

Montargis, the Loiret, and the Municipal Elections of 2026: What can a rural town tell us about the municipal elections in France?



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This note looks at the Municipales from the perspective of Montargis and other small and medium sized towns in predominantly rural areas. It highlights the challenges facing inhabitants and the relative powerlessness of mayors and local authorities to meet them - with implications not just for representative democracy but for constitutional government as well.

Christophe Ayad's reporting from Montargis¹ reveals the many, connected, reasons for disenchantment with electoral democracy in France, even at municipal level. Some of these – racial and ethnic segregation and discrimination; class conflict and mutual contempt; the consequences of an economically challenging environment – cut across towns both big and small, Paris and the rest of France. Others are more specific. They call our attention to a shared ignorance of French industrial and urban history that might have forestalled an often-clichéd distinction between rural and urban France that affects national politics and underpins failures of democratic and constitutional government across them both. Taken alongside Julian Mischi's analyses of three small industrial towns in Burgundy², and contemporary quantitative analysis of our current municipal elections from Cevipof³, a focus on Montargis brings into sharp relief what French politics looks like from the perspective of its rural towns. Those two words can seem like a contradiction in terms. However, they reflect the lived reality of those of us who, though members of 'rural' France, are surrounded by towns of different sizes, ethnic/racial compositions, voting patterns, histories and likely futures – often within a few kilometres of each other – lthough these rarely figure in public consciousness and debate.

[1] This series of 18 episodes, by the journalist Christophe Ayad, can be found here.
https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2026/03/06/montargis-au-quotidien-ville-de-la-france-du-milieu-ni-riche-ni-pauvre-ni-rurale-ni-urbaine_6669753_823448.html

[2] Julien Mischi's, Des élus en Campagne, SciencesPo Les Presses, 2025.

[3] <https://www.sciencespo.fr/cevipof/fr/actualites/lancement-de-la-collection-de-notes-de-recherche-municipales-2026/>

Montargis: transport and the lack of a regional hub

Montargis is a pretty town criss-crossed by canals, near an area of ecological interest, approximately 120 kilometres south-east of Paris. It lies at the end of the long fork in the Transilien Ligne R that goes into the Gare de Lyon – the other, shorter fork, ends at Montereau, in the Ile de France. Depending on the train, the Montargis-Paris journey takes anywhere from an hour and a bit to an hour and forty minutes – placing it within commuting range of Paris. However, because Montargis lies just beyond the outer boundary of the Navigo pass system, regular commuters must supplement their €90.80/month for the Navigo pass, covering the whole of Paris and most of their journey to it, with an €116 monthly pass for the additional three stops they need each way. For those for whom an abonnement makes no sense, a return journey to Paris costs about €42, as compared to the €5 now paid by those within the Ile de France – though that enormous amount is supposed to drop to €11 from October 2026.

The deeper transport problem, however, is not the quality, regularity and cost of the journey to Paris, but the absence of direct train links between Montargis and Orléans, the prefecture of the Loiret and capital of the Centre-Val de Loire region, 70 kilometres to the west. The railway between Orléans and Montargis, which opened in the 1870s, was closed in November 1969 and has never been replaced. Today, the only transport connection is a regional bus service, running roughly every three hours, with numerous stops along the way, or the road - which is faster, but crowded and dangerous. The lack of regular, speedy public transport is not unique to the Montargis–Orléans axis. Rather, it reflects the absence of direct trains between Orléans and other significant towns in the Loiret and in the broader Centre-Val de Loire region, such as Gien, Chartres, or Dreux.

The consequences of this isolation are structural: without rail access or its equivalent to Orléans, Montargis cannot function as a commuter catchment area for the regional capital; in turn, Orléans cannot draw on a wider regional workforce, and neither city can anchor the kind of inter-city economic ties that sustain regional development in more connected parts of France. The lack of direct trains between Orléans and significant towns in the Loiret and Centre-Val de Loire region clearly limits the capacity of Orléans to develop as a regional hub, restricting the scale of the local labour market and the range of professional opportunities available to residents of the Gâtinais-Montargois.

These obstacles to regional development seem to explain the high level of poverty in Montargis, where 44% of its inhabitants live below the poverty line, (more than double the national average) according to figures cited by the civic association *Engagement Citoyen du Montargois* during the municipal campaign, and an estimated 6,600 people face extreme precarity. That poverty is heavily concentrated in Châlette-sur-Loing, the contiguous commune barely 3 kilometres from the centre of Montargis, and part of the same 'communauté d'agglomération'. Hence, despite its cost, delays and cancelled trains, there are no shortage of commuters heading to work in Paris.

The Medical Desert: Healthcare Deprivation as a Structural Problem

Montargis is in a medical desert – one of the worst in France. According to the local *Communauté Professionnelle Territoriale de Santé* (CPTS), 31,000 of the 119,000 patients in the Gâtinais-Montargois territory lack a regular general practitioner (GP). The 54 GPs currently in practice in the territory are each responsible for an average of 18,000 residents - nearly double the already elevated national average for rural areas. More broadly, the Centre-Val de Loire region has been identified as the worst-affected medical desert in France, with an estimated 150,000 inhabitants of the Loiret alone - around 24% of the department's population - having no declared GP.

The Departmental Council of the Loiret has not been passive: it adopted a 'Plan Priorité Santé 2023–2027' and has, as of December 2025, renewed its financial commitments to medical students and to the creation of health centres, including a contribution towards a 'Médecins Solidaires' centre, just opened in January 2026 in Corbeilles-en-Gâtinais, and serving patients without a regular doctor. However, the structural causes of the medical desert - inadequate professional infrastructure, the difficulty of attracting doctors to areas with limited cultural amenities and poor connectivity, the absence of group practices or hospital-linked structures that might offset the professional isolation of rural general practice - are not amenable to departmental subventions alone⁴.

As with transport and poverty, so with transport and healthcare: we are not dealing with parallel problems but with ones that are mutually reinforcing. A prospective GP weighing the choice between a practice in Montargis and one in a better-connected town will factor in access to specialist colleagues, continuing education, and personal quality of life - all of which depend on transport. EU freedom of movement in principle enables doctors from other member states to practice in France, but local and municipal authorities have no power to incentivise such migration (though they have tried) because the regulatory framework remains national. Thus, the 'désert médical', like the transport gap, exemplifies the way in which *endemic local problems are structurally produced at the national or regional level, largely beyond the reach of municipal action* making poverty, ill-health and precarity an increasing strain on municipal revenue, and a sword of Damocles hanging over Loiret's population, when it hasn't fallen on them already.

The limits of localism

Montargis thus provides a paradigmatic example of a recurrent theme in CEVIPOF's notes on the municipal elections: the powerlessness of local elected officials to deliver opportunities and resources critical to the well-being and life-prospects of their citizens. The decisions that most directly affect the quality of daily life in Montargis - the extension of the Navigo pass, the maintenance, renewal or alternatives for railway connections, the organisation and funding of healthcare, the allocation of social housing and urban renewal resources - are made at national, regional, or departmental level, not at the level of the commune or 'communauté d'agglomération'.

[4] https://www.loiret.fr/sites/loiret/files/media/documents/2025/12/CP_Session_Lutte_contre_la_désertification_médicale.pdf

This structural impotence of local elected officials, in the face of problems that are experienced locally but governed nationally, creates a particularly bitter form of political frustration. Citizens hold their mayor responsible for problems their mayor cannot solve; mayors invest energy in problems they cannot resolve; both end up reinforcing the sense that politics is futile.

Olivier Costa and Martial Foucault note the increase in direct, personalised, often abusive attacks on local officials - creating a feedback loop in which the conditions for democratic engagement deteriorate further⁵. The result is that fewer incumbent mayors are standing for re-election⁶ in France, and nearly 70% of municipalities lack an opposition list for which to vote. While nearly 35,000 communes have just renewed their municipal councils, the structural powerlessness of mayors, the opaqueness of their powers and those of the 'intercommunal' government on which they sit, seem rather to reinforce than to alleviate citizen estrangement from electoral politics.

There is no shortage of commentators complaining about persistent and increasing abstention at municipal, not only national, elections. But, perhaps, we should be struck, instead, by how many citizens continue to vote at either, even both. As Henri Bono and Sylvain Brouard point out⁷, the predictable, if unintended, result of extending list voting to the smallest communes – the result of a 2025 extension to all communes of a 2013 reform that had previously exempted them – is that voters in the 68% of communes lacking a second list now have no obvious reason to vote at all. Where previously it was possible to vote for individual candidates, thereby affecting their likelihood of being elected on their shared list, the reform now means that such voters cannot affect electoral outcomes by voting (*or abstaining*).

Were this a single case where national politicians ignored the consequences of their decisions for those in small towns, the damage might have been limited by public apologies, speedy remedies and attention to how such a demoralising decision was made. If, instead, we see it as the latest in a line of decisions disempowering people in rural towns and villages, electoral abstention turns out to be more than a symptom of democracy under pressure, but evidence of a failure of constitutional government, as well.

[5] Olivier Costa and Martial Foucault, 'Réseaux sociaux et élections municipales : faut-il mieux réguler ?' https://www.sciencespo.fr/cevipof/sites/sciencespo.fr.cephipof/files/Municipales_OCME_RS_mars2026.pdf

[6] The number of incumbent mayors standing for re-election has fallen to 63%, and to only 54% among women mayors - a dramatic drop from the previous average of 69-72% https://www.sciencespo.fr/cevipof/sites/sciencespo.fr.cephipof/files/MUNICIPALES_PH_Panorama_mars26.pdf

[7] Pierre-Henri Bono and Sylvain Brouard, 'Les effets de la généralisation de la proportionnelle aux élections municipales : une parité incomplète au détriment de la participation' https://www.sciencespo.fr/cevipof/sites/sciencespo.fr.cephipof/files/Municipales_PHBSB_proportionnelle_parite_mars2026.pdf

For example, in the Burgundy town of Saint-Florentin, (one of the subjects of Mischi's book) turnout fell to 31.86 percent at this election – although it still seems remarkable that so many people chose to vote when faced with a single slate of candidates that their vote could not alter. However, 17% of those voters voted blank or null, thereby registering their dissatisfaction with their options. (resultats-elections.interieur.gouv.fr). You might think that those who are dissatisfied should simply stand as candidates themselves or encourage others to stand. However, the rules for municipal elections preclude citizens standing as individuals and dictate the minimum and maximum number of candidates on an electorally eligible list, thereby significantly constraining the scope for electoral initiatives by individuals or small groups. For example, in a commune the size of Saint-Florentin (ie between 3,500-4,999 inhabitants) the minimum number of candidates on a list is 27 and the maximum number 29. Time and resource-poor, but disgruntled, citizens may realistically have few, if any, opportunities to alter the electoral choices with which they are faced.

Failures of Political Representation, Failures of Constitutional Government

There are two ways to think of constitutional government. On the one, it suffices that governors, whoever they are, are bound by the same laws as everyone else. It is, in other words, the opposite of absolute government and, as Locke stressed, of legal systems where laws depend on status and caste, as in feudalism, rather than providing ‘a standing rule to live by, common to every one of that society, and made by the legislative power erected in it’⁸. Let’s call that the ‘formal’ conception of constitutional government. On the second view – which we can call the ‘substantive view’ of it – no government is constitutional unless the harms of thoughtless, misguided, arbitrary or prejudiced laws are likely to fall on lawmakers as well as their peers.

Common to both views is the intuition that absolute government is likely to be arbitrary government - or government by whim, passion and self-interest - because absolute monarchs are unaffected in their person by the adverse consequences of the laws/decrees that they pass. Hence, as Jeremy Waldron describes Locke’s views, ‘The idea here is that oppressive laws are less likely if the law-makers are ordinary citizens and have to bear the burden of the laws they make themselves’⁹. The formal view of constitutional government, then, assumes that if lawmakers are no longer ‘above’ the law, they will be as vulnerable to harms as anyone else – and therefore motivated to avoid hasty, prejudiced or ill-considered laws. The substantive view of constitutional government, by contrast, recognises that legal liability for law-breaking alone cannot ensure this.

Famously, Anatole France noted that ‘The law, in its majestic equality, forbids the rich as well as the poor to sleep under bridges, to beg in the streets, and to steal bread’¹⁰; though it is the latter who suffer from laws on vagrancy and rough-sleeping, but the former who pass them. The same is true when men determine rules that primarily affect women, or when those with no religious beliefs set the rules determining what religious believers may do. In such cases, we may have formally constitutional government but not its substance. Hence, failures of democratic representation - which create legislatures whose lives are quite different from those they govern - do not just threaten *democratic* government. They threaten *constitutional* government as well.

[8] John Locke’s Second Treatise of Government , ch 1V, ‘of slavery’, para 22.

[9] Jeremy Waldron, ‘The Separation of Powers in Thought and Practice’, Boston College Law Review 54.2.2013, p. 456 freely available at <http://lawdigitalcommons.bc.edu/bclr/vol54/iss2/2>.

[10] ‘The law, in its majestic equality, forbids the rich as well as the poor to sleep under bridges, to beg in the streets, and to steal bread’. From (Le Lys rouge 1894).

This seems to be the situation that we are now witnessing in France, where persistent deficits of democratic representation, consequent on severely unequal political opportunities, reflect the different lives, perspectives and interests of governors and governed. Hence, failures of constitutional government, not just democracy, form the backdrop to the protests of 2018-19 and 2023 which swept through rural towns, not only larger cities and their suburbs¹¹. Rural town though it was, Montargis was rocked both by the riots following the killing of Nahel Merzouk in Nanterre on 27 June, 2023 – riots that devastated its town centre – and by the ‘gilets jaunes’ protests in 2018, although the populations each mobilised were very different.

The ‘gilets jaunes’ movement was predominantly white, and its grievances about transport costs and Parisian indifference were politically recuperated by the RN more successfully than by other parties. The 2023 riots, on the other hand, were occasioned by the point blank shooting in Nanterre of Nahel Merzouk, a French 17 year-old, when he failed to stop his car and tried to drive away from a police officer¹². Yet behind the obvious differences in who was mobilised and why, we find decisions whose harms - however serious and predictable - were never likely to fall on people like the legislators who made them.

The 2023 riots reflected the consequences of a 2017 law permitting police to shoot at a vehicle fleeing a traffic stop if the driver was deemed to be putting the passengers or passersby at risk. The gilets jaunes protests were a response to a forthcoming rise on the carbon component of fuel taxes, due in the 2019 budget, in the context of a 16% rise in the price of diesel over the course of 2018. Each law attempted to respond to valid national concerns with terrorism and with climate change. Nonetheless, the failure to anticipate the likely consequences of the decisions, and to take steps to mitigate them, spoke of a legislature unable or unwilling to evaluate counter-terrorism strategies from the perspective of racial/ethnic minorities, or to consider the impact of carbon taxes for those who need cars for transport.

In short, while it is more usual to treat the populations affected by these two laws as geographically distinct – the one, associated with urban, racially and ethnically marked youth, the latter with older, white rural and peri-urban populations - the riots in Montargis are as evocative of the predicament of rural towns as the protests of car-dependent supporters of the gilets jaunes. As Mischi shows, and as Montargis and the Loiret confirm, the 1950s and 60s were boom towns for rural towns, attracting immigrant labour from the Maghreb and Turkey, supplementing earlier waves of immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe. But when the boom times ended in the ‘70s and ‘80s, leaving industrial populations with no work, in towns segregated racially and ethnically, the poverty, disadvantage and the sense of abandonment was not limited to their majority white populations. On the contrary, it included the native-born offspring of this industrial immigration, too.

[11] See Mischi, ch 9 for what happened in the towns of Briennon-sur-Armançon, Saint-Florentin and Venarey-les-Laumes in Burgundy.

[12] Merzouk’s death was the third fatal shooting of its kind in 2023, following 13 such killings in 2022 and another 5 between 2020-22, during and immediately after Covid.

Electoral Dynamics in Montargis: Fragmentation and Participation

How do such factors play out in municipal politics? As Pascal Perrineau notes¹³, the RN has been largely absent from municipal politics for much of its history, even in areas where it has done well in Presidential and European elections. That has begun to change since 2008, he remarks, as the FN/RN it has begun gradually to build a small but growing municipal presence. In Montargis, however, that 'local implantation' is very recent: the 2026 municipal elections were the first at which the RN presented a list, despite strong, and growing scores for Le Pen in 2017 and 2022, and wins, with greatly increased margins, for Bardella at the European elections in 2024¹⁴. The RN list was headed by Côme Dunis, a former Gilet Jaune activist, local estate agent and member of a long-established family in the area. He was supported in his campaign, as were the candidates on his list, the RN député of the Loiret, Thomas Ménagé. The latter was elected in 2022 and, ever since, has actively sought to make the RN electable at municipal level, as well.

Still, the success of the RN at these elections should not be exaggerated: its 34.6% of the vote barely put it ahead of the Communist Party, led by another well-known local figure, Jean-Paul Nottin, on 33.10%. Moreover, the RN clearly benefited from discontent with the centre-right list of Benôit Digeon (32.3%), the mayor of Montargis for the previous 14 years. Though Nottin successfully united diverse strands of the local left in opposition to Dunis, the PCF was never likely to make serious in-roads into the centre-right vote.

Amilly was the only other win for the RN in the Loiret in these recent elections. The RN's victory in Amilly looked more decisive and dramatic than in Montargis - overturning what had been a first round victory of 76% for the 'divers droite' in 2020 and coming first in each round in 2026. Nonetheless, its second-round victory was close (48.23% to 45.78%) and reflected a three way-split amongst those who had voted for the 'divers centre' in the first round, (those who now voted RN; those who voted for the 'divers' list that constituted the main opposition; and a faithful rump of 5.9%).

In short, the highly fragmented municipal outcome in Montargis seems to have been replicated in Amilly as well. These results, along with the first round victory of the PCF in its strong-hold of Châlette-sur-Loing, reflect the hold of local electoral patterns at municipal level, and the ability of the PCF to resist a surge in RN voting whose electoral victims appear to have been the centre and centre-right.

[13] https://www.sciencespo.fr/cevipof/sites/sciencespo.fr.cepipof/files/Municipales_PP_divorcepolitique_mars2026.pdf

But see Mischi p 315 and Safia Dahani's 'un parti si peu populaire. Sur quelques logiques de représentation des classes populaires parmi les dirigeants du Rassemblement national' in Gérard Mauger and Willy Pelletier (eds.), *Les classes populaires et le FN. Explications de vote*. Vulaines-sur-Seine : Éditions du Croquant, 2023 and her 'D'un parti à l'autre ; Inconstances politiques, reconversions partisans et professionnalisation' in the fascinating Dahani, Safia; Estelle Delaine; Félicien Faury; Guillaume Letourneur (eds.) *Sociologie politique du Rassemblement national. Enquêtes de terrain*. Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 2023.

[14] Bardella won the European vote in 2024 with 40% of the vote compared to winning with 24% in 2019; and though Le Pen lost by a wide margin to Macron in the second round of both Presidential elections, her vote share increased from 33.6% in the second round in 2017 to 39.7% in 2022.

Abstention in Small and Middle-Sized Town

The abstention rate in Montargis, Châlette and Amilly in the municipal elections is striking: reaching 53.99% for Châlette, around 48% in Montargis and about 40% in the smaller Amilly, highlighting the degree to which local politics fails to engage its citizens, even when the choices are clear and the contests are close. It is not that there are not significant local issues to be decided – the redevelopment of the town centre, not just its recovery from the riots; drugs and the insecurity they bring were all major issues in Montargis, and undermined support for the incumbent mayor. However, their connection to the other problems weighing on residents, which cannot be solved at municipal level, may have made municipal elections seem less, not more, relevant to citizens.

Voting in legislative elections is not obviously more appealing to them, either. In the 2024 legislatives in Montargis, the left beat the RN handily 53.1% to 46.85%, but in the constituency as a whole, the RN won with 62.59% of the vote to 37.41% for the left. In that 2024 election, the abstention rate in Montargis dropped from just over 50% of the electorate in 2017 and 2022 to a mere 42%. The abstention rate in Châlette is even more dramatic. In the 2017 legislative elections, roughly 68% of its electorate abstained. That dropped to 62.91% in 2022, before plunging to a mere 40% in 2024 - when the left won the first round outright and the RN came second with 45% of the vote.

The legislative elections in the Montargis area appear to have been hard fought, then, in the sense that the three towns in the area moved from centre-right deputies in 2017 to RN deputies in 2022 and then, for Châlette and Montargis, to left/NFP deputies in 2024. However, neither national nor municipal elections engaged large numbers of their respective electorates¹⁵. Even at Presidential level abstention in the three towns remains high, though very much lower than in either municipal or legislative elections. All three rural towns voted for Macron by over 55% in 2017 and 2022 – and by over 60% in Châlette. But while the 4th constituency in the Loiret voted Macron by nearly 60% in 2017, it voted Le Pen by the same amount in 2022. Given their status as outliers, compared to the surrounding villages and the smaller town of Amilly, it is less surprising that the abstention in Montargis and Châlette are high, and consistently 4-5% points higher than the constituency average.

[15] The effects of 'swamping' on abstention rates can be seen, also, in Briennon-sur-Armançon and Saint-Florentin, where abstention in legislative elections increased to 41-45% in 2024 - reflecting the way that the RN electorate in the 3rd Constituency of Yonne is outweighed by LR voters in the larger town of Sens and in small villages with high turnout. In Venarey-les-Laumes the abstention rates are even more dramatic, rising from 53% in 2017 to 57.90% in 2022, before falling to 35.6% - although in 2022 and 2024 the contest between the RN and LR for dominance was very tight, as the legislative success of LREM in 2017 faded. But Venarey is a tiny population in the large, dispersed 4th Constituency of the Côte-d'Or, and that likely explains its abstention rates.

Conclusion

Commentators tend to consider the influence of municipal elections on legislative ones. But in Montargis and its surroundings, at any rate since 2022, the reverse appears to have occurred: gains at legislative level for the RN have facilitated the development of a local RN list for the first time in Montargis, which was able successfully to gain the mayoralty in a tight three-way race; to win Amilly as well, and to put together a large municipal vote even in left-voting Châlette-sur-Loing. Likewise, the ability of the left in the 2024 legislatives to regain Montargis and Châlette from the RN seems to have helped it in the municipales in 2026, even though at constituency level the RN dominated the legislative elections.

The ‘front républicain’, like the ice-caps of the Arctic, has definitely melted in Montargis and the 4th constituency of the Loiret, where about 60-63% of those who vote, vote RN as compared to the 37-40% of those, largely concentrated in its two largest towns, who vote left. However, the left for which Montargis and Châlette vote is PCF at municipals and NFP at the legislatives. It is therefore unlikely to make in-roads into the centre-right electorate that dominates elsewhere – hence the three-way split that gave the RN its victory in Montargis’ municipal election. Abstention and the FN are likely to be the main legislative beneficiaries of the collapse of the centre-right in towns like Montargis and Amilly, unless an attractive local candidate can be found to challenge for a place in the second round – as has not happened since 2017.

The municipal elections of 2026 took place before the full consequences of Trump’s war on Iran hits France and the global economy. However, their likely consequences for rural towns like Montargis are not hard to guess: more expensive petrol and diesel will take a toll on individuals’ budgets for food and transport, while tourism and agriculture are likely to suffer – exacerbating the structural issues of poverty, ill-health, and exclusion affecting towns and villages in the area. Unemployment and visible poverty are concentrated in the former, but precarious, low-wage work and high fuel costs mean that more villagers will fall below the poverty line as well.

In principle both the NFP and centre right might challenge the FN in such circumstances, though the latter has the advantage of being a single party, rather than an unstable and uneasy alliance. In practice, that seems unlikely. And that, in the end, is the difficulty facing rural towns like Montargis: that debates about the cost of living, security or immigration - which may unite voters in national elections across France - will not address the particular deficits of employment, health-care and transport that they face, and which they urgently need national, as well as regional and local, politics to address.

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