



# Introduction to the special issue does local context matter? The re-localization of politics during municipal elections in three French cities

Arthur Delaporte<sup>1</sup> · Anne-Sophie Petitfils<sup>2,3</sup> · Sébastien Ségas<sup>4</sup>

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## Abstract

A comparison of the results of municipal elections in 2020 and the results of the most recent presidential and legislative elections in 2017 (results confirmed in 2022) has revealed a growing disconnection between the local and national political scenes. The aim of this special issue is to contribute to the understanding of this phenomenon by drawing on the achievements of electoral socio-geography, which is experiencing a certain revival in France. In addition to analyses focused on the political offer, in particular partisan strategies, this introduction argues in favor of taking greater account of certain urban and socio-demographic dynamics, in order to understand this disconnection. After presenting the revival of the ecological approach to political behavior in France, this article puts into perspective studies on gentrification, urban decline and territorial inequalities and their effects on electoral choices and participation, and more generally on the relocalization of municipal campaigns.

**Keywords** Municipal elections · Gentrification · Urban decline · Ecological approach · Electoral behavior

Municipal elections in France have long been associated with "second-order elections" (Reif and Schmitt 1980). Since the early 1980s, however, they have become increasingly important in French political life, for parties, government, commentators and voters alike. With the gradual unification of local and national political markets (Gaxie and Lehingue 1984) and the concomitance of presidential and legislative

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✉ Sébastien Ségas  
sebastien.segas@univ-rennes2.fr

<sup>1</sup> CESSP, Paris 1, Paris, France

<sup>2</sup> ERMES, Nice, France

<sup>3</sup> CERAPS, Lille, France

<sup>4</sup> Arènes, Rennes 2, Rennes, France



elections since 2002, they are regularly analyzed as mid-term tests of government action. As far as voters are concerned, municipal elections used to have the highest turnout after presidential elections.

With respect to these regularities, the municipal elections of March 15 and June 28, 2020 mark a turning point. Abstention rates in the first and second rounds were particularly high.<sup>1</sup> The context in which the campaign took place, marked by the COVID-19 crisis and the postponement of the second round to June 28, more than two months after the first round, reinforced the effects of "classic" strategic and structural abstentionism (Haute et al. 2021). In this context, with 83% of outgoing mayors re-elected, the 2020 municipal elections confirmed and even amplified the "incumbent bonus",<sup>2</sup> revealing a growing disconnection between the local and the national political scenes. Indeed, the results of the 2017 presidential and legislative elections (French Politics 2017), confirmed in the latest 2022 elections, have fundamentally modified the partisan system (Gougou and Persico 2017). The transformation of the party system seems to be particularly affecting left-wing parties (the creation of the centrist party, La République en Marche—LREM, weakened the Socialist Party by attracting a large proportion of its voters in the 2017 national elections). The political forces associated with what President Emmanuel Macron has called the "old world" parties (notably the Parti Socialiste—PS, Europe Ecologie Les Verts, Les Républicains and the Union des démocrates indépendants/Mouvement Démocrate) nevertheless showed great resilience in these latest municipal elections, after losing ground at national level.

The apparent stability of traditional parties at municipal level should not mask a number of other developments that point to a disconnection, in urban areas, between the municipal and the national political scenes. A unified political market presupposed the use and promotion of a national partisan label (Gaxie and Lehingue 1984). However, even in major cities, candidates have widely adopted strategies to make their party affiliation invisible, sometimes going so far as to run without a label or claiming a "citizen" identity for their list (Politix 2022/2; Delaporte et al., forthcoming). The unification of national and local political markets also presupposed the homogeneity of alliances at both levels. From this point of view, LREM, the majority party at the national level (which is poorly established locally), has particularly muddied the waters by investing outgoing mayors from other parties with which it is not allied at national level (Lefebvre and Vignon 2023).

As a complement to these analyses focused on the political offer (Pôle Sud 2021, 2023), the aim of this special issue is to contribute to an understanding of the disconnection, in urban areas, between municipal and national political scenes by drawing on the achievements of an electoral socio-geography that "emphasizes the spatial

<sup>1</sup> 58.4% of those registered to vote abstained for the second round. This is 20 points less than six years before. This phenomenon is more important in suburbs than in city centers.

<sup>2</sup> According to the *Figaro*, two thirds of the elected mayors are outgoing mayors in cities of more than 3,500 inhabitants. Marie Coussin, *Le Figaro*, 29/06/2020, "Les maires sortants, autres vainqueurs des municipales."



dimension of social inequalities and their electoral effects<sup>3</sup>" (Rivière 2022, p. 21). More specifically, the aim is to analyze electoral dynamics in urban areas, taking into account certain recent territorial changes, such as gentrification, segregation, decline or the impoverishment of peripheral neighborhoods. Alongside the classic long-term variables (party identification and the belonging to certain social groups) and short-term determinants to vote such as the electoral issues and the image of candidates (Nadeau and Lewis-Beck 2016), we plead for better consideration of territorial changes to analyzing electoral behaviors. Indeed, when it comes to understanding the disconnection between national and local politics, integrating these urban dynamics may be as heuristic as analyzing the transformations of the party system, on both national and local scales. It is possible to show, by combining the respective contributions of political science and socio-geography, that these localized socio-demographic changes have consequences for electoral behavior (abstention, voting orientation). As a result, they contribute to the relocalization of municipal political scenes by transforming or challenging electoral mobilization strategies (by adapting them to local situations<sup>4</sup>), or even by becoming issues on the electoral agenda. Deeply rooted territorial themes, such as urban decline, can thus become central issues in a campaign.<sup>5</sup>

After presenting the revival of the ecological approach to political behavior in France, this introduction puts into perspective studies on gentrification, urban decline and territorial inequalities and their effects on electoral choices and participation, and more generally on the relocalization of municipal campaigns.<sup>6</sup>

## **Combining social-geography and political science. The revival of the ecological approach in France**

By bringing together political scientists, sociologists and geographers, we seek to highlight the mutual contributions of electoral geography and political sociology to the understanding of territorial and electoral dynamics. This special issue is part of an effort, identified by Goguel over forty years ago, to bring political sociologists and geographers closer together (Goguel 1990). Since Vidal de la Blache,<sup>7</sup> electoral geography has been a marginalized sub-discipline of geography in France.

<sup>3</sup> Our translation.

<sup>4</sup> This means that the electoral strategies of the same party can differ from one territory to another.

<sup>5</sup> Here again, we are moving away from the thesis of the unification of political markets, which presupposes a local political agenda increasingly dominated by themes carried, on a national scale, by parties or the media.

<sup>6</sup> The articles of this special issue were discussed at the Journées d'études entitled "Les élections municipales de 2020 à l'aune de la recomposition du champ politique national et local", held in Rennes on January 21 and 22, 2021. We would like to thank the CREMI (Collectif de Recherche sur les Élections Municipales et Intercommunales) and the AFSP (Association Française de Science Politique) for their support. We also thank our colleague Bleuenn Lechaux for reading an earlier version of this article.

<sup>7</sup> Vidal de la Blache (1845–1918) is considered as the « founding father» of the French geography. He is the well-known author of « Tableau de la géographie de la France», edited and re-edited from 1903 to 1994.



For political scientists, the situation is quite different: in the early twentieth century, political science and geography were intrinsically linked. Indeed, the methods and questions of what was to become electoral geography were for a long time the only keys to understanding political and electoral behavior in particular (Mayer 2007). In the United States, Libby's study on the territorialization of voting in the American Constitution was the foundation of the geography of electoral behavior from the end of the nineteenth century (Libby 1894). In France, it was not until the publication of André Siegfried's work in 1913 that the use of maps was introduced to analyze the influence of territorialized social structures on political opinion (Siegfried 1913). But his inductive method, described by some as intuitive, can hardly be systematized (Bussi et al. 2016). Moreover, these pioneering studies were criticized for their geographical determinism: the geological nature of soils and settlement patterns were indeed decisive in explaining the opposition in electoral orientations between western and eastern France. In the 1930s, the use of the ecological approach was developed in Anglo-Saxon countries, thanks to the use of quantitative statistical methods based on aggregated data (Gosnell 1933; Tingsten 1937).

After the Second World War, despite the work of François Goguel, directly inspired by that of André Siegfried (Goguel 1947, 1951), the ecological approach lost ground in French electoral science, to the benefit of a sociological approach using opinion surveys. The question is no longer how a territory votes, but who votes for whom. In France, studies have shown a correlation between certain "heavy variables" and ideological orientation (Michelat and Simon 1977). The affirmation of this individual approach owes as much to its heuristic force as to the limitations of the ecological approach based on aggregated data. Robinson warns against the risk of ecological bias: correlations observed at the aggregated level do not necessarily hold true at the individual level (Robinson 1950). For its part, this individual approach tends to minimize the specific effects of local contexts and territorial singularities on electoral behavior (Braconnier 2010; Sainty 2014; Audemard 2017).

The last few decades have seen a revival and even a deepening of the ecological approach, particularly in France (Sainty 2021; Mayer 2023). This upsurge in ecological research is due to two reasons. The first is the limitations of the major models for understanding electoral choices and certain phenomena, such as the rise in the Front national vote and abstention in specific territories. The second is the improvement in tools and the widespread opening up of data at the very fine level of the polling station,<sup>8</sup> thus limiting the risk of ecological inference. Thanks to the work of young geographers, geographical studies proposing a territorialized and spatialized analysis of voting are experiencing a resurgence (Bussi et al. 2012; Rivière 2017). Inspired in particular by the study of Kevin Cox (1969), some geographers have developed an analysis of spatial interactions in order to verify whether the results of a party or candidate in a given location are influenced by the score of that party or candidate in a nearby location (Bussi et al. 2012). For political scientists, the revival stems from the development of localized and societal studies of politics, the interest

<sup>8</sup> The French Ministry of the Interior recommends a maximum of 1,000 registered voters per polling station.



of which lies in grasping the interweaving of the social and the political and avoiding an overly political definition of politics (Sawicki 2000). These studies show that political behavior, and particularly electoral behavior, is not only determined by strictly political issues such as ideological proximity and identification with a political party. Local socioeconomic issues such as the presence of a mono-industry, symbolic issues such as the fear of downgrading linked to the deterioration of the neighborhood (Cartier et al. 2008), or the presence of a well-established notable and the existence of a strong regional identity can influence partisan preferences and electoral practices on a territorial scale. A recent study by Nadeau et al. confirmed the importance of "heavy" territorial variables such as tax levels, the number of low-income housing units or unemployment levels in the stability of political orientations in many cities over time (Nadeau et al. 2018). Methodologically, political science researchers have also adopted the classic tools of geographers, notably cartography and spatial analysis, combined with statistical analysis such as multilevel modeling (Gombin 2014).

Following on from this work, this special issue aims to take territorial issues into account. It focuses on a localized, microscopic ecological approach to electoral behavior at the sub-municipal level. We advocate that understanding electoral behavior (voting orientation, abstention or participation) implies not only to start from the social positions of individuals, but also to relocate these individuals in their territorial contexts (Rivière 2022). This territorial context comes into play in two ways. Firstly, it is a political context, as it refers to the existence (or decline) of partisan networks, political socialization and mobilization instances, or the local notoriety of certain political figures. The spatial context also has a "social composition effect"<sup>9</sup> (*Ibid.*). This effect is explained by the distribution of social positions in space: for example, if the working classes are more likely than others to abstain, their concentration in certain areas can explain lower turnout rates at certain polling stations.

Articulating these two levels of analysis, the article by J. Audemard, A. Huc and D. Gouard in this special issue shows that the analysis of electoral volatility in the city of Montpellier cannot only be interpreted as the result of rational, individual choices. Its varying levels can also be explained, on the one hand, by the socio-demographic context effects classically highlighted by electoral socio-geography (distribution of social characteristics according to polling station), and, on the other hand, by factors of political anchoring, highlighted by local political science in France. These last factors refer to the more or less great incumbents' ability to mobilize local support networks by relying on partisan, institutional and associative structures.

Composition effects also have a dynamic component: the populations of urban areas change. The approach advocated in this special issue also highlights the electoral impact of urban transformation dynamics. The localized electoral changes observed in recent French municipal elections can be attributed to interactions between political factors—the transformation of the party system, the decline in the

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<sup>9</sup> Our translation.



localized anchoring of so-called traditional parties and the difficulties encountered by new parties (LREM, La France Insoumise)—and socio-demographic developments highlighted by geographers and urban planners. Among these interactions between political processes and socio-demographic evolutions, two of them are particularly analyzed in this special issue: those linked to gentrification processes and those linked to urban decline.

## Urban gentrification, participation and electoral strategies

Gentrification is often presented, in the French media but also in certain scientific analyses, as a phenomenon benefiting the left. In this framework, the votes of new residents in city centers, both better-off and more highly educated, are supposed to go to progressive parties. This interpretation is part of a broader vision that simplistically brings into opposition the urban vote, described as increasingly progressive, with a peri-urban vote that is generally marked by a rise in the extreme right (for a critical reading, cf. Rivière 2022). A detailed analysis at polling station level shows that cities are not homogeneous urban spaces: they are more like contrasting political mosaics. In the same district, gentrifying areas may coexist with social housing areas that remain popular, middle-class neighborhoods and areas occupied by the traditional bourgeoisie. The impact of gentrification processes on these socially and politically heterogeneous environments is complex, and can even lead left-wing parties to question their localized electoral mobilization strategy, as A. Delaporte and A.-F. Taiclet show in this special issue for the Parisian PS.

Gentrification can be defined as "a process of economic and symbolic (re)valorization of a space [...] through competition between different actors and unequally endowed social groups for its appropriation and transformation"<sup>10</sup> (Chabrol et al. 2016, p. 68). Indeed, gentrification reflects and reproduces social inequalities in and in relation to space. It is a process whereby a working-class space is progressively appropriated by social groups from the middle and upper classes and transformed according to their interests, to the detriment of the working-class inhabitants who used to live there. The issue here is not so much gentrification itself, or its origins (is it the result of social demand or capital movements? Rousseau 2010), but rather the effects of this type of urban transformation on electoral competition. In the Anglo-Saxon literature, we can identify two questions linked to the electoral effects of gentrification: the link between participation and gentrification, and the electoral dimension of gentrification policies.

Firstly, as regards the interaction between gentrification and electoral participation, two opposing hypotheses coexist in the literature (Knotts and Haspel 2006). The first hypothesis suggests that gentrification may have a mobilizing effect on the members of the working classes who continue to live in partially gentrified neighborhoods. Surrounded by wealthier, better-educated and therefore traditionally more participative individuals, longstanding residents would feel a form of social pressure

<sup>10</sup> Our translation.



to vote, while at the same time being exposed to new opportunities of participation (Oliver 1999). Gentrification may also generate movements of collective resistance among the working classes (Robinson 1995), which could have an impact on their electoral participation. Against this mobilization hypothesis, other researchers defend the idea that gentrification has a destabilizing effect on the participation of the members of the working classes who continue to live in gentrified neighborhoods. In the North American context, gentrification can weaken neighborhood institutions (churches, associations) that support political participation (Calhoun-Brown 1996; Putnam 2000), or weaken the working classes' representation of political efficacy, in other words, their self-image of their ability to influence local public affairs (Knotts and Haspel 2006). According to this second hypothesis, gentrification would therefore have a negative effect on the participation of the working classes.

There is another way of questioning the link between election and gentrification. Indeed, while gentrification has been analyzed as the result of urban entrepreneurialism (Rousseau 2008), some researchers have wondered whether, in the European context, pro-gentrification urban housing policies, and in particular policies restricting social housing, could also respond to political interests. In other words, these policies would aim to attract populations likely to support municipal power electorally, while displacing potential opponents. Far from being limited to right-wing cities, the anticipation of the electoral profitability of urban gentrification also seems to be shared by center-left majorities (Chou and Dancygier 2021). These two researchers have shown that Labour in Greater London supported gentrification-friendly policies by limiting social housing. This policy can only be understood by taking into account the political competition and the evolution of Labour's political positioning in this competition. Indeed, Labour, like many center-left parties in Europe, has distanced itself from working-class voters. In fact, the middle and affluent classes are increasingly the party's core electoral target. Labour's housing policies in Greater London can therefore be analyzed as policies that serve electoral interests. While this policy has short-term political costs, the wealthier newcomers are expected not only to be more willing to vote, but also more likely to vote Labour than the working classes, who used to be Labour's electoral clientele.

In this special issue, A. Delaporte and A.-F. Taiclet take an original look at the link between participation and gentrification, and electoral strategy and gentrification. Their field of study, the 18th arrondissement of Paris, is an area undergoing gentrification but still home to the working classes. They observe a socially differential abstention rate: working-class voters are more likely to abstain than middle and upper-class voters. As a result, the electoral choices of the middle and upper classes tend to weigh more heavily on the electoral configuration, generating a form of electoral appropriation of the territory. They show how, in a socially diverse and segregated neighborhood, differentiated abstention expresses a spatialized electoral power relation between social classes. This shift in the balance of electoral power is not without impact on electoral strategies. Although, unlike the case of Greater London, we are not dealing here with population displacement policies, A. Delaporte and A.-F. Taiclet highlight that local socialists are faced with a dilemma when it comes to organizing their election campaigns: should they continue to try to mobilize their traditional clientele—working-class voters—even though they abstain a lot





(and when they do participate, sometimes turn to other parties), or should they concentrate their campaign efforts on the educated fringe of the area's middle and upper classes (who may also be tempted by the center or even the right)?

## Urban decline and declining partisan anchoring

Urban decline is the second type of socio-demographic evolution to receive particular attention in this special issue. This theme has been explored in North America, notably by using the concept of "shrinking city" (for a critical review of the literature—see Fol, Cunningham-Sabot 2010). This concept refers to urban areas in which "processes of demographic decline and economic decline, often compounded by a crisis in local public finances, accumulate over a relatively long period of time, to a greater or lesser extent"<sup>11</sup> (Florentin 2016: p. 2). Geographers have imported this notion into the French context and identified cities in both demographic and economic decline, even if France seems less affected overall by this phenomenon than Germany or Eastern Central Europe (Wolff et al. 2013). France's shrinking cities are mostly concentrated in the old mining and industrial regions of the north, northeast and around the Massif Central (*Ibid.*).

In contrast to what we said about gentrification, the question of the impact of urban shrinking on electoral participation or voting behavior does not seem to have received much attention in the scientific community, neither in Europe nor North America. Researchers have turned more to analyzing the forms of urban planning and public action implemented to fight urban decline (Wiechmann and Pallagst 2012). And while participation is sometimes mentioned, the focus is not on electoral participation, but rather on the participation of local residents of vacant land in public consultations for these revitalization policies (Maasakkers et al. 2020).

The article by E. Guéraud and A. Warnant in this special issue raises the question of the impact of urban decline on political competition and electoral results by studying the case of Nevers, a city in decline located just north of the Massif Central. In Wolff et al.'s (2013) typology of French shrinking cities, Nevers is classified as one of the 27 "towns in need of activity".<sup>12</sup> In demographic decline, towns of this type are nevertheless experiencing less brutal aging than other French shrinking cities. However, they were confronted with a sharp rise in unemployment and a significant drop in activity between 1975 and 2007 (*Ibid.*) and since then. E. Guéraud and A. Warnant show how urban decline is a key component in understanding why this city was lost by the Parti Socialiste and its allies after some forty years of political domination. On the one hand, in terms of demographic dynamics, urban decline has led to population movements that have weakened the Parti Socialiste's electoral base: the departure of a large part of the middle class from the city center and their replacement by more precarious populations has been politically unfavorable. On the other hand, on the political offer side, this urban decline became a central theme

<sup>11</sup> Our translation.

<sup>12</sup> Our translation.





in the electoral competition, with opponents of the outgoing municipality blaming the socialists for this decline.

The case of Nevers illustrates the general thesis defended in this special issue. This town was lost by the Socialists in 2014 to a list led by a candidate with no party affiliation (who has since joined LREM). This victory illustrates the ability of a candidate with no (at least visible) national party anchorage to win a town, which is one possible facet of the disconnection between the local and national political scene. However, the explanation provided by the political offer (changes in the party system, demonetization of partisan labels), while relevant, is not sufficient on its own to understand the electoral results. Socio-demographic mutations (urban decline in this case, gentrification in Paris, etc.) and their eventual politicization on the electoral agenda, also contribute to creating the conditions of possibility for localized political continuities or changeovers.

## Conclusion

Taken as a whole, these three articles help to demonstrate, in the tradition of electoral socio-geography, that territorial contextual effects, here analyzed dynamically and in relation to changes in the electoral offer, help to influence electoral choices and participation while contributing to a more global process of relocalization of municipal elections. However, this special issue raises some meaningful scientific questions. B. Jérôme, V. Jérôme-Speziari, M. Lewis-Beck and R. Nadeau identify some of them in their response essay. Their constructive criticism invites us to extend the debate by questioning the scope and limits of our perspective.

To begin with, it seems useful—even if this is not explicitly part of the response essay's remarks—to compare the process of political relocalization in France with other forms of articulation between local and national political scenes in other countries. From a comparative perspective, the French process of political relocalization does not appear complete. For instance, we are far from the situation in Canada, where the national and local political scenes are largely autonomous (Mévellec and Tremblay 2013). While municipal parties exist in Quebec and, to a lesser extent, in British Columbia, they function more like personal parties at the service of their leader. They have little ideological content and are only loosely connected to national parties (*Ibid.*). In France, while national parties are less visible in the last French municipal campaigns, they have not totally disappeared. Their organizational capacities (i.e., their ability to mobilize political activists or to finance campaigns) often remain decisive, albeit in a more discreet way. The French political relocalization takes two main forms: (a) the disconnection between local and national electoral results (LREM, a party with a strong national electoral impact, had little success at municipal level) and (b) the growing importance of localized socioeconomic issues such as urban decline and gentrification on the urban agenda and in electoral strategies.

In their response essay, B. Jérôme, V. Jérôme-Speziari, M. Lewis-Beck and R. Nadeau highlight two other questions raised by this special issue. The first relates to the political profile of the cities analyzed in the three articles. Montpellier,



Nevers and the 18th arrondissement of Paris are areas where the Socialist Party has been, and sometimes still is, a dominant political organization. The authors of the response essay note that the Left has remained in the majority in two of these territories (Montpellier and the 18<sup>ème</sup> arrondissement—and more broadly Paris) and that this is an indicator of the Left's ability to adapt to a changing environment. Our aim was not so much to shed light on the successes or failures of the Left in general but to look, on a finer scale, at local partisan organizations (notably the local “sections” of the PS) grappling with socio-geographical changes. Nonetheless, this selection of three cities with a quite similar political history does not allow us to generalize the results of this special issue. For future research, it would be useful to include cities with different political profiles.

The response essay also points out that the analyses in this special issue do not provide a theoretical framework for separating the effects of local factors from those of national factors, or the effects of short-term factors from those of long-term factors. We agree with this pertinent observation. In response, we can simply specify that our scientific project for this special issue was much more modest: we wanted to show how socio-geographical changes have an impact on electoral results and behaviors. Isolating the relative importance of this kind of factors compared to others could constitute a next analytical step, in dialogue and debate with the model defended by B. Jérôme, V. Jérôme-Speziari, M. Lewis-Beck and R. Nadeau.

In our view, all these comments and questions are an invitation to pursue this kind of research. Possible developments may include an international comparison into the analysis, integrate French right-wing cities in the study and question the relative role of localized socioeconomic factors in relation to other factors. In conclusion, we would like to address our warmest thanks to the response essay authors for contributing by their remarks to a stimulating scientific debate and to the progress of our own reflections.

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