted in 2004 for the period 2004-2012,³ was formulated with a view to meet the target established as part of the EU burden sharing agreement. It explicitly referred to the ‘Factor Four’ trajectory – a decrease by a factor of four of CO₂ emissions by 2050 – which both Prime Minister Raffarin and President Chirac had pledged to achieve at the international level. It also proposed an array of policy instruments to reach this objective with the right wing government favouring fiscal incentives and informational instruments over taxation – including incentives for low carbon vehicles, energy labels, efficiency certificates for buildings, tax credits for efficient appliances and biofuels. Many of the sectoral targets adopted transposed European commitments – e.g. on biofuels, renewable electricity promotion or energy labeling (Bocquillon and Evrard 2016). This period was characterized by ‘bounded innovation dynamics’ (Szarka 2003), most changes consisting in improving existing policy instruments rather than proposing ambitious new measures.

From Grenelle to COP21: merging energy and climate issues, yearning for exemplarity (2007-2015)

³ The Climate plan was updated in 2006, 2009, 2011 and 2013.

In the second half of the 2000s, the French position evolved from foot-dragging to circumstantial leadership. This shift has been accompanied by a reframing of energy and climate policies – two areas traditionally dealt with separately by both the government and administration – as two faces of the same coin. This new approach was first introduced in the 2005 Energy Law (*Programme d’Orientation de la Politique Énergétique Française* – or POPE law), which established the fight against climate change as a priority of French energy policy. The bill also reaffirmed the ‘Factor Four’ target (75% GHGE reduction by 2050) to be reached at a pace of 3% per year on average.

This new orientation was further consolidated in a context of high public attention to environmental and climate issues throughout the second half of the 2000s while reaching its peak with the election of President Sarkozy in May 2007. During his election campaign, under pressure from ENGOs and activist TV presenter Nicolat Hulot, Nicolas Sarkozy signed an ‘Ecological Pact’ and made strong environmental commitments. On his accession to power, he created a super-Ministry of Ecology, Energy, Sustainable Development and Planning (MEEDDAT) – a merger of four existing ministries – so as to rebalance inter-ministerial relations in favor of environmental issues (Lascoumes et al. 2014). The powerful Directorate for Energy and Raw Materials (DGEMP), which used to be part of the Ministry of Industry, was also merged with other departments into a new Directorate General for Energy and Climate (DGEC). This administrative reorganization aimed to reinforce climate change policies and institutionalized the new energy/climate framing, without fundamentally altering administrative and political practices. A key commitment of President Sarkozy was to set in motion an innovative national consultation process on environmental issues, the ‘*Grenelle de l’environnement*’ (Whiteside et al. 2010). Confirming the priority granted to climate change and the new framing of energy, the first of the eight working groups was entitled: ‘*Fighting against climate change and managing energy*’. The *Grenelle* process clearly contributed to

increased public attention to climate change and led to the adoption of a wide range of policy commitments and targets in various sectors from housing to energy, transport and research.

However, the legislative phase that was supposed to materialize and implement these objectives proved uneven, confirming the long-standing ambiguous attitude of the government (Boy et al. 2012). The first law (*Grenelle 1*), which contained the main principles and goals of the *Grenelle*, was adopted almost unanimously by Parliament in August 2009. As for the implementation law (*Grenelle 2*), the legislative process was more controversial giving birth to a text lacking global coherence and marked by several renouncements. Key measures were postponed, awaiting the adoption of implementation decrees, and sometimes *sine die*. It was most noticeably in the case of the *Contribution climat-énergie* (Carbon Tax) and the Heavy Vehicle Transit Tax (*Ecotaxe*). Following a banal blame shifting strategy, the *Ecotaxe* was postponed until the Presidential and Parliamentary elections in 2012. When the incoming President François Hollande and his government tried to implement it, the measure triggered a strong controversy and was finally abandoned in Autumn 2014. The change of political majority did not alter the energy and climate framing however. A carbon tax on fossil fuel use (*Contribution Climat Energie – CCE*) was adopted discreetly in late 2013 but initially set at low levels.

More importantly, a Law on the Energy Transition, replacing the Climate Plan, was passed in July 2015, after a round of public consultations and a lengthy legislative process. The law sets a 40% GHGE reduction target by 2030 and confirms the ‘Factor Four’ objective for 2050. It also sets a national target of 32% of renewables in energy consumption (40% in electricity) and proposes to halve final energy consumption by 2030. The emphasis is put on energy efficiency in buildings and clean transport, most objectives and measures now awaiting implementation decrees. After opposing it, the government finally accepted a last minute amendment, proposed by the Green Party and its own majority to raise the carbon tax

to €56 per ton in 2020 (a four-fold increase) and €100 in 2030. As the host of COP21, the French Government has pursued the same discursive strategy invoking the Law on the Energy Transition as a symbol of its exemplarity and leadership at the international level.

4. Multi-level and polycentric climate governance in France

National centralization and the belated empowerment of local authorities

Since the ground-breaking laws of decentralization of 1982-84 and as a consequence of various other reforms, local authorities have been progressively entrusted with new powers in a variety of areas. Yet, these changes did not initially affect the governance of energy and climate change which remained largely centralized. French environmental and climate policy-making was characterized as a form of meso-corporatism in which powerful sectoral interests are entrusted with policy stewardship in collaboration and under the supervision of a specialised central administration (Szarka 2006). This centralized approach also characterized the energy sector which was dominated by two national public monopolies created after World War II: *Electricité de France* (EDF) and *Gaz de France* (GDF, now Engie). Despite a process of liberalization and partial privatisation after 2000, the two energy giants have maintained close ties with the state administration – especially the powerful DGEMP/DGEC – and preserved their hold on productive and political structures (Poupeau 2014).

Since the 1990s, in the face of a lack of formal competences for local authorities over energy and environmental issues, the ADEME and NGO networks tried to promote local energy and climate initiatives on a voluntary basis but only with limited success. The situation started to change with the adoption of the first national Climate Action Plan (CAP) in 2004, which invited local authorities to establish voluntary plans with their local partners (Yalçın

and Lefèvre 2012). The 2005 Energy Law also encouraged local authorities to develop renewable energy and energy management. But it is only since the *Grenelle de l'environnement* that local authorities – mainly the regions but also large urban areas – have really started to seize on climate issues (Nadai et al. 2015: 282). The two *Grenelle* laws made local CAPs compulsory for 400 authorities of over 50,000 inhabitants. In addition, they imposed the creation of Regional Schemes for Climate Air and Energy (*SRCAE*) which are non-prescriptive plans elaborated in collaboration between the state and the regions that integrate various planning documents related to energy and climate at the regional level.

The empowerment of local authorities has been further reinforced by European dynamics, notably the adoption of the 20-20-20 targets and EU Climate and Energy Package. The European Commission launched the ‘Covenant of Mayors’ in 2009 to support local authorities’ efforts in developing energy efficiency, renewable energy and climate measures. Local authorities have increasingly used direct references to EU objectives in their local sustainable development plans. This movement towards regionalisation has also stimulated the development of local networks and initiatives promoted by NGOs. For instance, the TEPOS network (*Territories à Energies Positives* – Positive Energy Territories) was set up in 2011 by the CLER, a French renewable NGO, to support the energy transition in rural areas (Nadai et al. 2015).

The new decentralization law adopted in 2015 endows regions with competences on environment and energy. It replaces the *SRCAE*, as well as various other planning documents by a new planning framework for regional and sustainable development – the *Schéma Régional d'Aménagement, de Développement Durable et d'Egalité des Territoires* (*SRADDET*) – which is now made binding (Roussel 2015). Along with the new Law on the Energy Transition (2015), it confirms the increasing role of local levels in energy and climate change.

Nevertheless, as Poupeau argues (2014), this recent ‘activism’ at the local level has not overturned traditionally centralized patterns of policy-making, as key policy instruments remain out of the hands of local authorities (e.g. in terms infrastructure planning, finance etc.). The state has combined the mobilization of local authorities for energy and climate action – e.g. to promote energy efficiency measures and behaviours, or sustainable urban planning – with containment to preserve its legitimacy and control of a strategic sector. To date, local climate plans have helped raising awareness and bringing stakeholders together, but have faced difficulties in setting ambitious strategies and in implementation (Virloquet 2015; Yalçın and Lefèvre 2012).

French activism in European and international fora: a mixed record

From the mid-2000s onwards, France has increasingly demonstrated entrepreneurial leadership at the EU and international level (Schreurs and Tiberghien 2007: 39). If its initial efforts yielded limited results, the French government has been able to claim some successes.

Following the 1992 UN Rio Conference, the French governments promoted, in 1993, an international distribution of climate efforts based on GHGE per capita for both industrialized and developing countries (Szarka 2008: 126). This was in large part motivated by the relatively low GHGE per capita of France, and to a lesser extent by the will to demonstrate cognitive leadership. This approach met with little success in view of the scepticism of other industrialized countries and was eventually abandoned. The internationalist and developmentalist ambitions of the French government – be they real or rhetorical – have not disappeared. In the run up to the 2009 Copenhagen climate conference, Prime Minister Borloo presented a ‘Climate Justice Plan’ which proposed a financial mechanism to support developing countries in their climate effort with a view to building a

climate coalition for Copenhagen (Szarka 2011: 119-21). Although promoted at the highest level through multilateral diplomacy, this new attempt at exercising cognitive leadership came too late in the negotiation process and carried little weight in the face of the structural power exercised by the US and China; France and the EU were sidelined in Copenhagen.

At the EU level, the French government has also become an ardent promoter of a collective approach. In the early 1990s, it supported the project of an EU-wide carbon/energy tax on condition that it would apply only to the carbon content of fuels – in order not to penalize nuclear energy – and, to defend France’s competitiveness, include safeguards should other industrialized countries fail to adopt equivalent measures. After the abandonment of the EU and national carbon tax projects (in 1994 and 2000 respectively), the French government waited circumspectly for the Emission Trading Scheme (ETS) which was finally adopted in 2003. Although it officially supported this new policy instrument, the government did not abandon the idea of a European carbon tax. In 2006, Prime Minister De Villepin proposed a carbon tax at EU borders to reduce the impact of the ETS on European competitiveness. Again, President Sarkozy floated this idea following the rejection of the French carbon tax in 2010, although without more success. A constant in the French approach has been to privilege EU and international solutions over go-it-alone policies, in the name of national competitiveness.

One of the French government’s greatest international achievements has been the adoption of the EU Climate and Energy Package during the French EU Presidency in the second half of 2008. In the Autumn 2007, it became clear that this package would be a priority and flagship project for the newly elected President Sarkozy. The package embodied domestic environmental and climate commitments and represented an opportunity for the government to position itself at the vanguard of EU climate leadership. The French EU Presidency committed to its adoption by the end of its term and drove the negotiations at an

astonishingly fast pace, combining top level diplomacy in the European Council and national capitals – including Berlin and Warsaw – as well as intense negotiations at lower levels of the EU Council, to conclude a deal in time for Copenhagen, be it at the expense of the environmental integrity of the package (Bocquillon 2016). In this context, France supported a binding GHGE reduction target of 20% by 2020, accepted to reduce its emissions by 14% in sectors not covered by the ETS as part of the effort sharing decision and – a more challenging objective – agreed to increase its renewable energy consumption up to 23% by 2020. The Climate and Energy package negotiations represent a case in which the French government managed to use the EU as a platform for exercising entrepreneurial leadership, in a heroic style but occasional and short-lived way.

More recently, France has been a strong supporter of a 40% GHGE reduction target by 2030, adopted at the EU level by the European Council in October 2014 and enshrined in the 2015 Energy Transition Law at the domestic level. The government has been more reserved about renewable energy targets, opposing binding national commitments at the EU level – but not a binding EU target of 27% by 2030 (Lindgaard 2014). French climate commitments have been driven by the will to demonstrate leadership by example in the perspective of the 2015 Paris climate conference. During the Paris summit the French government displayed strong entrepreneurial leadership, mobilizing large political resources and skills to broker an international agreement on a Post-Kyoto framework. Prepared with care months in advance, the conference – where the first global climate agreement was adopted – was hailed as a success and represents a tribute to French diplomacy (see section 6 for more details).

5. The domestic implementation of EU and international commitments

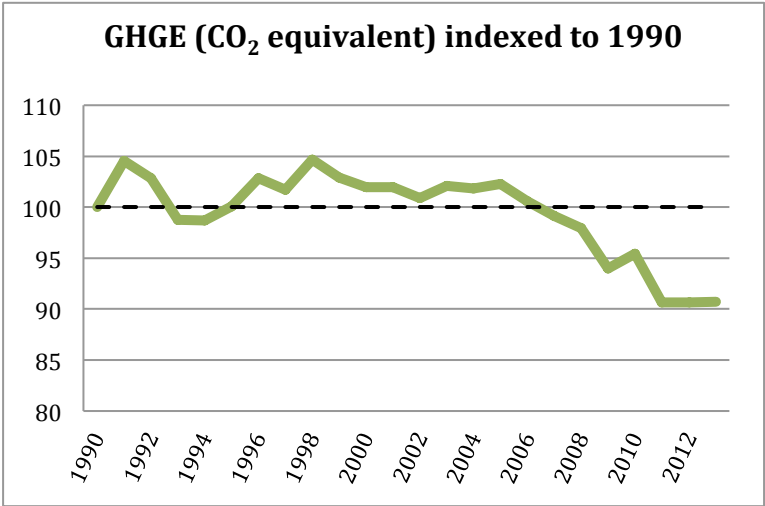
France's leadership ambitions at the EU and international level contrast with its mixed record in terms of domestic implementation. In view of the emission reductions achieved in the 1980s and its comparatively low GHGE per capita, France was granted a relatively unambitious target as part of EU Burden Sharing Agreement (1998): a mere stabilization of its emissions at 1990 level for 2008-2012. This contrasted with the large cuts accepted by Germany and the UK (see Chapter 8 and 12 by Jänicke and Rayner and Jordan respectively). In the late 1990s France's relatively strong economic growth pushed emissions up and a large overshoot was expected. This motivated the government to adopt its first Climate Programme in 2000 (Szarka 2008: 128). Enduring fears of exceeding the Kyoto target also prompted the 2004 Climate Action Programme.

Initially the government and French stakeholders had reservations about the ETS, a market-based instrument that did not seem to fit with the national policy style. Yet, implementation was easier than expected and the ETS proved to be compatible with national institutional structures and traditions (Szarka 2006: 631-2). The National Action Plan (NAP) was established by the ADEME and the register of emissions administered by the public investment bank *Caisse des Dépôts et Consignations*, while the state kept the ability to set the emission cap and implement sanctions. The cap set for the second (i.e. binding) phase of the ETS (2008-2012) was deemed too high by the European Commission and had to be reduced (as in most other member states). The second NAP eventually approved by the Commission set a cap slightly below 2005 emissions (-3%) and required only minimal efforts from target industries. Due to the structures of its industry and energy system – and in view of its size – France has not been a major player in the ETS. In the Kyoto commitment period, it came only in 6th position in terms of emissions covered (after Spain), the ETS representing only about 20% of national emissions. As a result, adaptive pressures have been comparatively low (Szarka 2011b: 122). It is thus no surprise that the reform of the ETS (adopted as part of the

EU Climate and Energy Package in 2009) centralized its functioning at the EU level and set a European-wide emission cap, proved relatively uncontroversial with the French government.

These commitments have been facilitated by favourable dynamics in terms of GHGE reductions (Figure 2). The stabilization of GHGE appeared uncertain up until the early 2000s. Since 2005, emissions have decreased sharply due to technology improvements in heavy industries and economic restructuring, a trend further accentuated by the economic crisis (Virilouvet 2015: 138-9). As a result France has overachieved its Kyoto objective, reducing its total emissions by 13% in 2012. However, the evolution of emissions differs significantly across sectors. While emissions from construction, manufacturing and energy industries have followed a downward trend since the 1990s, the transport and residential sectors, which are also the largest sources of emissions, have seen their emissions increase up until the mid-2000s (ibid: 104), while in agriculture (the main emitter of NO₂ and methane) emissions have only slightly decreased since 1990. Moreover, recent analysis of the French carbon footprint reveals that consumed emissions have slightly increased over 1990-2012 due to a rise in imported carbon emissions (CGDD 2015).

Figure 2: Evolution of French emissions (1990-2013)



Source: European Environment Agency / Eurostat 2016

Reviewing progress towards EU 2020 climate and energy targets, the European Environmental Agency finds that in sectors covered by the Effort Sharing Agreement (non-ETS), France has overachieved its interim 2013 objective by a large margin, and is well on track to meet its 14% target in 2020 based on domestic reductions only (European Environmental Agency 2015). Concerning renewable energy and energy efficiency, progress is more uncertain. With a 14.3% share of renewable energy in its energy mix in 2014 – mainly from large hydroelectricity – France is hardly on track towards its 23% renewable energy EU target for 2020. The predominance of nuclear electricity generation and intermittent political support to renewable energies have hampered the growth of the sector. In the administration there is widespread scepticism concerning the ability of the country to meet its objective, which is widely perceived as overambitious (Bocquillon and Evrard 2016).⁴ In comparison the promotion of biofuels, considered a national priority and supported by powerful agricultural interests, has been more successful. The 2004 biofuel programme triggered a rapid growth of the sector. France has achieved the 5.75% target included in the 2003 EU Biofuel directive as early as 2008, and reached its 7% national target in 2012. Yet, with ongoing controversy over the impact of biofuels on food crops and land use change, biofuel expansion has stalled, falling short of the 10% EU target in transport⁵. Concerning the non-binding 20% energy efficiency EU target, France is lagging behind its linear energy

⁴ France had already missed its indicative target of 21% renewable electricity by 2010, as set in the 2001 Directive.

⁵ To achieve the 10% EU target and curb its high emissions in the transport sector, the government has pushed for the development of electric vehicles, as reflected in the Law on the Energy Transition.

consumption reduction trajectory, a trend that reflects a long neglect of energy efficiency measures (Aykut and Dahan 2015: 557).

6. Climate change, from threat to industrial and diplomatic opportunity

Since the 1970s, the promotion of civil nuclear energy has been an integral part of French industrial, commercial and foreign policies (Szarka 2009: 120). The nuclear industry is considered a cutting edge, competitive and high added-value technology which provides France with structural and cognitive leadership. As a result, the interests of the nuclear industry – notably those of the predominantly state-owned EDF and AREVA – have been consistently assimilated to the ‘national interest’, and the state has been closely involved in their international promotion, notably through direct contract negotiations with third countries.

During the Kyoto negotiations, the pro-nuclear elites came to perceive the rise of climate concerns as a chance to promote nuclear energy at the global level (Mülhenhöver 2002). In a difficult context for the nuclear industry, they seized the issue as an opportunity to restore the legitimacy of nuclear energy and promote its ‘revival’ (Szarka 2013). Nuclear technologies were framed as a solution to the problem of climate change, based on their lower GHGE intensity compared to alternative fossil fuels. They were presented as the most efficient way to curb global emissions while ensuring sufficient and cheap energy for growing economies. This new framing was resolutely anchored in a discourse on ecological modernization. The climate framing of nuclear energy has been especially directed towards developing economies and emerging markets – such as China, India and Gulf countries – emphasising that nuclear electricity is a cheap and low-carbon technology with the potential to meet their fast growing energy needs. This strategy has also achieved some success in

industrialized countries, Finland (2003) and the UK (2012) signing contracts with French companies partly for climate-related motivations. Yet, it has been called into question, as a result of important delays and over-costs in ongoing construction projects (notably in Finland and France), and because of the detrimental consequences of the 2011 Fukushima accident for the sector's image (Szarka 2013).

In international climate negotiations, France has pushed for the recognition of nuclear power as a low carbon technology, to enhance its legitimacy and create new market opportunities for French technologies and expertise. At COP6 in the Hague (2000), the government pressed for the inclusion of nuclear energy projects within the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM). Although supported by the US and China, this initiative was opposed by all EU member states but Finland and eventually rejected (Mülhenhöver 2002: 175-6). At the EU level, during the negotiations on the 20-20-20 targets in 2007, President Chirac also tried to include nuclear as part of a broad low-carbon energy target, but this was too divisive and he had to back down (Euractiv 2007).

More generally, since 2007, climate change has become a prestige issue for the French government and a key area to demonstrate the country's environmental credentials and international standing. Mirroring the adoption of the Climate and Energy Package during the 2008 French Presidency (see section 4), the decision to host the COP21 in Paris in December 2015 clearly illustrates this political strategy. The decision was made in 2012, partly as a gesture towards the Green Party to forge an electoral alliance. The conference also became an opportunity for the Socialist government to 'green' its discourse after a series of environmental policy failures. The 2015 Paris climate conference reveals the importance that climate has acquired in France's diplomatic strategy of international influence. President Hollande made COP21 one of the landmarks of his term in office towards which national environmental and foreign policies have been geared. In the Environment Ministry, led by the

high profile Minister Ségolène Royal, climate issues have tended to take priority over all other environmental matters. In international environmental negotiations, the Ministry of the Environment was usually the lead negotiator. In preparation for and during COP21, it was the Ministry of Foreign Affairs – led by veteran Minister Laurent Fabius, his experienced chief negotiator Laurence Tubiana and no less than 60 members of staff – which has been at the forefront. This duo composed of a political heavy weight and a seasoned environmental adviser proved very efficient in leading the French team and eventually brokering an international climate agreement.

Commentators and national representatives have often hailed the summit as a diplomatic success. The French Presidency has been praised for its commitment and organization; for the dedication of its well-established diplomatic machinery; for its efforts to meet and listen to everyone, in a ‘transparent’ and ‘inclusive’ manner; and for its flexibility in brokering agreements on various drafts and on the final text (Harvey 2015; Stothard and Chassany 2015). Although the real influence of the French government may well have been overestimated in the euphoria that followed the deal, its active role in the negotiations leading to the Paris Climate Agreement reveals a national preference for (often short lasting) entrepreneurial leadership, based on the country’s negotiating skills and diplomatic resources, in a heroic style.

7. Conclusion: political leadership in France

France’s attitude towards climate change is ambiguous. In the press and public opinion, attention to this issue has varied, depending on the national and international political contexts, as well as the economic situation. As for governmental actors, their strategies have

been changing, alternating between bandwagoning at EU level, resistance to specific policy goals and instruments, and occasional bids for leadership at the EU and international levels.

Following the successful organization of the 2015 Paris climate conference, the disjunction between French humdrum domestic policies and heroic international leadership ambitions will be put to a test. The entrepreneurial role of the government during the negotiations has been widely praised. Now that the thorny process of implementing the Paris agreement begins, the focus will shift towards French domestic policies. COP21 has encouraged public authorities in their quest for exemplarity on environmental and climate issues, as shown by their support for European targets and the adoption of the Law on the Energy Transition in July 2015. The analysis of the previous decades shows that France's legitimacy cannot rely only on the occasional greening of its discourse and short lived diplomatic efforts. It must be combined with a clarification of its domestic policy and its policy preferences regarding climate change. The effective implementation of the Law on the Energy Transition will be crucial test case.

Another source of uncertainty lies in the effect of COP21 on French society as a whole. Will the media hype on climate change endure or falter after the conference? Will local and civil society actors be able to maintain their mobilization and influence? These dynamics appear more crucial to assess the long-term evolution of French climate policy than detailed accounts of the Presidency's role in international climate negotiations.

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