

Report

15 March-28 June 2020: The Elections and the Pandemic. The French Municipal Elections 2020

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The municipal elections are an important event of French politics. Indeed, after the presidential election, these are the elections that usually benefit from the highest turnout. 35,416 municipal councils were to be elected; however, as a result of the pandemic, they took place under very special conditions.

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The first round took place on 15 March 2020, just a few hours after the authorities announced the beginning of lockdown measures in France. As a result, the turnout was the lowest ever recorded: only 44.6% of registered voters went to the polls for the first round (18.9%-points less than in 2014).

While the second round was initially scheduled for 22 March it took place on 28 June 2020, a few weeks after the suspension of the quarantine measures. The government as well as the Constitutional Court were confronted with a dilemma: should the first round be declared null and void, setting a dangerous precedent (cancelling elections for a reason other than fraud) or could the exceptional situation permit the exceeding of the time period legally required between the two rounds of an election? The second option was chosen, allowing the second round to take place on 28 June 2020.

Despite the fact that it was held after the period of the pandemic scare, the second round of the elections saw the lowest turnout since 1945 with only 41.6% of registered voters participating. The turnout for municipal elections had never sunk below the threshold of 60%. This high abstention rate surprised the whole political spectrum.

Ecological hegemony?

Despite the ballot's being impaired by an increased abstention on the part of young people, these elections were marked by the victory of the ecologists. The ecological lists managed to win, through

coalitions they led, in a number of major cities, such as Marseille, Bordeaux, Lyon, Besançon, Strasbourg, Grenoble, Tours, Annecy, as well as other smaller municipalities. In addition, in the second round ecologists successfully supported the candidacy of Anne Hidalgo (*Parti socialiste*, PS) as mayor of Paris.

Europe Écologie Les Verts (EELV, Greens) presented mayoral candidates in 48% of the municipalities with more than 30,000 inhabitants. More than half of its candidates, however, relied on broad coalitions with forces from the traditional left (mainly Socialist), sometimes including the radical left (Communists and France Insoumise) as in the case of Colombes (85,000 inhabitants). This strategy allowed EELV to reach the second round and position itself in city councils in 30 cities with a population of more than 30,000 inhabitants.

At the same time, however, it has to be noted that EELV won mostly in the cities where the outgoing mayors were not candidates, losing in the second round some big cities that instead reconfirmed their previous mayors, such as Toulouse (led by the right) and Lille (led by the Socialists).

These victories in major cities confirmed a fundamental political trend: political ecology is playing an increasingly central role in the recomposition of leftist space; however, it is not in a position to win through an autonomous strategy that would leave out the traditional left. Such result shows a shift in the balance of power between social democracy and ecological forces. However, due to their observed dependency on other forces, it would be too early to conclude that the Greens could claim hegemony.

The Socialists

Besides succeeding in reconfirming Anne Hidalgo as mayor of Paris with a left-wing union list (with the Greens and Communists), the Socialists managed to maintain many of their strongholds such as Nantes (309,000 inhabitants), Rennes (216,000 inhabitants), Clermont-Ferrand (141,000), Rouen (110,000), Le Mans (143,000), Dijon (156,000), Brest (140,000), Villeurbanne (147,000), Avignon (92,000), Créteil (90,000). In addition they took back Montpellier (285,000). The Socialists also took over in six cities previously administered by the radical left, in particular Saint-Denis (111,000) administered by the PCF since 1921. In most cases the PS won thanks to a coalition strategy of leftist forces, including EELV and the PCF in particular. Overall, although the PS's performance is stable, it is clear that the Socialists have lost their hegemony in relation to the other formations and were obliged to ally with EELV in numerous cases. These elections confirmed the PS's local grounding whilst at the same time revealing a certain fragility.

The right

The right represented by the party *Les Républicains* (*La République en Marche*, LREM) lost many of the large cities they previously administered such as Bordeaux and Marseille. While remaining the first force in cities with more than 30,000 inhabitants (claiming victory in 44% of cases) LR, like the PS, had to compromise with other centre-right competing forces such as UDI (Union des démocrates et indépendants) and LREM (Macron) who managed to elect mayors in some major cities thanks to the support of LR, as in Amiens (134,000) and Le Havre (170,000) where former Prime Minister Édouard Philippe was elected. LR managed to win over a large number of small and medium-sized municipalities and remains therefore the party holding the highest number of municipal councils under its leadership. Four municipalities previously administered by the radical left, in particular Choisy-le-Roi (45,000), where the Renault automobile group is threatening to close an important

factory, or Aubervilliers (87,000) voted for the right.

Macron's party, *La République en Marche*

President Macron's party failed dramatically to gain any local mooring. In fact, it lost the second round in some of the few cities previously administered by mayors close to LREM such as Lyon, Tours, and Besançon. The candidate for the city of Paris, Agnès Buzyn (previously the minister of health) even failed to be elected to the city council although Paris voted massively for LREM in the European elections.

The strategy of Macron's party consisted mainly in supporting right-wing candidates (LR or centre-right) opposed to left-wing united lists, showing overall its alignment with a right-wing orientation. While still pretending to adhere to a 'neither left, nor right' position, it showed its true colours in this important ballot. The President has announced his wish to reshuffle the government and is paradoxically supposed to announce his intention to engage in a more 'social and ecological' agenda after being deserted by his 'leftist' supporters.

The far right

The *Rassemblement National* lost two of the municipalities it conquered in 2014 and managed to gain two others, with the number of administered municipalities (mostly underpopulated ones) not exceeding 10. However, despite the meagre result, for the first time in almost twenty years the party led by Marine Le Pen managed to conquer a municipality of more than 100,000 inhabitants (Perpignan). In percentage of obtained votes, the RN has dropped sharply throughout the country. During the first round of 2014, Le Pen's party exceeded 10% in 317 cities with a population greater than 10,000 inhabitants thus qualifying for the second round. In 2020, the RN achieved this result in only 136 cities, evidencing a negative trend. The *Rassemblement National's* problematic results could be explained by the high level of abstention on the part of its electorate, specifically the popular component.

The radical left

The radical left's strategy was split into two approaches. On the one hand, the French Communist Party has participated in most cases in lists of left-wing unity, managing to elect municipal councillors in major cities (Marseille, Lyon, Bordeaux, etc.) as well as supporting the election of Anne Hidalgo as mayor of Paris. Even though the communists managed to win back the municipalities of Bobigny (52,000 inhabitants), Villejuif (55,000) and Noisy-le-Sec (43,000) it lost many of its historical strongholds such as Saint-Denis (112,000), Aubervilliers (87,000), Champigny-sur-Marne (78,000), and 33 others cities ranging from 1,000 inhabitants to 55,000. Despite losing in such popular suburbs, the PCF, due to its strategy of alliance with other left forces, came out of the elections with more members of city councils than it previously had. However, its defeats in major suburban cities put it at risk of losing the last two intercommunal councils the PCF is presiding over as well as the last department (Val-de-Marne) under its mandate.

On the other hand, *La France Insoumise* decided not to present candidates under its own label but mostly to support citizen electoral lists or candidates from other sectors of the radical left, such as the candidate of the New Anti-capitalist Party Philippe Poutou who obtained 11% in Bordeaux, alternative to the union of the left. Jean-Luc Mélenchon has admitted on television that his wager to

'encourage the participation of the popular classes by presenting citizen-based lists has failed'. France Insoumise did participate, however, in unity strategies in certain major cities such as Marseille or Lyon.

In general, the trend of the radical left is slightly negative compared to 2014. After its strong result in the 2017 presidential elections, it could not mobilise its popular electorate.

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P.S.

• Transform. 09 Jul 20:

<https://www.transform-network.net/blog/article/the-elections-and-the-pandemic-the-french-municipal-elections-2020/>

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