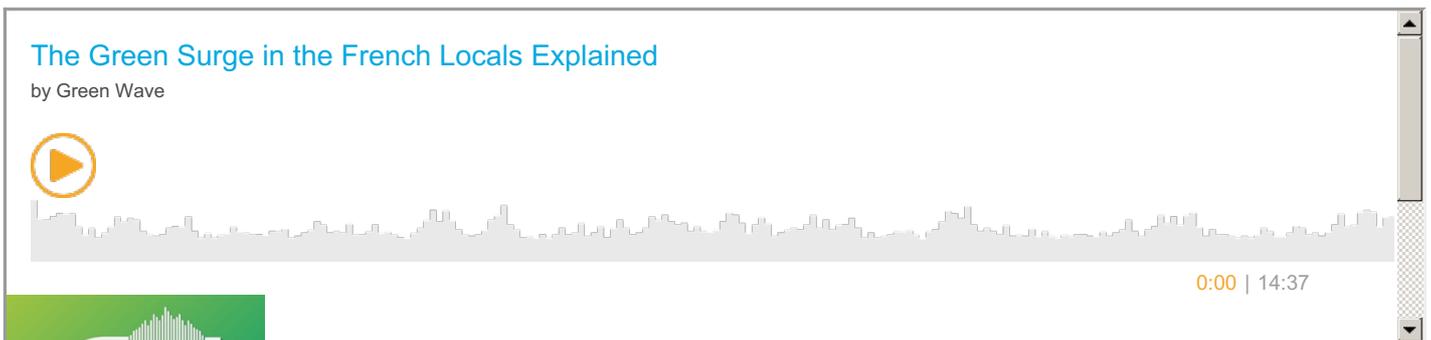


The Green Surge in the French Locals Explained

Article by **Quentin Ariès**

July 17, 2020

Local elections in France this June augured change in the political landscape as Greens celebrated major gains in key cities. The Green surge unequivocally signals widespread discontent with French President Macron's slide to the centre-right and the unwavering dominance of climate issues despite (or even because of) the COVID-19 pandemic. Ahead of the 2022 presidential elections, the challenge for Greens will be to consolidate their credibility by building successful green-left alliances and bridging the ecological and the social so as to leave none behind.



On June 28, the Greens of Europe Ecologie-Les Verts (EELV) confirmed their role as change makers in French politics.

The second round of the local elections saw Green-led coalitions win key French cities including Lyon, Marseille, Bordeaux, Strasbourg, Besançon, Tours, and Poitiers. With Greens in the executives of 15 of the 30 biggest French cities, they are now a central political force in France.

The results were heralded as a “green wave”, something now clear from the numbers and electoral maps that have since emerged. It is true that voter turnout plummeted to around 40 per cent due to the coronavirus crisis. It is also true that the centre-right Republicans managed to hold around half of the French cities with over 9000 inhabitants, and that the Socialists remain the leading force in Rennes, Nantes, Lille, and Paris.

Now over 1.9 million French citizens (out of a total 67 million) have a registered Green mayor and the party can count on over a 1000 affiliated local officials (most of France's 600 000 council officials are unaffiliated). Those numbers may look small, but the Greens have the political momentum.

A primary factor in the Green victory is French President Emmanuel Macron's definitive shift to the centre right. His centrist-liberal party, La République en Marche (LREM), lost its core voters: city-centre residents and the highly educated. Almost all of LREM's candidates underperformed and failed to impress voters by teaming up with the Republicans in an effort to block Green candidates. “Most Macron voters refused to join the Right in Bordeaux or Strasbourg. This strategy from the anti-climate bloc failed as Macron's electorate [at the 2017 French

presidential election] remained social-democrat,” explained Simon Persico, a political scientist at Sciences Po Grenoble in a phone interview.

Yet the centre-right’s anti-climate campaign was not necessarily against all ecological aspirations. From new transport infrastructure to bike lanes and planting tens of thousands of trees, environmental pledges were recurrent talking points in the campaign, including for centre-right candidates. But liberal and conservative forces fearmongered by portraying Green candidates as the far left in disguise.

If the Greens positioned themselves on the left of the political spectrum, most of their candidates (aside from their activists) were former local civil society figures, ordinary citizens, or from other left-wing parties in localities where they decided to run on a united Left ticket.

Elections in times of COVID-19

The fearmongering of the centrist and right-wing parties was doomed to fail in a campaign that took place in the midst of a pandemic. Millions of voters were locked down, but they were not shut down. Their support for action on climate and the environment did not diminish, and now they want to see rapid steps taken at all levels.

According to Simon Persico and Florent Gougou in [*a Le Monde op-ed*](#), the confinement even allowed organisations and intellectuals to link the health, social and ecological crises in reflections on the post-pandemic world.

This ability to swiftly change gears during the lockdown (which came into force days after the first round of the elections on March 15) was also a sign that the Green mayors were not new to the scene. The new mayor of Bordeaux, Pierre Hurmic, was a candidate for the job back in 1995. Besançon’s new leader, Anne Vignot, was the deputy mayor of the city’s left-leaning majority from 2014 (though the outgoing mayor became affiliated to LREM after the 2017 presidential election). Bruno Bernard, the new president of the Lyon Metropolitan council, has been in politics since 2008.

According to Margot Belair, the health crisis has also reshuffled some of the pledges at the top of their agenda – such as food checks to supply low-income families with local organic food to compensate for the extra expense of daily meals for their children due to school canteen closures.

Meanwhile, [mayor of Grenoble Eric Piolle](#), the only Green leader of a large French city before the elections, was re-elected in a landslide victory with 53 per cent of the vote (he faced off three other candidates in the second round, all of whom won less than 23 per cent).

“It’s somehow a new beginning. We’re not starting from scratch but being re-elected will bring new momentum and new priorities”, said Margot Belair, a newly elected Grenoble official. She embraces a “more radical” approach with a stronger focus on social issues that will require significant citizen involvement on, for instance, making public spaces near schools safer and traffic free. According to Belair, the health crisis has also reshuffled some of the pledges at the top of their agenda – such as food checks to supply low-income families with local organic food to compensate for the extra expense of daily meals for their children due to school canteen closures. “Food is at the heart of a lot of things, like our health; it highlights social inequalities but is also important for local economic

development”, she added.

Making the case for strong local economies helped boost the Greens’ credibility in the campaign. Lyon’s new leaders, Grégory Doucet (for the city) and Bruno Bernard (for the metropolitan area) promote a new innovation cluster for the biking industry, while the youngest of the new Green mayors, 30-year-old Léonore Moncond’huy from Poitiers, advocates closing the city’s airport with a view to re-investing the generous local subsidies used to keep it afloat in the local economy. After all, Poitiers (and its 88 000 residents) is less than a two-hour journey from Paris by high-speed train.

The fight is far from over

Local executives are now taking shape, and by the end of July we should know if they have managed to change the tide in metropolitan councils. These bodies group big cities and their suburbs and are key to implementing green policies in areas like transport, housing, infrastructure, and waste management. Important yet little known, the biggest metropolitan councils manage annual budgets of over 1 billion euros, higher than the budgets of city councils.

The newly elected Greens may find themselves at odds with the mayors of smaller cities and villages with other political leanings. Majorities could be slim and fragile, which might curb or moderate their ambitions. The suburbs often headed by centre-right figures (or independent mayors for small villages) are likely to resist putting a break on road developments and big infrastructure projects. They are also wary of a Green agenda that is sceptical of urban sprawl (for them a source of tax revenue, especially for villages that lack strong economic activities) and in favour of scrapping new shopping centres and tackling high car dependence in areas outside of city centres.

Having the metropolitan areas on board will be key for the Greens to avoid what many fear may be their downfall: failing to reconcile the urban-rural divide.

While talks are ongoing, the metropolitan areas of Tours, Strasbourg, Poitiers and Besançon may end up with leadership from centre-left local figures. Eric Piolle is hoping for a friendlier metropolitan executive after his allies won cities in Grenoble’s suburbs, firming up his green-led majority. The Green success in Lyon (the only city where metropolitan councilors are directly elected) was matched by the Printemps Marseillais coalition with a historic gain from the conservatives in Marseilles city, though they proved unable to unseat the Right in the metropolitan area.

Having the metropolitan areas on board will be key for the Greens to avoid what many fear may be their downfall: failing to reconcile the urban-rural divide. Will they be able to green cities with parks, better transport, and new ways of thinking about public space without antagonising middle-class suburbs that feel left behind and beyond the reach of the social changes green politics can bring?

In an article in *Libération*, philosopher Pierre Charbonnier summed up the challenge for the new Green cities: “will they confine themselves to a space which is disconnected from its surroundings, with a population that closes its eyes to the fate of its neighbors, or will they engage in a process of social and ecological decompartmentalisation?”

Going solo: a strategy doomed to failure

One thing is certain: if the ecological transition neglects social aspects, it will endanger Greens’ electoral success.

This is the big challenge that lies ahead, both ideologically and in terms of local policies. Most of the newly elected officials will have to quickly learn how to govern cities while building and maintaining coalitions with the myriad of French leftist parties.

Some form of environmentalism may now be widely found in left-leaning parties in France, but Green aides and officials have pointed to the key importance of highlighting social issues and widening the voter base to include less educated people or poorer districts in order to avoid a new “yellow vests” movement. The spark for the yellow vests protests was Macron’s proposal to raise fuel duty while cutting taxes for the highest earners. Many have also suggested that the temptation of rejecting alliances in favour of “going solo” would not be a good strategy.

“No party has the monopoly of ecology, no party has the monopoly of the Left, no party has the monopoly of the opposition, or of insubordination,” asserted a group of young, left-wing political activists in *Journal du Dimanche*. Their op-ed came with a warning: if the Greens have become the new alternative to liberalism and conservatism, they must resist “hegemonic temptations” – to which the Socialist Party succumbed for decades, and which la France Insoumise, the left-wing party led by Jean-Luc Mélenchon, has flirted with since the 2017 presidential election. “The roadmap is clear: we must take power. And the conditions for seizing power are also clear: scattered and divided, we will not succeed,” the young activists added.

Looking to 2021, local elections (for *départements* and regions) will confirm whether Greens are able to become the leading force on the Left, either by putting Green activists in power or helping to build successful alliances with a transformative ecological agenda. Further successes will boost hopes for a united Left ahead of the 2022 presidential elections, and may even manage to win over citizens mistrustful of politics or disillusioned by Macron’s failure to change French politics for the better.

Many factors, including a potential second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in autumn 2020, will decide whether a convergence between issues of ecology and solidarity is possible.

New ideas to fortify the Left and secure the centrality of ecology in this process are also being put forth. The new mayor of Tours, Emmanuel Denis, has floated the idea of a congress in his city in December 2020.

According to Ludovic Lepeltier-Kutasi, the mayor’s chief of staff, the congress will aim “regroup the Left and link ecology and social justice.” The last Tours Congress took place a century ago in December 1920 and has come to symbolise the split between Communists and Socialists. “We want to bring a European dimension as we’re not the only ones to ask such questions. We must overcome national differences. Europe is not only its treaties,” added Lepeltier-Kutasi, who also holds a Hungarian passport and previously lived in Budapest.

Many factors, including a potential second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in autumn 2020, will decide whether a convergence between issues of ecology and solidarity is possible. But climate change and the fate of our planet are not going anywhere. The day after the June 2020 elections, Macron approved most of the over 140 proposals of the Citizens’ Convention on Climate Change. These overwhelmingly endorsed bold reforms to limit urban sprawl, invest massively in green jobs, and stop short plane routes (equivalent to less than a 4-hour train journey) by 2025. A referendum could take place on those proposals in 2021.

Will it be enough for the youngest ever French president to win back his core voters? Macron’s bet is he will be the only alternative to the far-right candidacy of Marine Le Pen, allowing him to both speak to his left on climate

while expanding to his right (after all, the new French Prime Minister, Jean Castex, was previously an aide to the former and very conservative president Nicholas Sarkozy). But as no Green nor any centre-left figures were successfully poached by Macron during the July government reshuffle, the French Greens find themselves faced with a clear opportunity to consolidate their position.



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