France: Government parties experience substantial losses in local elections

Francis Dubois
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The “Plural Left” government coalition has suffered substantial losses in the local elections, despite winning control of Paris and Lyons from the Gaullist right.

When the first round ballot was held on March 11, opinion polls and media commentators were predicating a “pink wave,” in which the Socialist Party (PS), the Communist Party (PCF), the Greens, the Citizens Movement (MDC) and the Left Radicals (MRG) comprising the “Plural Left” would win control of a series of key cities and councils.

However, following the second round last Sunday, the media is now talking about a “blue wave,” with the Gaullists of the *Rassemblement Pour la Republique* (Assembly for the Republic, RPR); the *Union pour la Democratie Française* (Union for French Democracy, UDF); and *Democratie Liberale* (DL) doing far better than forecast.

The Socialist Party of Prime Minister Lionel Jospin has lost control of a number of large towns and cities to the right wing opposition. In contrast, the Gaullists have lost only 10 towns to the “Plural Left”. Government losses include 23 towns of more than 30,000 inhabitants, including six of more than 100,000 inhabitants. In the case of Paris and Lyons, although the right lost seats in various *arrondissements* (districts) and thus control of the mayor's office, their overall vote in both towns was slightly higher.

Almost all government ministers who stood in these elections were beaten. Most commentators agree that the Gaullists' loss of Paris, now ruled by a Socialist Party mayor for the first time, and Lyons was due mainly to the deep divisions among the rightwing parties themselves, rather than any positive support for the government coalition. Moreover, the Socialist Party candidate in Lyons had called for, and obtained, the second round votes of a section of the right wing.

The PCF, until now the second most important party in Jospin's coalition, has also lost a large number of municipalities, including Nimes, the only town of more than 100,000 inhabitants they controlled. The PCF now runs the *mairie* (town-hall) in just 31 municipalities of more than 30,000 inhabitants (22 of which are in the Paris area), and down from 41 after the last local elections in 1995. The PCF also lost control of a large number of smaller towns, which means that it has disappeared from some areas altogether. Even in the PCF's old strongholds of the “small crown” in the immediate suburbs of Paris, where it had substantial influence, the party's grip has been shaken. Moreover it only rules in two towns of more than 20,000 inhabitants in the Ile de France region (the larger area around Paris). The administration of several dozens of middle-sized towns is what gave the CP some importance.

The Green Party is the only member of the “Plural Left” to have gained in the elections. The Greens now controls the mayor in some 15 towns and in one of the Paris *arrondissements*, and they will also join the councils of a considerable number of other towns for the first time. After making gains in the first round, the Greens decided to run their own candidates in a number of towns where in the past they may have withdrawn in favour of a better placed Socialist Party slate. The media now consider them the second most important party of the “Plural Left” coalition; recognising this the Greens have aggressively demanded positions and concessions from the Socialist Party.

The extreme right was able to preserve its control of towns it had won in the 1995 election—Orange, Vitrolles and Marignane—but on the whole its presence was reduced. Whereas in 1995 the National Front (FN) stood in the second ballot in 185 towns of more than 30,000 inhabitants, last Sunday, the FN and the FN-

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breakaway *Mouvement National Republicain* (MNR) stood candidates in just 41 towns of the same size, out of a possible 205.

Estimates of turn out in the first round revealed that in general, a greater percentage of traditional Gaullist voters went to the polls than those supporting the "Plural Left". According to one estimate, 37 percent of government supporters abstained, against a 28 percent abstention by those sympathising with the right. The abstention by voters who would nominally support the government parties increased by two percent in the second ballot.

Those who voted in the first round for the parties of what the French press dubs the "extreme left"— *Lutte Ouvrière* (Workers Fight, LO), the *Ligue Communiste Revolutionnaire* (Revolutionary Communist League, LCR) and the *Parti des Travailleurs* (Workers Party, PT)—as well as for the so-called "citizens slates," did not transfer their vote to "Plural Left" candidates in the second round, as usually happened in previous elections. That was obvious in towns like Toulouse and Strasbourg, where the "Plural Left" was not able to tap the votes of these parties in the second ballot, handing victory to the right wing.

Despite their divisions, the Gaullists gained from the protracted crisis of the extreme right, in most cases absorbing their votes. The RPF (*Rassemblement pour la France*, Assembly for France), an anti European and French chauvinist party that was often allied to right wing slates (in Paris supporting the incumbent mayor Jean Tiberi), has acted as a bridge between the extreme right and the Gaullists. The traditional right wing parties have managed to win back large sections of FN and MNR voters on the basis of aggressive law-and-order campaigns.

A look at the social composition of the poll reveals that where the government parties have won votes, is amongst the more privileged urban layers. However, this has mainly been to the benefit of the Greens. "Success amongst the urban elites and in the strongholds of higher management, but defeat in the working class towns and in the dormitory-towns, such is the balance sheet of the Left in government," writes a commentator for French daily *Libération* the day after the second ballot.

This is hardly surprising, given that during the entire election campaign all the parliamentary parties have opposed any mention of the social problems confronting the working class, addressing themselves instead to big business and a privileged elite among the upper layers of the middle class.

For this reason the abstention rate was generally higher in working class constituencies and was even more pronounced amongst the youth. Concerned over the increased alienation of the government from broad masses of the population, many commentators now speak of a "break between the popular vote and the Plural Left."

The disaffection of the "popular vote," or more correctly the working class, from the "Plural Left" has increased since 1997 when Jospin came to office. At that time, Jospin had attempted to regain the votes of the working class, and this was one of the main tasks of the PCF in the coalition.

The local elections take place under conditions of ever increasing fragmentation of the political landscape. None of the contending parties has been able to win more than 25 percent of the vote in an election for the last six years. The heavy losses of the PCF will increase its own crisis and accelerate its disintegration; the founding of the NPC (New Communist Party) is planned for October this year.

After this year's elections, the Jospin government is more fragmented than ever. The coalition faces a shake up, with Jospin unable to rely on the PCF, which is deeply divided. While in 1997 the Greens were only a subsidiary force, the ecologists have now become the second party of the ruling coalition.

See Also:

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