Research Paper

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From National Concerns to Global Commitments: The Leading Role of France in the Paris Agreement*

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Abstract

The 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP21) in Paris brought together 195 countries to reach an agreement. Regardless of the environmental issues discussed and agreed in the conference, what seems significant is the global role that France played as the conference hosting nation. The country managed to promote itself as "the" eligible place among many European cities to host the conference, creating a diplomatic prestige for itself, provoking new environmental ambitions worldwide and presenting Paris as the home city, whose name is attached to the agreement forever. Yet, environmental issues have not always been a driving force for diplomatic efforts and public policy initiatives in France. Indeed, environmental protection grew to appear in the national agenda throughout decades and developed as a notion worthy of political and diplomatic attention in a long-term process, the study of which is noticeable in the European context. Utilizing Issue Ownership and Green Soft Power theories, the research employs Theory-Testing Process Tracing method to analyze France's environmental contributions resulting in its leader role in the Paris Agreement. Ultimately, this study seeks to illuminate how environmental concerns gained public and political attention in the French society and politics, leading to the country's position in the agreement process. The author argues that an interplay of domestic and external factors let France present itself as a responsible actor in environmental affairs, strengthen its soft power on the international stage, and reinforce both national policy and international influence on the issue of the agreement.

Keywords: Climate Change, Climate Diplomacy, COP21, France, Paris Agreement

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1. Introduction

On 12 December 2015, 195 countries reached an agreement on a new climate accord, which United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon described as "a monumental triumph for people and our planet" (UN News, 2015). Its purpose is to intensify global efforts on three fronts simultaneously: mitigating emissions, adapting to the adverse effects of climate change, and mobilizing financial support for necessary transformations (Brun, 2016). Adopted in 2015, the Paris Agreement aims to limit global temperature rise to below 2°C above pre-industrial levels, with a hope to keep it in less than 1.5°C (UN News, 2015).

Between 2010 and 2015, the economies of China and the United States experienced significant growth, while Europe's economic performance was comparatively weaker, with many EU countries facing slow recovery following the 2008 financial crisis compared to the faster recovery in the U.S. In terms of industrial competitiveness, Europe has struggled to keep pace with the massive scale and speed of industrial output in both China and the United States. Additionally, China and the U.S. are often criticized for their high levels of industrial emissions, contributing significantly to global pollution. In response to these challenges, the European Union—often led by France and Germany—has sought to implement regulatory frameworks aimed at ensuring fair competition, protecting the environment, and maintaining European industrial sovereignty. These include environmental standards, carbon taxes, and restrictions on foreign subsidies. France, in particular, played a key role in championing European values and environmental leadership. It took a leading position in international climate diplomacy, culminating in the hosting of the landmark COP21 climate conference in Paris in 2015, where the Paris Agreement was signed. This was a strategic opportunity for France

to defend both its national interests and broader European goals, positioning Europe as a global leader in climate action.

The Paris climate summit heralded the beginning of a new era in international climate politics, one that offers the chance of more durable international cooperation. Among the 195 countries that participated in the negotiations, France, which hosted the conference, played a significant role in reaching the conclusion of this meeting. At the summit, the French government displayed strong leadership, mobilizing political resources and expertise to negotiate an international agreement. The well-prepared conference, which resulted in the Paris Agreement, was celebrated as a success and highlighted the effectiveness of French diplomacy (Bocquillon & Evrard, 2016).

This article examines France's role in signing the Paris Agreement and the strategies employed in environmental initiatives. In other words, it addresses the causal mechanisms whereby France played a leading role in the agreement promotion and signing. The author's hypothesis is that France has been a leader in the Paris Agreement due to a series of domestic and diplomatic factors including commitment to international leadership, active diplomacy, relevant economic considerations, dedication to environmental protection, and a strong stance against climate change. The author specifically hypothesizes that the role Paris played in the process as a hosting capital to the agreement participants and a leading practitioner was not achieved overnight. Indeed, France gained the position throughout a series of causal mechanisms in place in a long-term period. The investigation of these processes constitutes the main objective of the author. The findings provide readers with a deeper insight into the French politics and society in terms of how an interaction between societal

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concerns and international responsibilities translates into actual decisions and procedures.

2. Theoretical Framework

Since the early 2000s, environmental issues have been noticeably placed on the agenda of the French government, becoming important components of the country's domestic and foreign policies. In this article, the factors influencing these policies are categorized into internal and external categories. For internal factors, issue ownership theory is employed, while for external factors, green soft power theory is utilized.

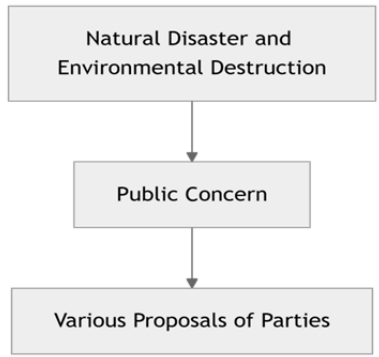
2.1. Issue Ownership Theory

This theory suggests that political parties and their candidates work to engage voters by highlighting issues where they are seen as knowledgeable or skilled. Consequently, parties gain support during elections based on the issues in which they are believed to have expertise (Petrocik, 1996). For example, when discussing free market economy and national security, the right party tends to take the lead, while the left party plays a stronger role in advocating for labor rights and environmental protection. The theory has two main objectives. First, it seeks to explain the behavior of political parties and candidates by focusing on the issues they emphasize during election campaigns. The expectation is that parties prioritize issues they are perceived to ‘own’ to enhance their credibility with voters, ensuring these issues align with their established image. Second, the theory aims to explain voter behavior in relation to issue ownership during elections. It posits that individuals make their voting choices by assessing which party is most competent in addressing specific issues. Voters are able to identify the party or

candidate they believe is the most credible advocate for a particular issue and subsequently vote for that issue's owner (Bélanger & Meguid, 2008). When natural disasters and environmental destruction become pressing concerns for the public, parties propose various programs to address these issues. In such cases, the owners of environmental policies—often green parties—gain increased popularity (McAllister & Oslan, 2021).

The theory is illustrated in Figure 1, which shows how natural disasters and environmental destruction raise public concern, leading parties to propose various solutions. This illustration highlights the mechanism through which issue ownership theory operates in shaping party competition.

Figure 1. An Illustration of Issue Ownership Theory



Source: Author

2.2. Green Soft Power

The concept of green soft power has been discussed in several academic articles and is based on Nye's theory of soft power. According to Nye (1990), soft power is the power of attraction to influence the behavior of other states through the use of non-

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coercive means including culture, political values and foreign policy (Nye, 1990).

After the Cold War and with the increasing negative consequences of environmental degradation, countries gradually came to accept that some of the most serious environmental problems had gone beyond national borders, and addressing them required international cooperation. In this way, the terms *environmental foreign policy* or *environmental diplomacy* came into extensive use (Karakir, 2018). Environmental diplomacy means "international negotiations, which address the problems of environmental degradation and pollution on a global basis" (Broadhurst & Ledgerwood, 1998).

Green soft power is built upon a country's environmental foreign policy. Understanding the relationship and interaction between soft power and a country's being green—or being perceived as green—means that a government must have outstanding environmental policies aligned with global standards. For example, it should have exemplary records in reducing carbon emissions and efficiently using renewable energy within its national energy mix (Nitza-Makowska et al., 2024).

Nye argues that the soft power of a country rests primarily on three resources: culture, political values and foreign policies (Nye, 2008). He also believes that having an active role in international negotiations for the global community helps strengthen a government's soft power (Nye, 1990).

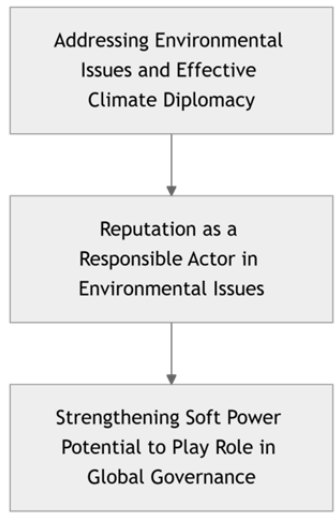
The source of a country's green soft power is its environmental foreign policy—that is, the actions and policies a government pursues at the international level to protect the environment. The tools needed to acquire this power are multilateral and bilateral environmental diplomacy, through which a country cooperates with

other states and international organizations on environmental issues. The main transmitters are international organizations, while the primary recipients are foreign governments and public opinion. In other words, green soft power is employed with the aim of influencing the governments of other countries (Nitza-Makowska et al., 2024).

Environmental issues gained greater importance on the foreign policy agenda of countries, and in this context, adherence to international environmental norms has led to an increase in countries' soft power capacity.

This theory is illustrated in Figure 2, which demonstrates how addressing environmental issues through effective climate diplomacy enhances a country's reputation as a responsible actor. In turn, this reputation strengthens its soft power potential and capacity to play a more active role in global governance.

Figure 2. An Illustration of Green Soft Power



Source: Author

3. Literature Review

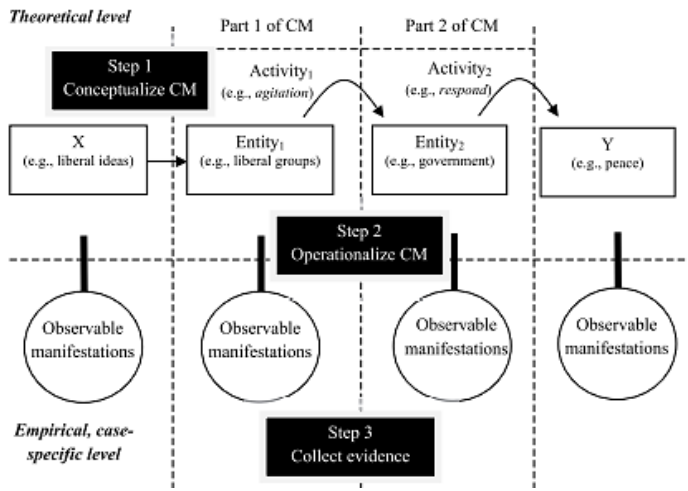
There has been limited detailed analysis on why France signed the Paris Agreement, and research on France's role in its conclusion is sparse. However, Falkner (2016) in his article *The Paris Agreement and the New Logic of International Climate Politics* examines the process of sealing the Paris Agreement from Copenhagen, and analyzes the outcomes of the COP21 conference. A case study by Rüdinger (2018), which focuses on *Best Practices and Challenges for Effective Climate Governance Frameworks: A Case Study on the French Experience*. This research highlights the key challenge of creating strong climate rules at the national level to implement the Paris Agreement effectively, detailing France's experience and the obstacles faced in its low-carbon strategy. Bocquillon and Evrard (2016), in their article *French Climate Policy: Diplomacy in the Service of Symbolic Leadership?* discuss the disconnect between France's domestic policy and its leadership on climate change, emphasizing the need to align French domestic and foreign policies. Estève's study (2023), *Preventing and Managing Climate Risks: France's Approach to Climate Security* summarizes climate diplomacy activities during the presidencies of Hollande and Macron from 2007 to 2020. Through discourse analysis, it shows how the social and political construction of risks can lead to a security approach in French climate policies. In *Conference Diplomacy: The Making of the Paris Agreement*, Brun (2016) provides a firsthand perspective on the negotiation process behind the Paris Agreement on climate change, and examines the significance of conference diplomacy in achieving it. Mathieu's case study (2016), *France: Reducing Nuclear Dominance and Promoting a Low-Carbon Energy System*, notes that with its first Energy Transition Law in 2015, France intensified efforts to address global environmental issues. As the host of the UN Climate

Change Conference (COP21), France has emerged as a global leader in green finance. Lastly, Colombier (2018) discusses the activities of the French government to deal with climate change. Each of the works examines, in some way, France's performance from different perspectives, both inside and outside the country, in relation to signing the Paris Agreement.

4. Research Method

In this article, the author uses the method of process tracing, which focuses on examining the causal mechanisms and processes that result in a special outcome. Theory-Testing Process-Tracing method is chosen to assess whether the hypothesized causal mechanism exists between two variables, X and Y. The goal is to demonstrate how this mechanism operates according to chosen theories. Figure 3 illustrates the key steps of the Theory-Testing Process-Tracing method.

Figure 3. Theory-Testing Process-Tracing



Source: Beach & Pedersen, 2013, p. 15

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Key steps of this method include:

1. Conceptualization of causal mechanism: In this step, the researcher analyzes a causal mechanism between X and Y based on existing theories and determines the context in which this mechanism operates.

2. Operationalization: theories are translated into case-specific predictions to see what symptoms should be present if the mechanism is present in the case.

3. Collect Evidence: The researcher collects empirical evidence to see if the hypothesized mechanism actually exists and whether it has functioned as predicted or if only some parts of it have (Beach & Pedersen, 2013, pp. 23-32).

To answer the research question, various forms of evidence, including documents, articles, and books, were first gathered to follow the events that culminated in France's signature on the Paris Agreement. Next, these events were organized chronologically. Afterward, the influencing factors in this process were investigated, with an aim to establish causal relationships between them. In examining these relationships, both X and Y were considered, and questions were posed regarding whether the mechanism functioned as predicted or if only some components its were present. The causes were categorized into two groups: internal factors and external factors. To ensure the work is done and the evidence is found, four tests introduced by Van Evera were used. These tests include:

- Hoop Test
- Smoking-Gun Test

- Doubly-Decisive Test
- Straw-in-the-Wind Test

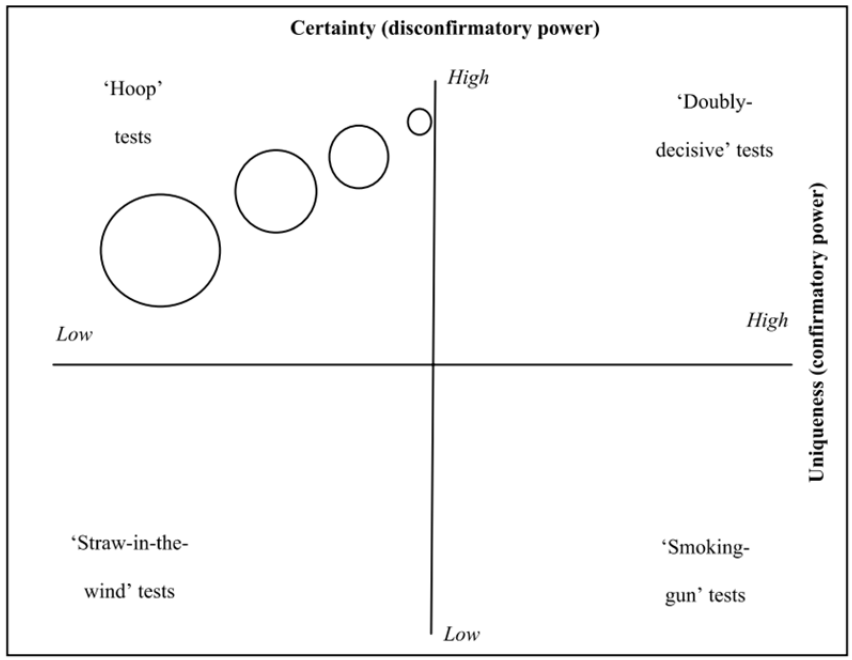
The Hoop Test is used to eliminate alternative hypotheses. If the expected evidence is not found, confidence in the hypothesis decreases. However, finding the evidence does not confirm the hypothesis with certainty. This test has high certainty but low uniqueness.

In the Smoking-Gun Test, if the expected evidence is found, it strongly increases confidence in the hypothesis. But if it is not found, confidence doesn't decrease much, because the evidence is rare and hard to find. This test has high uniqueness but low certainty.

The Doubly-Decisive Test has both high uniqueness and high certainty. If the predicted evidence is not found, confidence in the hypothesis goes down; and if it is found, confidence increases. It's worth mentioning that in social science research, it's often difficult to design such strong tests.

Finally, the Straw-in-the-Wind Test acts like an early indicator. It helps guide the direction of the research but should not be used for making firm conclusions. This test has low certainty and low uniqueness, meaning it can't strongly confirm or reject a hypothesis (Beach & Pedersen, 2013).

Figure 4. Types of Tests of Parts of a Causal Mechanism



Source: Van Evera, 1997, in Beach & Pederson, 2013

5. Findings

Based on the author's hypothesis, France's leading role in Paris Agreement was derived from a series of domestic and external factors discussed below:

5.1. Internal Factors

5.1.1. Copenhagen and Fukushima

The Copenhagen Conference in 2009 was presented as an opportunity for countries to collaborate in dealing with climate

change. It aimed to make a mid-term agreement that balanced efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from developing countries with transparency from developed nations regarding their short-term and long-term financial commitments and climate control plans. The conference also signed the initiation of several important innovations in climate policy, including the Green Climate Fund, which promised up to US$100 billion annually by 2020 to support mitigation and adaptation efforts in developing countries. In addition, a system for monitoring, reporting, and verifying emissions and financial contributions was proposed (Falkner, 2016). However, the lack of strong agreements as well as the limited outcomes led to frustration and concern among the public and environmental activists. Ultimately, the negotiations fell short, as they did not yield practical results for the Copenhagen meeting. The lack of backing from the United States and essential developing countries was a hindrance to the realization of the conference's ambitious visions. At the same time, environmental NGOs and some political figures started advocating for a new mobilization on climate in response to the disappointing outcome of the 2009 UN Climate Summit in Copenhagen and declining ambitions at both the French and European levels (Colombier, 2018).

On March 11, 2011, the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear catastrophe involved a series of equipment failures, nuclear meltdowns, and releases of radioactive materials at the Fukushima nuclear power plant, activated by the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami. After this event, public awareness of the dangers associated with nuclear power notably increased. The accident caused disastrous human and environmental damage, transforming the issue into a political concern that prompted many governments to prioritize

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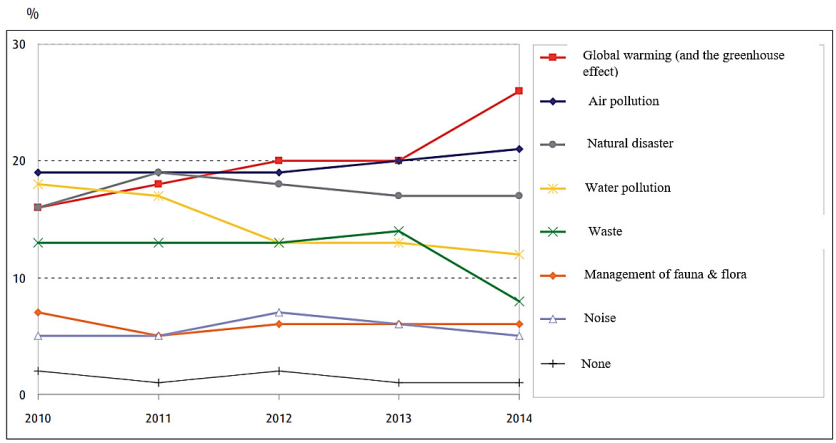
investigations into their nuclear power plants. In 2010, France heavily relied on nuclear energy, which accounted for about 74.1% of its electricity generation (Hollard, 2024). French nuclear power plants could also face risks similar to those experienced in Fukushima. This is the reason for which the issue of controlling consumption—linked to the transition away from nuclear energy and ultimately tied to climate concerns—has become an internal priority for France.

5.1.2. The French Concern about Climate Change and Nuclear Energy

The Copenhagen event (2009 climate change conference) and the Fukushima disaster (2011) both had a significant influence on public attitudes toward climate change and energy. These two incidents clearly demonstrate the importance of global collaboration and the need for diversity in energy sources to deal with environmental and social crises. According to an annual survey published by Department of Observation and Statistics (SOeS), global warming has been consistently viewed as one of the three most concerning environmental issues with air pollution and natural disaster in French public opinion. From 2010 to 2014, concerns about global warming and the greenhouse effect increased steadily among the French population, surpassing all other environmental issues. While issues such as air pollution, natural disasters, and water pollution remained relatively stable, global warming showed a clear upward trend and became the most worrying environmental problem by 2014. This indicates a growing awareness and concern in France about climate change compared to other environmental challenges during this period.

Figure 5. Environmental Problems in French Public Opinion (2005–2014)



Source: SOeS, 2015

The annual national survey conducted by the Institute for Radiological Protection and Nuclear Safety (IRSN)[1], carried out six months after the Fukushima nuclear disaster in March 2011, revealed that the percentage of French citizens perceiving nuclear safety risks as significant increased from 48% in 2010, to 55% in the following year. This marked the highest level recorded since the survey began in 1988 (Institut de Radioprotection et de Sûreté Nucléaire, 2012). With this change in risk perception, the idea that France had become overly dependent on nuclear began to gain traction. After the Fukushima disaster in March 2011, then-French President Nicolas Sarkozy addressed global concerns about nuclear

1. Institut de Radioprotection et de Sûreté Nucléaire

safety and energy choices. He emphasized France's dedication to nuclear energy for energy independence and environmental reasons, asserting that the country maintains high safety standards (Élysée, 2011). The French government indeed committed to reviewing the safety systems of its nuclear power plants in light of the Fukushima incident, promising transparency in this process. Sarkozy and his government, who considered nuclear energy the main element of French independence, justified it as follows:

> France has chosen nuclear energy, which is an essential element of its energy independence and the fight against greenhouse gases. This choice is inseparable from an unwavering commitment to ensuring a very high level of safety for our nuclear facilities. The technical excellence, rigor, independence, and transparency of our safety system are recognized worldwide.

Sarkozi also highlighted:

> Progress in terms of safety must be permanent, and we must take into account feedback from accidents. Lessons from the Fukushima accident will be learned through a complete review of the safety systems of our nuclear power plants and this work will be made public (Élysée, 2011).

François Fillon, the then Prime Minister, visited the Bugey nuclear power plant in Ain on August 30, 2011. At the time, the site was producing around 40% of the electricity consumed in the Rhône-Alpes region. In his speech, Fillon emphasized that for France, nuclear power "is an irreplaceable source of energy". "The Fukushima accident was a dramatic reminder that we do not compromise on nuclear safety. On safety, we are and will be uncompromising", he insisted (Le Dauphiné Libéré, 2011).

5. 1. 3. Environmental Programs of the Socialist Party (SP)

Before the 2012 national elections, the Fukushima nuclear accident in March 2011 brought energy issues back into political focus**.** In response to public opinion, France considered revising and reducing its reliance on nuclear power in favor of increasing the use of renewable energy sources, and decided to collaborate more intimately with green parties. What began as a political debate on the future of nuclear energy in the wake of the Fukushima accident eventually accelerated an all-inclusive discussion on setting up a strategic vision for a low-carbon future in France (Rüdinger, 2018). The motive for the energy transition in France received a significant boost during the primaries for the 2012 presidential election, particularly within the Socialist Party. During these primaries, two prominent candidates, Martine Aubry and Ségolène Royale, advocated for the withdrawal from nuclear energy. While François Hollande held a more moderate position on the matter (Aykut & Evrard, 2017). The Socialist Party's stance evolved notably, with key members advocating for a gradual reduction and possible phase-out of nuclear energy over the coming decades. Their goal to reduce nuclear energy by 2025 should not be seen as the initial move towards a total phase-out. The official approach was to keep nuclear energy as a key source, though no longer the primary one, while allowing for greater expansion of renewable energy sources (Mathieu, 2016). As a middle ground between the conservatives, who favored a high nuclear energy level, and the Greens, who wanted a complete phase-out, the socialist program aimed to reduce nuclear energy's share from 75% to 50% by 2025. This topic also became central in coalition talks between the SP and the Europe Ecology – The Greens, resulting in an agreement to reduce nuclear energy to 50% by closing 24 reactors by 2025. Presidential candidate François Hollande promised to organize a

new governance approach to develop a low-carbon strategy by 2050, discussing nuclear energy while committing to reduce it (Rüdinger, 2018). Before the 2012 presidential election, the SP and the Europe Ecology – The Greens collaborated on a series of proposals to implement if the left-wing coalition won a majority. François Hollande made a pact with the Green Party whereby, if he won the presidential election, the Greens and his own Socialist Party would form a coalition in the National Assembly. The agreement allowed the Greens, who had only four members at the Parliament at the time, to form a 'parliamentary group' in 2012. They would have 25 to 30 members of the Parliament if the left won and 15 members if it lost (Le Monde, 2011). This pre-election agreement emphasized accelerating the transition to a more organized and renewable energy system (Mathieu, 2016).

The agreement between the Socialist Party and Europe Ecology – The Greens for the legislative elections was validated by 74% of the votes during the party's federal council in Paris (Rougerie, 2011). "The presidential campaign can resume its rights", declared Denis Baupin, one of The Greens negotiators (Rougerie, 2011). For Baupin (2011),

> the environmentalists have proven their political maturity. We are signing an agreement even if all our proposals have not been taken up. We have shown that we know how to make compromises and also that we know how to stick to them afterward.

Before reaching the Elysée Palace, the socialist candidate published a book titled *Change destiny*[1] in 2012. In one section, he discussed his alliance with the Green Party:

1. *Changer de Destin*

> I want to govern with the Greens. The Socialists have already done so for five years. This alliance should ensure that ecology serves as a lever for development, an instrument of well-being, and a principle of balance. Ecology is the great cause of the 21st century; it is integral to our policies aimed at reducing inequalities, fostering participatory democracy, and preserving resources for future generations. This alliance deserves a formal agreement, putting aside any past disagreements (Hollande, 2012).

Hollande emphasized environmental issues in his election campaigns, defining national interests through both his rhetoric and his practical alliance with the Greens.

The economic situation, particularly employment, was a significant political concern following the 2008 crisis, which left the country with high unemployment rates. Discussions about this issue were both quantitative and qualitative, focusing on professional qualifications, training needs, and the sectoral and regional impacts of various industries. There was a strong focus on energy sectors (such as nuclear, oil, gas, and renewables), with specific challenges identified in construction—where small and medium enterprises are crucial—and agriculture. The debate highlighted two conflicting views on ecological transition: one side worried that limiting fossil fuels could raise energy costs, harm the economy, and force undesirable lifestyle changes, while the other believed the transition could enhance efficiency, lower production costs, alleviate fuel poverty, and foster innovation for the benefit of citizens (Colombier, 2018). The main idea of Socialist Party was that preparing for a future without fossil fuels would benefit the French economy (Mathieu, 2016).

During the debates and differing opinions, the Socialist Party candidate defined two key goals for his presidential campaign: "diversifying energy sources" and "promoting a society focused on energy efficiency". He believed these two objectives go hand in hand: "It is only by controlling the growth of energy consumption, particularly electricity (the SP predicts an average increase of 2% per year), that we can reduce our dependence on oil and nuclear power and develop renewable production sources" (Lefilliâtre, 2012).

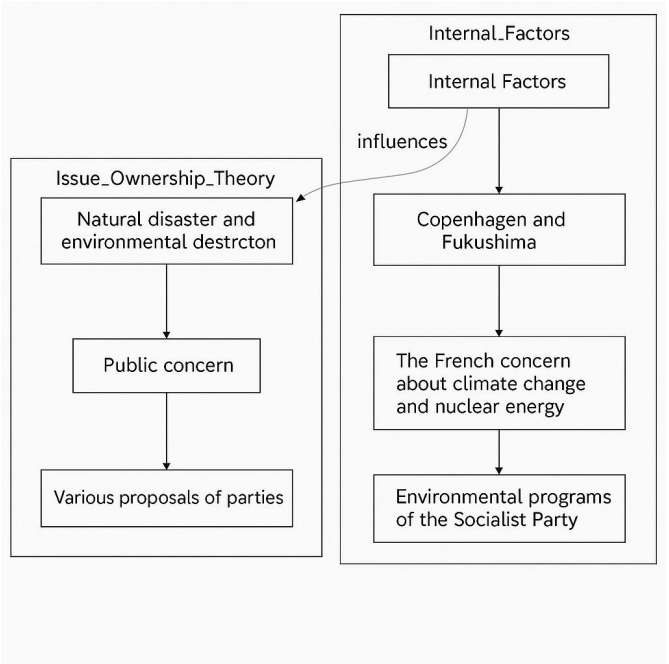
Regarding diversifying energy sources, François Hollande aimed to reduce the share of nuclear power in electricity production from 75% to 50% by 2050. This goal required increasing the share of renewable energies (RE) from about 15% to 40% in fifteen years. As for promoting a society focused on energy efficiency: Hollande planned to implement a thermal renovation initiative as part of his 60 commitments, specifically the 43rd commitment. He intended to launch a large-scale program that would provide quality thermal insulation for one million homes each year. This included renovating 600,000 older homes and constructing 400,000 new homes that adhered to standards set by the Grenelle Environment Forum. Hollande expressed optimism about achieving energy savings of 30 to 40%, which he considered significant. Additionally, he noted that this thermal renovation effort would help maintain the purchasing power of the French people and create over 150,000 jobs by 2020 (Lefilliâtre, 2012).

These changes followed the economic crisis and the emergence of shale gas in the United States, which angered European businesses. Additionally, environmental NGOs and some local leaders continued to demand a revision of climate policies. After the election, the Socialist-Green coalition government committed to

holding a 'National Debate' on the future of energy to help draft a new Energy Transition Law (Colombier, 2018).

The findings of the first traced process based on issue ownership theory can be summarized in figure 6.

Figure 6. Issue Ownership Theory Applied to Internal Factors



Source: Author

To test internal factors, the following evidence related to the Copenhagen Summit and the Fukushima disaster passes the straw-in-the-wind test, as these indicators serve as early signals that help guide the direction of analysis. However, they are not strong

enough to draw definitive conclusions on their own. In relation to public concern about climate change and nuclear energy, the case passes the hoop test, since the available evidence is necessary for the hypothesis to hold, but not sufficient to confirm it with certainty. While the absence of such evidence would significantly weaken the hypothesis, its presence does not decisively validate it, as similar patterns could also be accounted for by alternative explanations. Finally, based on the available evidence, the environmental programs of the Socialist Party pass the smoking-gun test, as the evidence presented is both sufficiently specific and rare. However, it cannot be stated with complete certainty that this evidence is incompatible with all competing hypotheses.

5.2. External Factors

It is unlikely to imagine that only internal factors led to France's role in the Paris Agreement; the influence of factors dictated by France's international or European position must also be taken into account.

5.2.1. Dynamic French Diplomacy

The French government's internationalist and development goals—whether real or rhetorical—have persisted (Bocquillon & Evrard, 2016). France's pursuit of leadership is fueled by its diplomatic goals and desire for global prestige. As an entrepreneurial leader in politics, France has established a strong presence internationally. Its influential voice in the European Union and the broader international community highlights its active and effective diplomacy.

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In the early 2000s, as global attention on climate change increased, France realized that it could no longer fall behind. The French government, led by President Jacques Chirac, made a notable statement at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg: "Our house is burning, and we look elsewhere". During this period, France sought to persuade the EU and the international community to recognize nuclear energy as a key strategy for addressing climate change. Both climate change and nuclear energy significantly influence France's energy diplomacy with developing countries (Bocquillon & Evrard, 2016, p. 14.).

France is proud of its low per capita greenhouse gas emissions and carbon intensity, largely because of its reliance on nuclear and hydroelectric power. This has earned the country significant recognition as an 'inadvertent climate pionee' (Bocquillon & Evrard, 2016, p. 1.). Consequently, the French government often asserts that it practices leadership by example.

Other French statesmen also supported French climate diplomacy**.** For instance, in February 2003, during the 20th meeting of the IPCC (The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change), Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin stated:

> We know that we need to cut GHG emissions by a factor of 2 at the global level. For France, this means a division by 4 to 5; according to the common but differentiated responsibility principle, we shall take the lead (Colombier, 2018).

As a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, France advocated for the 2007 discussion on the Impact of Climate Change on Peace and Security. Jean-Marc de la Sablières, France's Permanent Representative to the UN, identified various security

risks associated with climate change, including food crises, health threats, extreme natural disasters, resource depletion, loss of arable land, and migration flows. Finally, the representative deemed it urgent to improve international environmental governance by proposing the creation of a United Nations Environment Organization. (Nations Unies, 2007). These efforts can be attributed in part to France's proactive climate diplomacy (Estève, 2023).

Following the talks led by Chirac and other statesmen in the European Union, France began to take climate diplomacy more seriously. A Climate Plan was adopted in 2004 to guide actions from 2004 to 2012, aiming to fulfill the targets set by the EU burden-sharing agreement. It specifically mentioned the 'Factor Four' trajectory, which calls for a fourfold reduction in CO_2 emissions by 2050—a commitment made at the international level by Prime Minister Raffarin and President Chirac (Bocquillon & Evrard, 2016). Within the EU, France advocated in 2000 for the establishment of the Emissions Trading System (ETS) to reduce overall greenhouse gas emissions in the European Union; the system became operational in 2005. Starting in 2004, France reported to Brussels on its progress in combating climate change through the Climate Plan, which was updated in 2006, 2009, and 2011 (Virlouvet, 2015). Adopted on July 13, 2005, the POPE Law[1] (Programming Law for Fixing the Orientations of Energy Policy) set out France's energy strategy and objectives. In particular, it established an energy savings obligation for all energy suppliers, later extending to fuel distributors as well (Légifrance, 2016).

1. Loi de programme fixant les orientations de la politique énergétique

5.2.2. Green Commitment: Commitment to Sustainability and Climate Action

Nicolas Sarkozy's election in May 2007, during which he emphasized environmental concerns, marked a shift in France's stance on climate change and led to a more proactive approach in European affairs. During his campaign, under pressure from Environmental NGOs (ENGOs) and TV presenter Nicolas Hulot, he signed an 'Ecological Pact' and made environmental commitments. After coming to power, he created a super-ministry—the Ministry of Ecology, Energy, Sustainable Development, and Planning (MEEDDAT[1])—which merged several previous ministries (Bocquillon & Evrard, 2016). Sustainability, a key issue during the presidential campaign, became a top policy priority. At the EU level, France committed to increasing the share of renewable energy in its energy mix and incorporated this objective into the 2007 Environment Grenelle law[2] (Légifrance, 2021).

One of Sarkozy's main commitments was the initiation of a national consultation process on environmental issues, called Environment Grenelle. In 2007, Nicolas Sarkozy launched this significant consultation process to redefine sustainable development in France, promoting it as a 'revolution for green growth'. That same year, the French government formed six working groups composed of both state and non-state participants to rethink the country's environmental policy. Their proposals were opened for public consultation, resulting in recommendations submitted to the French parliament in early 2008. One of the

1. Ministère de l'Écologie, de l'Énergie, du Développement durable et de l'Aménagement du territoire (MEEDDAT)
2. Loi du Grenelle de l'environnement (1)

groups focused specifically on climate change. The principles of this process were outlined in the Grenelle I Law (Légifrance, 2021). The primary objective was to significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, particularly targeting buildings and transport, which together accounted for 40% of emissions. Key measures included improving public transport, increasing energy efficiency in social housing, promoting renewable energy sources, encouraging organic farming, minimizing pesticide use, and enhancing community involvement in environmental decision-making (Vie Publique au Cœur du Débat Public, 2019). The *Grenelle II* Law provided a more detailed framework for implementation. Notably, in 2008, the National Observatory on the Effects of Climate Change (ONERC)[1] became part of the Ministry of the Environment following the 2008 Grenelle conference (Estève, 2023).

France took the presidency of the EU Council in the second half of 2008, making the adoption of the *Energy-Climate Package* a priority. This package, proposed by the European Commission in January 2008 and adopted in April 2009, was designed to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and strengthen the EU's energy security. It established three '20 by 2020' targets:

1. A 20% reduction in GHG emissions compared to 2005 levels (up to 30% if an international agreement was reached).
2. A 20% share of renewable energy in total energy consumption, including 10% in transportation.
3. A 20% reduction in energy consumption compared to projected levels, with a focus on energy efficiency (Connaissance des Energies, 2024).

1. Observatoire national sur les effets du réchauffement climatique (ONERC)

This package represented the French government's environmental commitments, particularly as climate policies were seen as favorable to nuclear energy, which was presented as a low-carbon technology.

In 2008, during France's presidency of the EU, Sarkozy prioritized the adoption of the EU climate and energy package, shifting France from a norm importer to a norm entrepreneur. Bocquillon and Evrard noted that "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". They also observed that France's climate stance shifted from being perceived as a threat to industrial growth to becoming a diplomatic advantage (Bocquillon & Evrard, 2016).

Nuclear energy is known as a source of low-cost electricity supply. Additionally, it helps maintain France's leadership position on the global stage (Mathieu, 2016). It is said that the images associated with nuclear energy are linked to the French national identity. This ambition for a French-led nuclear resurgence was illustrated by Nicolas Sarkozy's establishment of the France Nuclear International Agency in 2008, which aimed to promote nuclear energy in emerging nations (Agence France Nucleaire International, 2009). Energy security and climate protection were key factors in shaping France's environmental foreign policy. In the 2000s, the country focused on revitalizing its nuclear sector by promoting reactor sales internationally.

In the latter half of 2008, France, under President Sarkozy, successfully adopted the EU Climate and Energy Package. This initiative underscored France's climate commitments and aimed to establish the country as a leader in EU climate policy. Key goals

included a 20% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2020, a 14% reduction in non-ETS sectors, and an increase in renewable energy consumption to 23% by 2020 (Bocquillon & Evrard, 2016). The French government intensified negotiations, utilizing high-level diplomacy and discussions at multiple EU levels to finalize the agreement before the Copenhagen Summit.

On September 14, 2012, four months after his election to the Élysée palace, François Hollande inaugurated his first environmental conference, reiterating his campaign promise: “To make France the nation of environmental excellence” (Vie Publique au Cœur du Débat Public, 2013). Hollande entrusted the organization of the "National Debate on Energy Transition" to the Minister of the Environment, Delphine Batho, and pursued two goals: preparing the drafting of a framework law to reshape France's energy policy for the coming decades; and creating an exercise in democratic consultation in the field of energy issues (Aykut & Nadaï, 2019).

Since France announced its intention to host COP21 in 2012, the government aimed to set a standard through increased domestic efforts, hoping to gain the political leverage necessary to encourage global action. For example, in 2013, transport service companies were required to report their greenhouse gas emissions (Wang et al., 2023). By 2015, legislation was passed, mandating all companies to reveal their emissions reports (Légifrance, 2022). France then implemented laws on corporate and investor climate reporting, becoming one of the first nations to require financial institutions to disclose climate-related risks (Légifrance, 2022).

At the yearly environmental conference, Hollande announced that France would eliminate export credits for energy projects in developing countries that included coal, the most polluting fossil

fuel (Reuters, 2014). France also encouraged OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) members to implement similar restrictions on coal plant financing (Mathieu, 2016). The new OECD rules were published in November 2015. OECD Members were required to publicly disclose the carbon footprint of their portfolios and clarify how their assets contributed to a low-carbon transition (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2015). After this initiative, the French finance minister requested that the Financial Stability Board assess the potential impacts of climate change on the global financial system. This approach, which incorporated the concept of carbon risk management advocated by NGOs and scholars, was initially tested through domestic legislation before France encouraged coordinated action among partner countries, including the G20 (Mathieu, 2016).

François Hollande announced on September 28, 2015, at the United Nations General Assembly in New York, that the host country of the important Paris climate change conference in December would also raise its grant aid, which would not be in the form of loans. He added that France would increase its financial assistance to help poor countries combat climate change from €3 billion to €5 billion ($5.6 billion) in 2020 (Darby, 2015). On November 30, 2015, France, along with 19 other nations at the Mission Innovation launch event, pledged to double its government-directed public funding for clean energy research and development over the next five years, relative to its average investment of €440 million during the 2012-2014 period (Mission Innovation, 2025).

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5.2.3. Active As an Entrepreneurial Leadership

After committing to climate programs, France increasingly demonstrated entrepreneurial leadership at both the EU and international levels, acting very deliberately in this regard. In fact, the Socialist-led government made an important decision to initiate a national discourse on the future of France's energy policy. This initiative initiated the 'Great Debate on Energy Transition[1]' in 2013, which established the basis for what is now recognized as the French model of energy transition. This dialogue ultimately resulted in the Law on the Energy Transition[2] being passed in 2014. The timing of this legislation was strategically significant, as it preceded the Paris Climate Conference (COP21), positioning France as a leading example ahead of the event.

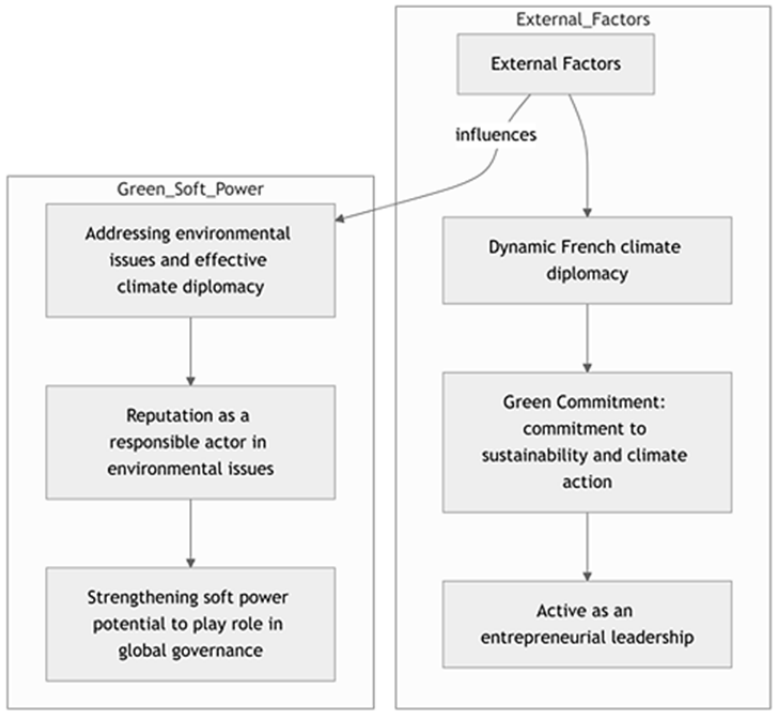
Hollande called for transformed Paris into an 'anti-Copenhagen'. France's strategy was based on an analysis of the failure of the COP15 conference, which highlighted the strategic errors of the Danish presidency in 2009. At COP15, the opinions of developing countries and other nations were not sufficiently considered, leading to its assessment as being partially aligned with American interests. The French president also engaged with major negotiation players in both the North and South through active climate diplomacy outside the negotiations. This diplomatic activity was fruitful, resulting in joint statements with the United States (November 12, 2014), India (April 11, 2015), Mexico (July 16, 2015), and China (November 3, 2015). This statement was released a month before COP21. Hollande's goal was to use bilateral initiatives to strengthen the multilateralism of the United Nations (Aykut, 2016).

1. Grand Débat sur la transition énergétique
2. Loi de transition énergétique pour la croissance verte

French politicians and officials made diplomatic efforts in the lead-up to the Paris Conference, to correct the diplomatic mistakes of Copenhagen Conference. They engaged in strategic dialogues with key countries before the Conference. Unlike the 2009 Copenhagen Conference, where heads of state arrived toward the end of the conference and complicated negotiations, the French team portrayed itself as receptive to all parties, acknowledging their concerns. In preparation for COP 21, the French presidency organized early high-level meetings focused on specific themes and established a new format for these pre-meetings. Ministers were restricted to brief general comments based on written statements, after which they were divided into smaller groups to address specific questions that had not been disclosed beforehand. This method promoted more targeted discussions, improving understanding of each party's issues and facilitating exploration of potential compromises. Consequently, these pre-meetings closely mirrored the final negotiations and laid the groundwork for the agreements achieved at the Paris Conference. Before presenting the final text for approval, the presidency conducted thorough consultations with major countries and all negotiating groups (Brun, 2016). In international environmental negotiations, the Ministry of the Environment typically took the role of the primary negotiator. During COP21, the ministry of foreign affairs, under the leadership of minister Laurent Fabius and chief negotiator Laurence Tubiana, along with a team of over 60 staff, played a center role. Their combination of political clout and environmental expertise was instrumental in guiding the French team and ultimately securing a global climate agreement (Bocquillon & Evrard, 2016). The proactive role of the government throughout these negotiations has received acclaim. France extended invitations to heads of state and government for the conference's

opening. This approach, aimed at building political momentum, was innovative and ultimately successful, leading to a demonstration of France's political commitment (Brun, 2016). The findings of the second traced process based on green soft power theory can be summarized in Figure 7.

Figure 7. Green Soft Power Theory Applied to External Factors



Source: Author

To test external factors, the following evidence related to France's dynamic climate diplomacy passes the hoop test: while the absence of such evidence would weaken confidence in the hypothesis, its presence does not provide definitive confirmation.

In relation to green commitment and entrepreneurial leadership, both types of evidence pass the smoking-gun test, as they are sufficiently specific and rare. However, it cannot be stated with complete certainty that this evidence is entirely incompatible with all alternative hypotheses.

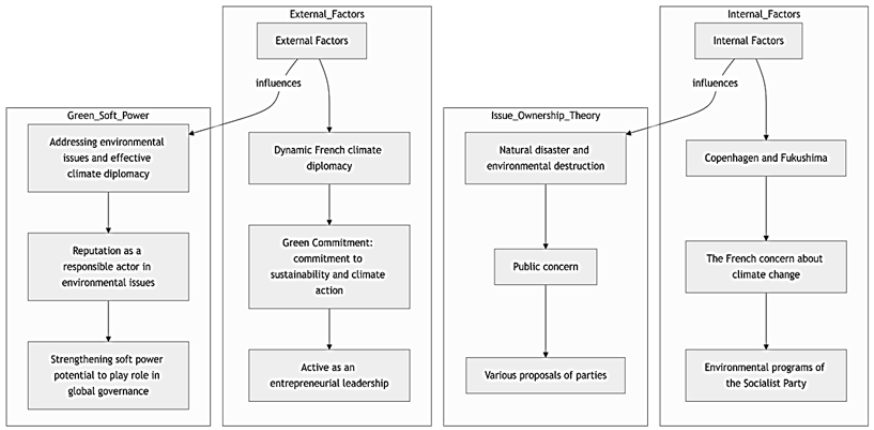
6. Discussion

By analyzing internal and external factors through the theory-testing process tracing method, this study identifies a complex interaction between domestic political dynamics and international diplomatic efforts that shaped France's climate policy during the signing of the Paris Agreement. The internal factors were examined using issue ownership theory, which concluded that public concern over environmental disasters and nuclear energy heightened political responsiveness. These events prompted political parties to propose targeted programs to address environmental challenges. The external factors were analyzed through the lens of green soft power theory, revealing a causal relationship between diplomatic engagement and national reputation. The findings indicate that a country's image as a responsible actor is strengthened by active diplomacy in environmental matters, ultimately enhancing its soft power. The analysis demonstrates that by effectively navigating these internal and external factors, France has positioned itself as a leader in climate action, illustrating how environmental responsiveness can reinforce both national policy and international influence.

It has consistently sought to establish a special role for itself and position itself as a leader in important decision-making processes, both within the Union and as an international actor. A key aspect of

this matter is that French diplomacy has played a vital role, successfully establishing France as a recognized authority in this field. Additionally, environmental issues have become increasingly important to the French people in recent decades, leading to the emergence of social movements and shifts in the trajectories of certain political parties. It is the combination of these factors that has made Paris a pioneer in the movement, as well as the location where the agreement was signed. The findings of this article confirm these points and can be analyzed through these theoretical perspectives. Figure 8 summarizes the findings of the research in line with the theoretical framework.

Figure 8. Findings of the Research in Line with the Theoretical Framework



Source: Author

The organized evidence across internal and external factors presents a coherent and well-developed foundation for France's leadership in the Paris Agreement. On the internal front, events like

the failure of the Copenhagen summit and the Fukushima disaster acted as straw-in-the-wind signals, indicating a need for changing policies regarding nuclear energy. Meanwhile, growing public concern over climate change and nuclear safety, supported by ADEME reports and safety reforms, passed the hoop test, suggesting that such concerns were necessary—although not sufficient—for policy shifts. The Socialist Party's ambitious environmental agenda, including plans for nuclear reduction and renewable expansion, met the smoking-gun standard, indicating highly specific and unlikely evidence that strongly supports the hypothesis of internal political will. On the external front, France's diplomatic engagement, long-term climate initiatives, and legislative measures meet the conditions of both the hoop and smoking-gun tests, suggesting that its involvement in the Paris Agreement was influenced by a combination of strategic planning and institutional commitment, rather than occurring by chance.

Table 1. Organized Table of Tests, Evidence, and Results

Internal factors	Evidence	Test	Empirical result
Copenhagen and Fukushima	• Copenhagen's failure • Fukushima disaster • France's dependence on nuclear energy (74.1%)	Straw-in-the-wind	Passed
The French concern about climate change and nuclear energy	• According to the ADEME report, climate change became one of the top three environmental concerns. • Public concern about climate change peaked during Copenhagen, declined, then rose again around the Paris agreement. • Fukushima increased public concern about nuclear safety. • Nuclear safety entered mainstream political discourse. • France initiated safety reviews of its nuclear power plant.	Hoop	Passed

Internal factors	Evidence	Test	Empirical result
Environmental programs of the Socialist Party	• Socialists proposed reducing the share of nuclear energy from 75% to 50%. • A plan was introduced to increase renewable energy capacity. • Closure of 24 nuclear reactors was proposed. • A national low-carbon strategy was adopted. • A Goal was set to reduce the share of nuclear energy by 2025. • A parliamentary Green Party group was planned to support the ecological transition. • A fossil-free future was envisioned as beneficial for the French economy. • Renovation and construction of homes following environmental association standards.	Smoking-Gun	Passed
External factors	**Evidence**	**Test**	**Empirical result**
Dynamic French diplomacy	• France took climate diplomacy more seriously after EU-level talks led by Chirac. • Adopted a Climate Plan in 2004 • Committed to "Factor Four" — cutting CO□ emissions by 2050. • Proposed the EU Emissions Trading System (ETS) in 2000; launched in 2005. • Passed the POPE Law in 2005 to set national energy goals**.**	Hoop	passed
Green commitment: commitment to sustainability and climate action	• Signing of the Environmental Pact by President Sarkozy. • Merger of multiple ministries into an integrated environmental ministry. • Grenelle Environmental Law I (2007). • Grenelle Environmental Law II (2008). • Integration of the National Observatory on Climate Change Impacts into the Ministry of Environment: • Adoption of the Energy-Climate Package. • Organization of a national debate on the energy transition. • Mandatory GHG emissions reporting by transportation companies. • Mandatory climate risk disclosure by financial institutions. • Elimination of export credits for fossil fuel projects (e.g., coal) in developing countries. • Implementation of OECD climate-related standards. • Increased climate aid to poorer countries. • Doubling of public funding for clean energy research and development.	Smoking-Gun	Passed
Active as an entrepreneurial leadership	• National debate on energy transition. • Adoption of the Energy Transition Law. • Active diplomacy to host the conference. • Avoiding the mistakes of Copenhagen.	Smoking-Gun	Passed

Source: Author

7. Conclusion

France's role in the Paris Agreement illustrates that aligning domestic policies with climate diplomacy increases a country's credibility as a responsible actor on environmental issues. This analysis uses the process-tracing method to show how two major external shocks — the Copenhagen Summit and the Fukushima accident — influenced public opinion in France. During the Copenhagen Summit, concern focused mainly on climate change. Later, after the Fukushima accident, public concern shifted toward nuclear energy, especially since 3.4% of France's electricity came from nuclear power. These events impacted France's energy policy decisions. Nuclear safety became a key political issue, even appearing in election campaigns, where candidates expressed their positions on the topic. On the other hand, the reactions and environmental speeches by Chirac and other statesmen in international forums show France's dynamic diplomacy alongside its environmental programs. Their efforts to encourage others to align with their plans and to present themselves as concerned about environmental issues at the European level demonstrate a strong green commitment. By learning from the mistakes made in Copenhagen, and using its diplomatic skills, France was able to lead the way in signing the Paris Agreement, which reflects its strong climate diplomacy. All of these cases prove that France's leading role in the 2015 Paris Agreement was not accidental, but rather the result of a series of internal and external factors working together to make the agreement possible.

In conclusion, Europe, with France and Germany in the lead, tried to respond to the challenges after the 2008 crisis by setting strict environmental rules and protecting its industries. France played an important role by helping to create the Paris Agreement,

showing strong leadership in global climate action. However, when the United States later left the agreement, it created new doubts about how strong these agreements could stay. This brings up a main question: how can France keep pushing forward with its climate goals, even without strong support from the U.S., and while facing increasing competition from China and others? The answer will be important for the future of Europe's leadership in climate issues and for the success of global climate efforts.

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