

Mainstream French parties have failed to form a coherent response to the wave of right-wing movements sweeping across France

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France has seen the rise of a number of groups and associations protesting against the French government. [Lise Herman](#) writes that these movements are only loosely connected and have emerged in response to the government's agenda on LGBT rights, education and family law. She argues that it has been difficult for the mainstream parties to establish a firm response given the heterogeneity of the groups involved, with the government caught between the protesters and abandoning the agenda of their own supporters.



In an [interview](#) published on 2 February in the *Journal du Dimanche*, French Home Secretary Manuel Valls called for a reaction of the left against the birth of what he termed a 'Tea party à la française'. Opposing the current Socialist majority, a number of unorthodox social movements have indeed emerged since 2012. While it is debatable whether a comparison with the right-wing Tea Party movement in the United States is appropriate, the Minister's concern is directed towards a relatively new and multifaceted phenomenon of French politics. Positioned on the right or the far right of the political spectrum, these movements have often sat uncomfortably under the same banner. They nevertheless raise similar problems for the more traditional forces of the French party system.

Protests against the Socialist government's societal policies

These grass-root movements have mostly emerged in reaction to the current majority's societal agenda on issues related to gender, education and family. The French Parliament's discussion in the autumn and spring of 2013 of a law authorising same-sex marriage most certainly acted as a trigger in this regard. Six protests were organised by a new born collective of 37 associations baptised [La Manif pour tous](#) ('The Protest for all'). With slogans ranging from the defence of childrens' rights to the [denunciation of a 'fascist state'](#), marches on 13 January, 24 March, and 26 May 2013 each united between 300,000 and 1 million protesters in Paris alone, with smaller scale protests organised in most other major French cities.

While the collective has lost much of its potential for mobilisation since the adoption of the law in April last year, other societal policies have sparked discontent. In January, between 16,000 and 40,000 people [marched](#) in Paris against a law facilitating women's recourse to abortion. Protesting against the supposed influence of 'gender theories' on the education of their offspring, parents in approximately one hundred French Schools decided to keep their children at home on 24 and 27 January. A reform of French family law, including among other measures the consolidation of surrogate parents' legal status



Sign at a protest against the teaching of gender theory in French schools: "We want sex, not gender". Credit: Pat Berardici (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

and the facilitation of paternity leave, also recently gave a second life to the *Manif pour tous* collective. On 2 February it united between 50,000 and 80,000 protesters in Paris to [denounce](#) the government's 'familiphobie'.

A nebula of right-wing organisations

Behind these protests, four different types of organisation can be distinguished. On the one hand, there are associations that embody traditional forms of social conservatism, such as the [Confédération Nationale des Associations de Familiales Catholiques](#), or the pro-life association [Alliance Vita](#). Typically, these associations and those who follow them are loosely aligned with the stances of the [Parti Chrétien Démocrate](#), a small political party allied to the centre-right [Union pour un Mouvement Populaire](#) (UMP).

A second group includes a younger and more radical generation of catholic traditionalists, united in organisations such as [Civitas](#), [Renouveau Français](#) or the more recently founded collective [Printemps Français](#). These movements are prone to using direct action and protests as means of exerting political pressure. More traditionally conservative organisations have thus been reluctant to associate with these movements, the *Manif pour tous* having for instance [excluded the Printemps Français from its ranks](#) in March 2013.

A third ensemble comprises openly racist and homophobic groups, such as [Unité Radicale](#), dissolved in 2002 and reformed under the name [Bloc Identitaire](#), or the neo-fascist [Group Union Défense](#) (GUD), [Troisième voie](#) and [Jeunesses Nationalistes Révolutionnaires](#) (JNR).

Finally, France has witnessed the growing popularity of more unorthodox forms of far-right currents. The antisemitic stances of ideologue Alain Soral and closely affiliated humorist Dieudonné M'bala M'bala are gathering an increasing number of followers on the internet. Especially popular amongst French citizens of second or third generation immigrant origin, the comedian has politicised his discourse over the last few years. His gesture, the "quenelle", has become a rallying point among his followers.

While these different movements have often sat uneasily under the same banners, their common target is *de facto* connecting them, albeit in a loose manner. Despite the unease of traditional social conservatives, Catholic reactionaries and radical groups have been present in much of the protests described above. Neo-fascist movements also appear to have accumulated vigour (or at least visibility in the media) in the movements against the PS government's societal measures.

A case in point has been the involvement in June 2013 of [Troisième Voie](#) and JNR members in the [violent death](#) of 19-year old anti-fascist and gay rights activist Clément Méric. As for the 'quenelle' movement, it is also loosely connected to the opposition against the current government's societal policies. For instance the association [Égalité et Réconciliation](#), which launched rumours concerning the threat of 'gender theory' being taught in primary schools, is run by an open supporter of Dieudonné, Farida Belghoul.

Uncertain reactions to a loosely connected movement

The heterogeneous nature of this movement has complicated the formulation of a coherent response by more traditional political forces. The UMP has certainly had the easiest task in this regard. While denouncing violent excesses, it continued to support the objectives of these different protests. In this regard, the centre-right party even had official representatives in the marches of spring 2013 against same-sex marriage.

The far-right [Front National](#) (FN), on the other hand, has struggled to define its position. Certainly, it vocally opposed the reforms denounced by these movements. It also cultivates informal links with many of the organisations cited above: members of the FN often taking part in a larger and more radical nebula of far-right organisations. Perhaps for this very reason, the party has not been a vocal actor in this debate, refraining for instance from sending an official delegation to any of these protests.

Indeed, in recent years the FN has strived to become a more acceptable political actor, purporting to defend

secularism and the values of the French Republic. While the party's leaders still depict French citizens of Muslim confession and immigrants as a threat to such values, open anti-semitism, racism, and homophobia, are now **proscribed** from the FN's official position. With many of their grass-roots supporters still sharing such views, remaining discreet on the societal agenda can be read as a way for the FN to avoid confronting its own contradictions.

As for the PS, its reactions have been inconsistent. Certainly, it has maintained a firm position against the more radical manifestations of this wave of discontent. Following the death of Clément Méric, the government **initiated** a procedure of dissolution against two neo-fascist groups. In a similar vein, some of Dieudonné M'bala M'bala's shows have recently been **banned** for compromising public order. The socialist majority has been far more timid, however, in the defence of its societal agenda. While same-sex marriage was indeed adopted by the French Parliament, President Hollande nevertheless conceded to Mayors the right to refuse celebrating such marriages.

Following the more recent protests of the *Manif pour tous*, the government also renounced its family law reform. In this regard, the socialist majority seems unwilling to fight on the economic and social fronts at once. Indeed, it is already engaged in negotiations to conclude a Responsibility Pact with business representatives, a project which is getting much criticism from the left of the political spectrum. By backing down on its reform of family law, the government is thus avoiding the risk of seeing both right and left-wing street opposition a few weeks away from the March 2014 local elections. Still, this move is both symbolically heavy, and politically risky: for the core of the PS electorate, societal measures remained the government's last ticket to left-wing credibility.

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