



# Analysis of the local election results in the aftermath of 22 March 2026

## **Voter apathy: a stark reminder of the discontent with political representation**

*Anne Muxel, Emeritus Research Director at the CNRS, CEVIPOF*



The level of voter turnout was notably low in both rounds of the municipal elections. If we set aside the comparison with the 2020 municipal elections, where the low level of turnout can be easily explained by the COVID pandemic, the average level of turnout across France was the lowest observed since the beginning of the Fifth Republic (43.8% in the first round and 42.1% in the second, representing increases of 7.4 percentage points and 4.3 percentage points respectively compared to 2014).

Many political observers have overlooked this important development, choosing to focus instead on electoral competition and the realignment of political forces. Yet this marked decrease in voter turnout raises a number of questions, especially given that the local politics is one of the few places where the level of political trust is high in France. Given the abysmal level of trust in national political institutions and politicians, it may come as a surprise that the figure of the mayor – and their work in close contact with the daily lives and concerns of their constituents – continues to inspire interest, support and trust. As a result, this significant drop in turnout may be a further indication of the weakening of the civic norm of the duty to vote and of the erosion of the French people's connection to their political institutions, a trend that is reaching the very heart of local communities in all their diversity.

A number of factors that may explain this result will be examined: the erosion of trust in democracy, electoral system reforms, the intensity of electoral competition, the composition of the field of candidates, and the international context. The structural social factors behind abstention must also be considered: young people voted less than their elders, more privileged socio-professional groups voted more than working-class groups, and residents of rural areas voted more than those in large cities. Nevertheless, whilst these factors hold true, they no longer alone explain the contrasts in turnout that have been observed. For example, educational attainment is no longer, on its own, a decisive factor in turnout. And young people, when comparing their abstention rate with that of the 2014 local elections, were slightly more likely to vote this time around (+2 percentage points), even as turnout among their elders tended to be on the decline. Similarly, abstention has increased in small towns and rural areas that had previously been spared, whilst in some large cities experiencing intense electoral competition, turnout was higher than usual.

This election highlights the growing significance of the political dimension of abstention, which serves as a vehicle for discontent and protest. 30% of those who abstained stated that they wished to express their dissatisfaction with politicians, the government, and Emmanuel Macron<sup>1</sup>. The trend towards abstention observed over the past several years owes more to this political aspect of abstention, which is gaining ground, than to the sociological dimension, the drivers of which remain stable over time. Not voting has gained legitimacy. Not voting is also a way of having one's say.

In these local elections, there were several ways to make one's voice heard through abstention, depending on the region and the size of the local authority, on ideological and political leanings, and also on the composition of candidates and electoral lists. In two-thirds of rural municipalities and in medium-sized municipalities, the large number of single-list elections, with no real electoral contest, and above all the lack of any possibility of vote splitting, undoubtedly explain the sharp decline in turnout observed. In municipalities with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants, which account for 70% of all municipalities in France, turnout fell by 11.5 percentage points compared with 2014, even though it remained above the national average (64% compared with 57.1% in the first round). In large cities, the rise in abstention was significantly lower (+1.57 percentage points in the first round). Voter turnout was mixed. Where the electoral contest was close, localised mobilisation was observed, particularly in Paris, Lyon and Marseille, though without much momentum. In contrast to what happened in small municipalities, the change in voting procedures, allowing PLM voters to cast their votes for both the arrondissement and the central town hall, may have made a difference.

The political polarisation towards the extremes that characterised the municipal candidate line-ups did not lead to any particular surge in turnout. In the towns won by LFI, Roubaix and Saint-Denis, turnout remained well below the national average (37.6% and 42.8% respectively). At the other end of the political spectrum, voters sympathetic to the RN did not turn out to vote any more than the average.

Finally, the manoeuvring around alliances and the merging of electoral lists may have contributed to the disengagement of some voters who disapproved of these tactics and did not identify with the electoral options on offer in the second round. The defeat in several major left-wing cities where the PS had decided to form an alliance with LFI – Toulouse being the most emblematic example – is not unrelated to this 'political disengagement', a phenomenon we have clearly identified in our research over the past several years.

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[1] Sociology of non-voters, IPSOS-BVA, first round of the 2026 local elections.

## **LFI and the RN are significantly disrupting the municipal balance of power**

*Jérôme Jaffré, Associate Researcher at CEVIPOF*

One of the most deeply entrenched norms in France is a clear separation in voting behaviour between local and national elections. Even during periods of political upheaval, this has remained true. Neither in 1959 nor in 1965 did the triumphant Gaullism manage to prevail in the municipal elections of the time. And we recall that in 2020, Macronism failed in its hopes of victory and also in establishing a real foothold across the regions.



The 2026 election does not abolish the rule, but it significantly weakens it. In the context of the local elections, this will be seen as a partial reflection of the influence of the parties on the political spectrum's fringes on the local political balance, at least in urban France. Moreover, these two parties – and particularly LFI – have managed to incorporate this vote into their presidential strategy. This is one of the key lessons to be drawn from the election.

In towns and cities with more than 30,000 inhabitants – which account for over a quarter of the electorate – where the vote is highly politicised, neither party has, however, managed to replicate the results it achieved in recent national elections. La France Insoumise, where it is standing with its own list, is securing an average of 12.1% of the votes cast. This represents real progress compared to 2020, when the average score was just 7.2%, but nothing earth-shattering, even in towns with over 100,000 inhabitants (12.6%). The key lies elsewhere: in the pressure being exerted on the Socialist Party, whose last remaining strength lies in the power of its network of elected representatives. LFI has succeeded in highlighting the party's decline in several of its current or former strongholds, such as Lille, Toulouse and Limoges, or, just as seriously, its inability to hold onto its gains over the long term, as in Saint-Denis.

What is more, the PS found itself forced – and somewhat humiliated – to ask La France Insoumise for alliances in places where this had seemed unthinkable, such as in Nantes (where it ultimately succeeded) or in Avignon (where it ultimately lost). It is clear that these last-minute alliances, viewed by many as insincere, drove away a proportion of centre-left voters or those who would otherwise have abstained – a group the PS needed to retain its town halls.

For its part, the RN is not performing particularly well and remains far below the results it achieved in the last two years in other types of election. It is averaging 14.5% of the vote in towns and cities with more than 30,000 inhabitants where it is contesting the election. This is better than in 2020 (8.2 per cent) but barely above 2014 (13.9 per cent). Two factors, however, are contributing to the shift in the balance. On the one hand, the RN is now performing respectably in large cities (those with over 100,000 inhabitants) which had previously been very hostile to it, with an average of 12% and even 16.1% if Paris – a stronghold of anti-RN sentiment – is excluded from the calculation. On the other hand, the strong result it achieved in 2014 had little lasting effect, as that election was the most recent to see a major success for the moderate right amidst the widespread unpopularity of Hollande's five-year term.

The situation is different in 2026, with Les Républicains and the 'Various Right' parties in a weaker position than they were twelve years ago. Consequently, RN voters have played a key role in the second rounds, where they have either secured victory for the right or the centre (as in Brest, Clermont-Ferrand or Limoges) or ensured their defeat (as in Tours, Agen or Pau, to the detriment of François Bayrou). As for Jordan Bardella and Marine Le Pen's party, it has won numerous mayoral seats in medium-sized towns. But where the contest is both political and media-driven, it has failed, as in Marseille or Toulon. Yet what could be more political and media-driven than the presidential election? This is what keeps the outcome of the 2027 election in doubt.

## National Rally: quantity over quality

*Gilles Ivaldi, CNRS Researcher Fellow at CEVIPOF*



The March 2026 local elections served as an electoral test for the National Rally ahead of the 2027 presidential election and with a view to the September senatorial elections. The vote confirmed the party's lack of local presence and the difficulty the RN faced in assembling a pool of credible candidates, in a campaign marked by fresh controversies surrounding 'black sheep' – candidates singled out for racist or anti-Semitic remarks.

Present in just under 550 municipalities, compared with 580 in 2014, the RN was not really able to cover the whole country and concentrated much of its efforts in its strongholds, particularly around the Mediterranean coast and in the north-east, mobilising more than thirty of its MPs to campaign on the ground.

The first round revealed, in particular, a strong southern bias and the party's growing foothold in traditionally right-wing areas, such as the Var and the Alpes-Maritimes. Its candidates recorded improved results in several major southern cities, notably Marseille, Nice, Toulon and Nîmes. The party also achieved its best results in small and medium-sized towns. Outside its Mediterranean stronghold, however, the RN remained at a low ebb in major urban areas, as evidenced by its results in Paris (1.6%), Lyon (7%), Bordeaux (7%), Nantes (4.6%) and Toulouse (5.4%).

By the evening of 15 March, the movement's leaders could boast of the election of their candidates in 20 municipalities, including the seven incumbent RN mayors. With candidates in 278 run-off elections, the RN consolidated the gains it had made in the first round and won in around 40 additional municipalities, particularly in medium-sized towns just as he had in Menton, Carpentras and Liévin, and in small towns such as Oignies, Aubignan and Salernes. His candidates, however, failed to win in Marseille, Toulon or Nîmes; only Éric Ciotti was able to secure victory in Nice, adding a second city with over 100,000 inhabitants to the movement's list of successes alongside Perpignan.

The run of local elections has concluded with a mixed bag of results for Marine Le Pen and Jordan Bardella's party. In terms of numbers, the number of municipalities won undeniably marks an unprecedented success that should pave the way for a new generation of local leaders and enable the RN to continue its institutionalisation and professionalisation. In terms of quality, however, the party has once again failed to make inroads into the major cities and has not managed to break out of its strongholds in the southern Mediterranean and the north-east: no fewer than 9 out of 10 municipalities won in the second round are still located in these regions, and the total number of votes barely exceeds one million.

With 2027 in its sights, the challenge for the RN remains to continue its takeover bid of the right and its voters, and to try to further break down the cordon sanitaire that keeps it at arm's length from power. The unification of the right, foreshadowed by the alliance with Éric Ciotti's UDR, is set to be more central than ever to the future strategy of Jordan Bardella's RN. On Sunday, voters continued to build a republican front against the RN – a party largely abandoned by the other parties in the run-up to the second round – which will be the key to the presidential election in a year's time.

## The left in turmoil

*Luc Rouban, CNRS Research Director at CEVIPOF*

The 2026 local elections, at least in large and medium-sized towns, served as a testing ground for developing national political strategies ahead of the 2027 presidential election. This is particularly true for left-wing parties. Campaigns in both the first round and the period between the two rounds were dominated on the left by the question of unity and rapprochement between the PS, the Greens and LFI. Behind this question lies another, more radical one: is LFI a losing or a winning machine?



In this respect, the results can be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, by counting the votes and assessing the progress or failure of the competing lists. It is undeniable that LFI achieved an electoral breakthrough, notably by winning Roubaix, Saint-Denis and Vénissieux, and by strengthening its position in towns already won by the left, sometimes taking the place of the PCF, particularly in the former 'red belt' around Paris. But LFI failed in Lille, even though the first round had given it hope of a strategic gain against the PS, as in Toulouse, despite considerable progress. Overall, it was the 'established' socialist left that fared best, as in Paris, Marseille, Nantes, Rennes and Montpellier, whilst the Greens lost the major cities they had won in 2020, such as Bordeaux, Poitiers and Strasbourg. The establishment left relied on its local strongholds against its old adversary, LR, amid a shift towards political centrism, transforming the radical left and its role as kingmaker into a threat that had to be contained.

Another way of interpreting these results is to look at the strategies employed. The PS and LFI blamed each other for the failures they suffered when they fielded joint lists, as in Brest or Clermont-Ferrand. The PS weakened its position by adopting a double standard: rejecting any alliance with LFI at national level whilst entering into local agreements, thereby fuelling the criticism held by a majority of French people regarding the unreliability of politicians, who are solely focused on their own political manoeuvring. The result is a strong internal backlash that is likely to lead to a party conference before 2027. For its part, LFI emerges battered from an overly nationalised campaign in which the figure of Jean-Luc Mélenchon served as a foil and in which the strategy of mobilising abstainers and the 'new France' failed.

The divide within the left between reformists and radicals seems far more difficult to bridge than the one separating the RN from LR, for two reasons. The first relates to the values of the electorate. Whilst right-wing and far-right voters are fairly aligned on issues such as security, state authority, immigration and even economic liberalism, significant differences separate LFI voters from PS, Place Publique and even the Greens on economic issues, attitudes towards Europe, authority and trust in political institutions. The second is directly linked to the rallying of former Macronist voters, which has become essential for the PS if it is to have any hope of winning in 2027. The prospect of a united left therefore seems to have evaporated.

## The ebb of the « Green Wave »

*Daniel Boy, Emeritus research Fellow at CEVIPOF*



During the 2020 local elections, the political world and the media celebrated the Greens' unexpected victories, dubbing them the 'Green Wave'. Indeed, for the first time in their turbulent history, the Greens managed to win seven major cities: Lyon, Bordeaux, Strasbourg, Besançon, Poitiers, Tours and Annecy, whilst retaining Grenoble, which they had won in 2014.

With the recent municipal elections, most of these gains have been lost: Besançon, Poitiers, Annecy and Bordeaux have swung back to the right or centre, whilst Catherine Trautmann has retained her seat as mayor of Strasbourg by defeating the Green candidate Jeanne Barseghian, the outgoing mayor, in the second round. The only Green strongholds remaining are Grenoble, won fairly easily by Laurence Ruffin, and Tours and Lyon, narrowly retained by Grégory Doucet at the expense of the surprise contender Jean-Michel Aulas, an entrepreneur and sports executive.

What is behind the sudden decline of the 'Green Wave'?

Several factors have likely worked against the recent election of Green mayors. The first relates to what has been termed the 'environmental backlash', namely the abandonment or scaling back of environmental policies at both national and European level. In France, the rise of farmers' protest movements is leading to the ban on certain pesticides being called into question. At European level, the 'Green Deal' has been seriously undermined. Public opinion polls continue to confirm concern about the tangible effects of global warming, but within an atmosphere that seems tinged with resignation.

The second explanation is of a more directly political nature: it relates to the image of the Green Party in recent years. In the 2019 European elections, the Greens achieved one of their best results: 13.5% of the votes cast. But in the 2022 presidential election, their candidate Yannick Jadot secured only 4.6% of the votes cast, whilst Jean-Luc Mélenchon came close to 22%. Worse still, in the 2024 European elections, the Greens' list led by Marie Toussaint secured just 5.5% of the vote, whilst that of La France Insoumise garnered nearly double that (9.9%). In short, the Greens have been defeated on their favourite playing field: Europe. In fact, since 2017, for the first time in their history, they have lost their monopoly on environmentalism politics. Under the leadership of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, La France Insoumise has become their main rival. Yet, amidst the deep divisions on the left, their secretary, Marine Tondelier, continues to call for unity at all costs, and one senses in her – and no doubt in many Green voters – a more or less acknowledged inclination towards the social radicalism of 'La France Insoumise' rather than the 'social democracy' to which the Socialist Party officially claims to adhere. In the recent elections, the Greens clearly paid the price for their political ambiguity.

## The municipal decline of Macronism

*Pascal Perrineau, Associate Professor at CEVIPOF*

Emmanuel Macron and the local level have never seen eye to eye. As early as his 2017 campaign, the candidate had denounced the 'old world' and its outdated practices. Among these, establishing local roots as a step on the political ladder was roundly criticised. No sooner had he been elected President of the Republic than he encountered a sense of disillusionment that would quickly turn into a revolt among local elected representatives.



In the September 2017 senatorial elections, the 'electors', mainly local councillors, gave only lukewarm support to candidates from La République en Marche, who managed to form only a modest group of 21 senators (out of a total of 348).

The following year, in November 2018, the President flatly snubbed the major Republican gathering at the congress of the Association of French Mayors. In March and June 2020, the backlash was keenly felt in the local elections: the President's party, which had hoped to establish a local presence, achieved very disappointing results. After the two rounds of voting, LREM secured just 624 seats on municipal councils in towns with over 1,000 inhabitants, out of a total of more than 220,000 seats, far behind the established parties (the PS and its allies, LR and various right-wing groups, etc.). It failed to win the mayoralty in any of France's major cities and even saw it slip away to a left-wing green party in Besançon and Lyon, where the outgoing team was led by a mayor affiliated with LREM. Of the 42 towns with over 100,000 inhabitants, only Macron's allies (Édouard Philippe in Le Havre, Christophe Béchu in Angers) managed to 'save face'.

Six years on, the situation has not improved. Renaissance, which took over from LREM in September 2022, fielded few lists and preferred to merge with right-wing and centrist lists without claiming to lead them. Following the first round, there are only a handful of councillors explicitly linked to Renaissance, and no major city saw a Renaissance-led list win. In five towns with over 100,000 inhabitants, Renaissance was represented by list leaders: in Annecy (Antoine Armand), Bordeaux (Thomas Cazenave), Lille (Violette Spillebout), Metz (Ludovic Mendes) and Mulhouse (Lara Million). Except in the first two cities mentioned, the results were modest (4.8% in Metz, 11.1% in Lille, 13.3% in Mulhouse). In the second round, successes were few and far between and can be summed up as the victories of Antoine Armand in Annecy and Thomas Cazenave in Bordeaux. One of Emmanuel Macron's key allies, François Bayrou, president of the Modem and mayor of Pau, lost the capital of the Pyrénées-Atlantiques, which he had led for twelve years.

Admittedly, it is never easy to be on the president's side in mid-term elections where the opposition is mobilised, support is waning and the president's standing has been damaged. But beyond this protest vote lies President Macron's particular inability to establish effective local representatives to support his policies on the ground and lay the groundwork for the continuation of his political vision. All the Presidents of the Fifth Republic have had effective local representatives. On the left, François Mitterrand and then François Hollande benefited from the Socialist Party's strong local roots and those of its allies. On the right, Georges Pompidou, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, Jacques Chirac and Nicolas Sarkozy benefited from the local presence of neo-Gaullist parties (UDR, RPR, UMP, LR) and non-Gaullist right-wing parties (RI, UDF and its scattered successors).

Emmanuel Macron has never managed to establish the same kind of local support network, whereas 67 years ago, General de Gaulle – who did not have a party with a municipal history – was able, as early as the March 1959 local elections, to forge links with the 'old parties' such as the CNIP and the MRP to win cities such as Angers, Calais, Grenoble, Le Mans and Tourcoing.

This is not the case for the Macron camp, which has remained a national phenomenon with no local resonance and may therefore have no lasting future.

## What are the national implications of the local elections?

*Bruno Cautrès, CNRS Research at CEVIPOF*



Whilst opinion polls continue to show a high level of distrust in politics, this distrust spares mayors, who remain the political figures in whom the public places the most trust. According to the latest wave of CEVIPOF's Political Trust Barometer, 60% of French people trust their mayors. This particularity might have suggested a refocusing of voters on local issues and on the importance of local representation.

Yet abstention was high in both rounds of the municipal elections. It is true that several factors contributed to blurring fundamentally altered the electoral landscape: since the dissolution of 2024, the electorate has been disoriented, lost in a chaotic political landscape, and the sense that political life is out of touch with the country has never been stronger.

Voting motivations in the local elections naturally remained very important to the French people when choosing their mayors<sup>1</sup>, the overwhelming majority of whom were elected in the first round (68% of municipalities had a single list). And the results highlight just how difficult it is to interpret these local elections at a national level. Nevertheless, these local elections offer valuable insights for the next major national elections in 2027.

In many towns and cities in particular, but also in medium-sized towns, the electoral landscape was partly shaped by the parties' national strategies: united left-wing lists without LFI, LFI lists concentrated in Mélenchonist strongholds, RN lists fielded in the party's strongholds or in areas recently won in the general election, competitive dynamics within the left or between LR and RN lists, and Renaissance's support for LR and/or Horizons lists. All these factors demonstrated that national dynamics were very much at play. And what of the period between the two rounds, dominated on the left by a mix of local-tactical considerations (attempting to preserve the PS's local political capital, undoubtedly its most precious asset today) and national-strategic ones (for the PS, attempting to stem the LFI surge by incorporating it into merged lists, and for LFI, forcing the PS to acknowledge that it had to rely on it).

The local elections also demonstrate the National Rally's consolidation in many towns and villages outside major cities and metropolitan areas, as well as its significant increase in the number of mayors and councillors – a vital resource for building a nationwide network ahead of September's senatorial elections, the presidential election and the parliamentary elections that will follow.

These national implications and consequences of the local elections also apply to the right-wing LR and to the president's party, which salvaged some pride by winning Bordeaux, not to mention the national political fate of Édouard Philippe, which was decided in a three-way contest in Le Havre that proved more challenging than in 2020.

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[1] According to wave 1 of the 2026 electoral survey produced by IPSOS, Le Monde, the FJJ and CEVIPOF, 76% of those surveyed stated that they took the local political situation into account above all else when voting in the municipal elections.

All these factors highlight the unique nature and significance of the local elections, which embody a certain duality between the local and the national: they take place on the same day, meaning they occur both within the national political arena and across the multitude of local political spheres. The shadow of the presidential election was, moreover, soon to be felt, both in the interval between the two rounds and in the hours following the second round.