

France: First round in local elections reveals political turmoil

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The first round of the local elections held on March 11 has revealed a degree of political turmoil in France. In what many commentators regard as the most important poll since the Socialist Party-led coalition came to office in June 1997, the government parties made only slight gains against the rightwing opposition.

Even the government's pre-election measures in favour of the elderly and other poorer sections of the population did not have any real impact. Just before the election, for example, Prime Minister Lionel Jospin had announced a new allowance for those over sixty.

The opinion polls had predicted a "pink" tidal wave. However, the parties of the traditional Gaullist right (*Rassemblement Pour la République* - Assembly for the Republic, RPR; the *Union pour la Démocratie Française*, Union for French Democracy, UDF; and the *Démocratie Libérale*, DL) have generally been able to maintain control of the towns and cities they previously held. Where the government coalition parties made gains, it was largely due to the crisis of the rightwing parties rather than any increase in their own popularity.

The abstention rate of more than 33 percent, the highest ever in an election of this type, also shows a strong political disaffection. However, turnout was higher in the towns and cities where the result was uncertain and a lot was at stake—like in Paris, Lyons or Toulouse. The position of mayor in France's major urban centres is normally occupied by a senior member of the various political parties. It forms an important base of support for the different factions within both the Gaullist right and the Socialist Party (PS).

In towns where the PS was predicted to win comfortably, it only just scraped through. In Lyons, Toulouse, Lille and even Paris, where the PS is in the lead, its vote is generally way below expectations. In several towns where government ministers stood, they lost or were badly shaken (e.g. Avignon, Beziers and Blois). According to some reports, the election meetings of the Socialist Party only mobilised a fraction of the numbers that gathered during the last European elections.

The number of local councils the French Communist Party (PCF) controlled previously meant that almost 4.5 million people (8 percent of the population) lived in towns they administered. However, the reduced PCF vote left it in difficulty in the towns still under its control, and the party could even lose Nimes, the only town of more than 100,000 inhabitants it still runs. In many towns the PCF—the major partner in government with the Socialist Party and the Greens in the so-called "Plural Left" coalition—had signed a unity agreement with the PS prior to the elections and presented a joint slate.

On the other hand, the Green vote grew slightly. The Greens had not signed any pre-election agreement with the Socialist Party and utilised

the relative weakness of the PS vote to force important concessions in the second round. New election laws allow parties that make it into the second ballot—those achieving more than 10 percent of the vote—to merge with others instead of pulling out in favour of another slate. Consequently, as soon as the first round results were known, the Greens merged everywhere with the PS slates.

The loss of influence of the PCF and the relatively better results of the Greens has already forced the PS leaders to grant the latter more room in local administrations and this could also find its expression at national level. It is possible that the Greens will become the Socialist Party's senior coalition partners pushing the PCF into a junior position.

The PCF also lost votes to the competition on its left from several middle class radical groups and the so-called "citizens lists". The latter are based on a rather vague programme, generally demanding more democracy and more "closeness to the people," and say they are aiming for the votes of those "disappointed by the old left". Typical examples of these lists are those called "Motiv-é-es" (motivated), which have appeared in many towns and have sometimes scored relatively high votes (e.g. 12 percent in Toulouse). The Motiv-é-es slate in Toulouse was formed around a band called Zebda. Their opposition to the mainstream parties was largely verbal, and as soon as the results were known they began negotiations with the PS and merged with it for the second round.

The parties of what the French press dubs the "extreme left"—*Lutte Ouvrière* (Workers Fight, LO), the *Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire* (Revolutionary Communist League, LCR) and the *Parti des Travailleurs* (Workers Party, PT)—increased their vote significantly. LO presented slates in 129 towns, the LCR in 93 and the PT in 146, collectively doubling the number of lists of candidates they ran since the 1995 local elections. According to some press estimates, they could increase the number of their local councillors from a few to a hundred or more after the second ballot. In some places *Lutte Ouvrière* scored close to 20 percent of the vote.

These parties were particularly active in the larger towns and industrial centres, and their relatively high vote placed them in the position of powerbroker in many cases. In several towns their lists included dissatisfied PCF members, and in some towns the LCR ran joint slates with official sections of the PCF.

Some commentators noted that the PCF had been replaced by the "extreme left" in what they term the "popular vote", i.e. working class vote, and that the vote for the "Plural Left" did not originate from these layers of the electorate. The Greens were said to find their voters amongst the "professional middle class," while the PS did not hide the fact that it was after the votes of the bourgeoisie. One journalist

commented on the PS vote in Paris as follows: “It is not an accident if, from election to election the left progresses regularly in the capital. The bourgeoisification of Paris has paradoxically favoured this evolution inasmuch as the PS more and more attracted the well off layers, while losing ground amongst the popular layers”.

Though the extreme right *Front National* (FN) lost the town of Toulon in the first ballot, it nevertheless maintained its position in other towns it had won in 1995, and was re-elected in Orange and achieved 38 percent of the vote in Vitrolles. In towns where they could not put up their own slates, the politicians of the extreme right (both the FN and the *Mouvement National Republicain*, MNR) got “recycled” onto whichever list of the Liberals or Christian Democrats would have them. They concluded a number of election agreements with the UDF, the RPR and the *Rassemblement Pour la France* (Assembly for France, RPF). In some towns the bourgeois right withdrew and left the MNR to campaign on its own against the lists of the left.

It is interesting to note that many local branches of the employers' federation Medef—that has been leading a systematic attack against worker's social gains for the last two years—put up candidates independently of the traditional rightwing parties, which they apparently judge to be incapable of representing the interests of employers.

The main themes of the campaign of the rightwing and the “Plural Left” alike were law-and-order and “quality of life”. Fighting between rival youth gangs was splashed all over the media, as well as many articles about violence in schools, with asylum seekers being demagogically used as political scapegoats for many social ills. These campaigns were aimed largely at those better off layers who feared for their newly acquired wealth or social status. At the same time, some newspapers remarked on the virtual absence of any campaign on the part of the establishment parties about social questions, such as poverty.

The slogans of the PCF, the Greens and the PS were almost identical in the first round, and the ex-Stalinists and the ecologists identified themselves completely with the policy of “social capitalism” espoused by the PS. Nevertheless, the popular vote, which Jospin was able to rally at a certain point, has been profoundly eroded and it is clear that the votes of some layers of the working class went to parties regarded as standing to the left of the PS.

The profound crisis shaking French politics also manifested itself in the particular form of the crisis of the traditional right in some cities. In Lyons, the collaboration of sections of the Gaullists with the extreme right following the last local elections has caused many divisions.

The crisis is at its sharpest in the capital, Paris. A Gaullist candidate has held the office of Paris mayor ever since the post was created some 25 years ago. However, several dirty scandals in Paris have largely discredited the Gaullists, with the present incumbent Jean Tiberi and President Jacques Chirac (himself a former Paris mayor) both implicated in corruption affairs there.

Bertrand Delanoë, the PS mayoral candidate in Paris, was ahead after the first round with 31 percent of the vote. Against the background of scandals he had campaigned for a “moral” administration of the capital, and enjoyed a certain credibility over Philippe Séguin, the official RPR candidate who received 25 percent. Tiberi, who was expelled from the RPR last November, came in a poor third with 14 percent.

A war erupted as soon as the results were known, between those

who wanted a merger and those who wanted a simple withdrawal in favour of the best-placed rightwing list. Finally on Tuesday, and with only hours to go before the official registration of candidates for the second round was closed, Séguin and his followers struck a reluctant agreement with Tiberi, to avoid the rightwing vote being split, and almost certainly guaranteeing that Delanoë would become the first Socialist Party mayor of Paris.

The deal was struck after days of virulent attack and counter attack. Chirac and a majority of the leaders of the RPR and other right wing parties, who fear that a massive defeat for the Gaullists in Paris would place them at a severe disadvantage in next year's presidential and parliamentary elections, also employed enormous pressure to reach a settlement.

However, if the Gaullists were to win the second round, the identity of the next mayor could still provide more ammunition for the internecine struggle on the right, since both Séguin and Tiberi have laid their claim to the post.

A similar crisis prevails in Lyons, where UDF candidate for mayor Michel Mercier, a close collaborator of UDF leader François Bayrou, had initially sworn that he would not ally himself with Charles Millon (Liberal and Christian Right). Millon is a former defence minister and ex-leader of the regional council, who was expelled from the UDF because he gained his position on the council by accepting the votes of the extreme right in 1998. In the present elections, Millon also gave extreme right politicians positions on his slate. Mercier was then forced under pressure from the UDF national leaders (and principally Valéry Giscard D'Estaing, the former French President) to accept an agreement with Millon after two days of political haggling and sordid bargaining. In the first round, the Socialist Party candidate Gerard Collomb won 33 percent of the vote, while Millon and Mercier each won 24 percent.

Conscious that the continuing feud within the Gaullist camp could allow the Socialist Party and others to benefit, Chirac himself had insisted just before the election that all the right wing parties should unite into a single organisation. “The opposition would be well inspired if it was to make a cultural revolution,” he said, while the newspaper *Libération* even spoken of a necessary merger “in order to avoid an implosion”.

The second round in the local elections takes place on Sunday, March 18, 2001.



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