



# The 2021 French regional elections: beyond second-order effects

Florent Gougou

## ► To cite this version:

Florent Gougou. The 2021 French regional elections: beyond second-order effects. Regional and Federal Studies, 2023, 10.1080/13597566.2023.2175351 . halshs-04016093

**HAL Id: halshs-04016093**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04016093>**

Submitted on 1 Jun 2023

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## The 2021 French Regional Elections: Beyond Second-Order Effects

### Abstract

Re-election of all incumbent Presidents, most of them from the Socialist Party (PS) or the Republicans (LR), was the main feature of the French regional elections of 20 and 27 June 2021. As a result, regional government remained controlled by the two parties that have dominated French politics since the early 1980s, even though both lost the 2017 presidential and legislative elections to newcomer Emmanuel Macron. The second-order elections model captures part of these dynamics, but the candidate-centered politics model provides a more appropriate framework to understand the general pattern of these regional elections. In a context of increasing split-ticket voting between regional and departmental elections, which were held at the same time, an era of divided government seems to have emerged since 2017.

### Keywords

Regional elections – Second-order elections – Candidate-centered politics – Divided government – Split-ticket voting

### The author

Florent Gougou (PhD 2012, Sciences Po Paris) is an associate professor of political science at Sciences Po Grenoble

<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3298-4262>

### Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Arjan Schakel and Valentyna Romanova for their suggestions on the first version of this text. They allowed me to clarify certain sections and to strengthen the theoretical argumentation. I am also grateful to Pierre Martin for providing valuable comments on this piece. All the errors remain mine.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Introduction

The 2021 regional elections were concerned with the renewal of all regional councils in France. They took place at the normal end of the regional councilors' mandate but also coincided with the end of departmental councilors' mandate. For the first time since 2004, regional elections were held on the same day as another type of election. This was an important characteristic given the potential spill-over effects between both elections (Martin, 2004).

The 2021 elections were the last local elections of Macron's first-term presidency. The campaign was affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and the perspective of the 2022 presidential election. The gradual easing of the third lockdown restrictions from May onwards led to a recovery in executive popularity. The success of the vaccination strategy put in place by Prime Minister Jean Castex improved citizens' evaluation of responses to the pandemic and then destabilized the opposition parties, whose systematic criticism of the government became incomprehensible. However, candidates for the regional elections (and to a lesser extent for the departmental elections) were not able to use classic tools of electoral campaigns, notably meetings. As a result, media coverage of the campaign mainly focused on party manoeuvres for the 2022 presidential election.

Since the 2017 presidential election, in which he pursued left-wing voters and caused the collapse of the Socialist Party (PS), President Macron has focused his strategy on seducing right-wing voters and weakening the Republicans (LR) (Martin, 2019). The 2017 legislative elections were the first milestone: LR dropped to 15.8% and lost 82 seats. The 2019 European elections were the second milestone: LR dropped to 8.5%. The 2021 regional elections were the third milestone: the presidential majority joined the list of Renaud Muselier, incumbent LR President of Provence-Alpes-Cote-d'Azur (Paca), and then initiated a crisis within LR between supporters of a coalition with Macron and supporters of a strong opposition. Following this crisis, several local representatives left LR. However, Muselier sustained his nomination, although it had already been withdrawn.

The results of the regional elections were marked by an impressive drop in voter turnout and the win of all incumbents, almost all of them coming from the PS and LR, the two main governmental parties of the Fifth Republic<sup>1</sup> which have been challenged by Emmanuel Macron since the 2017 presidential and legislative elections. As a result, the PS and LR remained in charge of regional government in France – the presidential majority was once again unable to break through at the local level, while the radical-right *Rassemblement National* (RN) and *Europe Écologie – Les Verts* (EELV) were once again unable to win in a two-round majoritarian system.

The election report is structured as follows. The first section presents theoretical models to understand the results of the 2021 French regional elections, contrasting the second-order election and the candidate-centered politics models. Section 2 details the main rules under which these regional elections were held. Section 3 analyses the political offer and shows how both candidacies and alliances between parties reflect party system change in France. Section 4 is dedicated to election results. It analyses the first

---

1 In metropolitan France, the PS controlled 5 regions (Bourgogne, Bretagne, Centre-Val de Loire, Nouvelle-Aquitaine, Occitanie), the right-wing coalition 7 (LR in Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes, Paca, Grand Est, Pays de la Loire; ex-LR in Hauts-de-France and Île-de-France; LC in Normandy), while Corsica was held by regionalists. The overseas regions are disconnected from national politics and are not covered by this paper – they would need a separate analysis, considering the specificities of local politics.

round and the second round separately, and emphasizes the rise of split-ticket voting. The last section concludes and puts the main results into perspective.

## 1. Analytical framework

For almost four decades, the second-order elections model (Reif, Schmitt, 1980) has been widely used to understand regional elections in France (Parodi 2004; Escalona, Labouret, Vieira 2013) and across Europe (Schakel, Jeffery, 2013) as well. In this section, I discuss this framework and then introduce an alternative theoretical approach coming from American politics, the candidate-centered politics model (Wattenberg, 1991).

### *The second-order elections model*

Since government and opposition at the national/federal level are not officially at stake when government at the regional level is elected, regional elections perfectly fit the category of ‘second-order elections’ (Reif and Schmitt, 1980: 8). Within this framework, French regional elections can even be considered as **national** second-order elections: all regional elections are held on the same day, basically according to the same rules (see below).

Starting point of the model is the idea that second-order elections have less at stake than first-order elections, and then are less important to voters. Building on previous research on German regional elections (Dinkel, 1977) and American midterm elections (Tufte, 1975), Reif and Schmitt identify four aspects of second-order elections in comparison to previous national elections (Reif, Schmitt, 1980: 9). (1) *Lower level of participation*: since there is less at stake, fewer citizens consider second-order elections as important enough to vote. (2) *Brighter prospects for small and new political parties*: since there is less at stake, more voters express their preference without thinking that their vote might be wasted. (3) *Higher percentage of invalidated ballots*: since there is less at stake, more voters express their discontent by casting an invalid vote. (4) *Government parties lose*: since there is less at stake, voters use second-order elections to punish and/or apply pressure on the government. The extent of the decline in support for governing parties depends on the national electoral cycle: losses are larger in the middle of the cycle, lower at the beginning and the end of the cycle.

The second-order election model has been extensively discussed in the political science literature. Three major points have been raised to refine the framework. First, the distinction between first- and second-order elections should not be made according to their institutional consequences but according to their importance for voters (Van der Eijk, Franklin, Marsh, 1996). Second, the model implies that first-order elections do have consequences on national government – this is the case in majoritarian democracies but not necessarily in consensus democracies (Parodi, 1983; Marsh, 1998). Third, the model is not relevant for second-order elections held simultaneously with first-order elections (Schakel, 2013).

### *The candidate-centered politics model*

The candidate-centered politics model has not been introduced to understand results of certain types of elections, and certainly not of regional elections. Wattenberg’s initial objective was to provide a framework to analyze electoral change in the United States in the 1980s. At that time, a stunning change in US public policy had happened, the most dramatic one since the 1930s: the Reagan revolution.

Starting point of the model is the idea that citizens have gradually moved away from parties – the idea of party dealignment. Building on Downs’ economic theory of voting, Wattenberg argues the main feature of American elections in the 1980s (both presidential and congressional) is the degree to which explanatory factors other than parties and partisanship have become increasingly influential (Wattenberg, 1991: 1). Within this general framework, candidate-centered politics includes four main dimensions. (1) *Decline of the impact of partisanship on voting*: voting is more and more performance-based rather than party-oriented; (2) *Decline of straight-ticket voting*: less and less voters cast a ballot for the same party in elections held at the same time; (3) *High level of incumbent re-election*: re-election rates reach record-high levels, most of the time above 95%; (4) *High level of divided government*: split party control of both national and local governments becomes more and more frequent.

The candidate-centered politics model has been mostly developed in the context of American politics. It has been employed to assess the sources of split-ticket voting (Burden, Kimball, 1998), the increasing incumbency advantage in congressional elections (Beck et al., 1992) and even the dynamics of presidential nominations (Barker, Lawrence, Tavits, 2006). However, evidence of candidate-centered politics has also been found in Western Europe (Dalton, McAllister, Wattenberg, 2000) or Brazil (Ames, Baker, Renno, 2009).

## 2. Institutional setting: organization and rules

French regional assemblies have been elected by universal suffrage since 1986. The 2021 elections were only the second to take place after a territorial reform led in the mid-2010s. The implementation of this reform had consequences for the timing of the elections.

### *Regional government in France: recent developments*

From a comparative perspective, local government in France is especially fragmented, featuring divisions into *communes*, *intercommunalités*, *départements* and *régions*. In December 2010, a major reform of local government was adopted at the initiative of Prime Minister François Fillon. It initially aimed at reducing public spending by cutting this territorial ‘layer cake’. The first stage of the reform had been the creation of newly designed territorial councillors to replace both the former general councillors (*départements*) and regional councillors (*régions*). At that time, regional and cantonal elections<sup>2</sup> were supposed to disappear and be replaced by territorial elections in 2014, involving a first-past-the-post voting system that was thought to advantage the right-wing governing coalition (Gougou, Labouret 2011a: 381-382).

This reform was abrogated after the Socialists won the 2012 elections. Reducing the number of elected mandates was not a priority for the new government. Both regional and newly designed departmental elections were reinstated. However, in order to reduce public spending, the Socialists cut the number of regions in a third act of decentralization (Maptam law). France now has 13 in metropolitan France compared to its previous 22.

---

2 Elections for departmental government used to be called cantonal elections before the 2015 reform.

### *Election timing*

These successive local government reforms disrupted the regional election calendar. From 1986 to 2010, regional elections were held every six years in March, and almost always synchronized with another ballot – national in 1986 (legislative elections) or local from 1992 to 2004 (cantonal elections). Given this pattern, there should have been regional elections in March 2016 and March 2022. This has not been the case.

The Fillon reform had foreseen that the mandate of the regional councilors elected in 2010 would expire in March 2015 to coincide with the renewal of the departmental assemblies and create the newly designed territorial elections. However, following the Maptam reform, the 2015 regional elections were postponed to December to be closer to the implementation of the new regional map in January 2016. As the departmental elections had gone ahead in March 2015, the regional elections were organized separately, but a resynchronization was planned for March 2021. The regional elections were then held on 6 and 13 December 2015 with mandates of 5 years and 3 months; the departmental elections were held on 22 and 29 March 2015 with mandates of 6 years.

Beyond these multiple changes in the electoral calendar, the exact timing was an important issue before the elections. Given the persistence of the Covid-19 epidemic, the government postponed the elections from March to June 2021 in the hopes that contagion would have slowed down by then. Opposition parties took advantage of this and accused Macron of using the context of the pandemic to avoid facing the people's vote and suffering another defeat at the local level, after the 2020 municipal elections. Yet this was not the first time that Covid-19 changed the timing of elections; in 2020, the second round of municipal elections, initially scheduled for 22 March, had been precisely postponed to 28 June because of a lockdown.

The resynchronization of regional and departmental elections could have two important effects on the electoral balance of power: (1) stop the long-term trend of declining turnout by minimizing the effects of voter fatigue; (2) limit the impact of local elections on national power by reducing the number of election days likely to result in a sanction vote against the government. This second effect is important to consider given that the two previous presidential mandates were punctuated by a succession of heavy defeats in local elections for national executives. During the Sarkozy presidency (2007-2012), the right-wing governing coalition was punished in the 2008 municipal elections, the 2010 regional elections and the 2011 cantonal elections (Gougou, 2008; Gougou, Labouret, 2010; Gougou, Labouret, 2011a). During the Hollande presidency (2012-2017), the PS was sanctioned in the 2014 municipal elections, the 2015 departmental elections, and the 2015 regional elections.

For political scientists, the 2021 elections also made it possible to revisit the link between local elections. The desynchronization of regional and cantonal elections in 2010 and 2011 was initially implemented to limit contagion effects of a sanction vote against the government in the regional elections to the cantonal elections, the latter being supposed to be less impacted by national political dynamics.

## *Electoral systems*

Electoral systems for the 2021 local elections remained the same as in 2015. Nearly 46 million voters were called upon to simultaneously designate their regional and departmental councilors according to two different electoral systems<sup>3</sup>.

For the regional elections, the same electoral system has been applied since 2004. This comprises a mixed two-round system combining proportional representation on 75% of the seats and a majority bonus of 25% of the seats for the leading list in the decisive round. In the first round, a list can win if it obtains more than 50% of the votes cast; if no list reaches this threshold, a second round is organized for which a relative majority is sufficient. If a second round is necessary, the lists reaching 10% of the votes cast in the first round can decide whether or not to continue. Mergers between lists are possible between the two rounds for all lists having reached 5% in the first round, but a merger is only possible if at least one of the lists involved in the merger exceeds 10% in the first round. For the departmental elections, it was the two-round majority binominal (parity) system<sup>4</sup> used for the first time in 2015.

This regional electoral system was historically put in place to combat the growing influence of the radical right. From 1986 to 1998, regional elections had a one-round proportional system. However, in the 1998 regional elections, the rise of the FN prevented clear majorities from forming in several regions. Negotiations between right-wing incumbents and FN elected representatives for the designation of regional executives led to a national crisis. To avoid another crisis in 2004, the electoral system was changed before the elections. The new electoral system has major consequences for the electoral offer. Given the majority bonus, and barring exceptional conditions, winning the election secures an absolute majority of seats. As a result, alliances are encouraged, not only in the second round but also in the first round. Since 2004, in the 54 separate regional elections held in metropolitan France (all of which were won in the second round), no list has ever won by obtaining less than 23% in the first round. On average, the winning lists in the second round had obtained 32% in the first round.

### **3. Candidates and party system change**

In the 13 metropolitan regions, there were 112 lists with an average of 8.8 per region. This total was down on the 2015 regional elections, where the average was 10.1 lists. The decline in the number of lists resulted from a decrease on the left and on the right and an increase in the centre around the new presidential majority. It confirmed the reconfigurations of the national political landscape at work since the national elections of 2017 (Gougou, Persico, 2017). All incumbent regional presidents stood for re-election.

---

3 Inhabitants of the Lyon Metropolis were only concerned by the regional elections. On its territory, the Lyon metropolis has exercised the competences of a department since the adoption of the Maptam law and the Lyon metropolitan elections were held simultaneously with the municipal elections in 2020. It has been the case in Paris since 1986.

4 To stand for election, candidates have to run in mixed pairs (**binômes**): each pair is made of a woman and a man. In the first round, a pair wins if it obtains more than 50% of the votes cast and at least 25% of the registered voters; if no pair satisfies these conditions, a second round is organized where a relative majority is enough. In case of a second round, the two pairs receiving the highest number of votes and all other pairs receiving more than 12.5% of the registered voters in the first round may stand for election.

### ***The presidential governing coalition***

In the centre, the presidential majority introduced lists in all metropolitan regions but Provence-Alpes-Côte-d'Azur, where it supported the incumbent LR president. This quasi-systematic presence contrasted with the 2015 regional elections, where the *Mouvement Démocrate* presented only one independent list and joined LR everywhere else. It also contrasted with the departmental elections organized simultaneously, where the presidential majority did not have any systematic strategy and sometimes made agreements (partial or total) with right-wing outgoing departmental majorities.

Parties included in the presidential majority lists revealed the shape and the evolutions of the coalition supporting President Macron since 2017. *La République en Marche* (LREM) and the *Mouvement Démocrate* (MoDem) were still the two pillars of the majority in keeping with the 2017 presidential campaign. However, two other formations were also represented on all lists: *Territoires de Progrès* (TdP) and *Agir*. TdP embodied the left wing of the majority and was made up of primarily former PS members; Agir embodied the right wing of the majority, essentially made up of former LR members. The heads of lists also made it possible to assess the internal balance of power within the presidential majority: 8 for LREM, 2 for the MoDem, 2 for TdP. Beyond that, presidential majority lists were joined by the UDI in two regions.

### ***The former governing parties***

On the left, the main change resulted from the loss of influence of the PS. In the 2015 regional elections, the PS had a list in all the metropolitan regions, without exception, and came out on top of the left in every region except Corsica. In the 2021 regional elections, the PS introduced only 9 lists: 5 with an incumbent president and 4 with a challenger. In 3 regions, where the threat of a radical right-wing victory was the strongest, the PS went along with EELV to form broader left-wing alliances. In one region, Corsica, it was absent. However, in the 5 regions where it had an incumbent, it managed to keep the support of the PCF. Conversely, EELV extended its momentum from the 2019 European elections and the 2020 municipal elections by leading a list in 12 of the 13 regions (it supported the PS in Normandy), as in 2015, but this time with the hope of taking the leadership on the left.

The loss of influence of the PS was even more striking in the departmental elections. Since the cantonal elections of 1973, the Socialists' strategy was to present a candidate in every canton, as the Communists had previously done. For the first time, in 2021, the PS agreed to join left-wing coalitions together with EELV and the PCF in a large number of departments, especially those where it was not in government. This was a major change in French politics. On the right-wing side, the weakening of LR did not translate into a lesser presence, but rather garnered support for incumbents who had broken away since the 2019 European elections (Xavier Bertrand in Hauts-de-France, Valérie Pécresse in Ile-de-France). Since its elimination in the first round of the 2017 presidential election and its setback in the 2019 European elections, LR no longer seemed able to impose itself on politicians who shared national ambitions.



## 4. Results

Much like the previous local elections of President Macron's five-year term, the regional elections were marked by three major elements: (1) the recovery of LR and the PS in comparison to the 2017 and 2019 elections; (2) the inability of the presidential majority to establish a local presence; and (3) the decline of the RN. In a context of extremely low turnout, the elections resulted in re-election for all incumbent regional presidents (in metropolitan France), a first since 1986.

### *Turnout*

Historically low voter turnout was a key feature of the elections, both in the first and the second round. In the first round, the turnout of 33.3% in metropolitan France set a record low for nationally organized elections in France. Never before had French citizens abstained on such a scale since the establishment of electoral democracy at the beginning of the Third Republic, excluding the 2000 referendum on the presidential five-year term. It was a 16.8-point fall compared to 2015. In the second round, the turnout of 34.4% was slightly up but still confirmed a sharp drop compared to 2015 (–24.1 points), where voter turnout had significantly increased between the two rounds.

Such a sharp drop led politicians and observers to focus on short-term forces, in particular the context of the pandemic. However, this explanatory model does not tell the whole story as voter turnout is not put into historical perspective. As is the case in many Western democracies, France has experienced a long-term trend of declining turnout in all elections since the beginning of the 1980s, except for the presidential election. Turnout rates in the first round of regional elections were 78.2% in 1986, 68.7% in 1992, 57.8% in 1998, 62.3% in 2004, 46.3% in 2010 and 50.1% in 2015 (Gougou, Labouret, 2011b).

Three short-term factors were able to temporarily slow down this long-term trend: a very unpopular government (2004, 2015), being the first second-order election in the national electoral cycle (2004) and a dramatic political situation (2015, after the attacks in Paris). None of these factors were present in 2021. In contrast, the 2015 regional elections featured two of these, meaning that (1) the long-term trend toward declining voter turnout could be reversed and (2) the return of the long-term trend had a significant boomerang effect in 2021.

### *First round*

The first round was mainly about a surge of almost all incumbents, regardless of their political affiliation. In all regions, they came out first, with particularly good results for presidents at the end of their first term. On average, the five PS incumbents obtained 28.1% compared to 27.4% in the first round of 2015 and the seven right-wing incumbents obtained 36.5% compared to 28.7% in 2015.

Within this framework, it is difficult to give a national interpretation of changes in the balance of power between left and right (Table 1). The changes between left and right were very different from one region to another and shifted according to the identity of the incumbent regional president. The left reached 48.4% in the five regions it controlled, a 5.8-point increase; it obtained 29.8% in the seven regions that were controlled by the right, a 4.8-point decrease. The regional elections were not the only ones affected by these opposing movements; the same dynamic was observed in the departmental elections. In the 612 cantons where at least one incumbent ran for re-election, support for the left increased by 7.9 compared to 2015; in the other 1357 cantons, it decreased by 4.1 (Gougou, 2021).

Table 1. Results of regional (R), European (E) and presidential (P) elections since 2009 (metropolitan France)<sup>5</sup>

	E2009	R2010	P2012	E2014	R2015	P2017	E2019	R2021
<b>Voters</b>	41.3	46.3	81.4	44.2	50.1	80.0	52.2	33.3
<b>Valid votes</b>	39.6	44.6	79.9	42.5	48.1	78.1	49.9	32.0
<b>EXG</b>	6.3	3.3	1.7	1.6	1.6	1.7	0.8	2.2
<b>FG-FI</b>	6.2	6.5	11.3	6.4	4.2	19.6	6.2	3.9
<b>PCF</b>	FG	FG / PS	FG	FG	FG	FI	2.5	1.2
<b>EELV</b>	16.3	12.5	2.3	8.9	6.8	PS	13.5	13.1
<b>PS</b>	16.4	29.5	28.1	13.9	23.5	6.3	6.2	15.7
<b>DVG</b>	0.1	2.0		3.1	1.3		3.3	0.2
<b>Ecologists</b>	3.9	0.9		1.8	0.4		4.1	1.1
<b>Miscellaneous</b>	0.6	1.0	0.2	2.0	1.2	1.4	1.1	1.8
<b>LREM</b>						23.8	22.4	10.5
<b>MoDem</b>	8.4	4.3	9.2	9.9	LR	LREM	LREM	LREM
<b>UMP-LR</b>	27.8	26.2	27.0	20.7	27.1	19.9	8.5	29.1
<b>DVD</b>	0.2	0.9		2.1	0.6		2.7	0.8
<b>Sovereignists</b>	6.6	0.8	1.8	4.3	4.8	5.7	4.7	0.7
<b>FN-RN</b>	6.5	11.7	18.3	25.2	28.4	21.5	23.4	19.2
<b>EXD</b>	0.7	0.9		0.0	0.2		0.7	0.7
<b>Left</b>	45.2	53.7	43.4	34.0	37.3	27.6	32.4	36.2
<b>Right</b>	41.9	40.1	47.2	52.3	61.1	47.1	40.0	50.4
<b>Others</b>	12.9	6.3	9.4	13.7	1.6	25.2	27.6	13.3

NB. Results are the percentage of the electorate for voters and for valid votes, but the percentage of valid votes for the result of each party.

The results did not show any recovery of the left compared to 2015, when it was in opposition. Similarly, the recovery of the right compared to the 2019 European elections was deceptive: its momentum was carried by its incumbents and it did not perform better in the regions where it was in opposition. These developments show that the presidential majority managed to solidify a core of voters coming from both the left and the right, despite having been unable to compete or sometimes even to exceed the 10% necessary to qualify for the second round (4 out of 12 eliminations).

Regarding the other political parties, the results of the first round showed a strong decline of the RN (-9.2 compared to 2015) and a surge of EELV (+6.3). The RN's decline confirmed that Macron's *quinquennat* term has been less favourable to the radical right in second-order elections than Hollande's *quinquennat*. During the 2019-2021 sequence, the RN declined over the 2014-2015 sequence in all

5 The full name of parties and party families listed in the table are as follows. *EXG*: Extreme left. *FG-FI*: Front de Gauche – France Insoumise. *PCF*: Parti Communiste Français. *EELV*: Europe Écologie – Les Verts. *PS*: Parti Socialiste. *DVG*: Miscellaneous Left. *LREM*: La République en Marche. *MoDem*: Mouvement Démocrate. *UMP-LR*: Union pour un Mouvement Populaire – Les Républicains. *DVD*: Miscellaneous Right. *FN-RN*: Front National – Rassemblement National. *EXD*: Extreme right.

elections (-1.8 in the European elections, -5.5 in the municipal elections, -7.2 in the departmental elections). If the decline was so strong in the regional elections, it is above all because its results in the previous regional elections were exceptional in the immediate context of the Paris attacks. As for EELV, its lists almost recovered the level reached in the 2019 European elections (13.1% against 13.5%) and confirmed the development of the Greens at the local level. More interestingly, EELV managed to overtake the PS in all the regions held by the right where the two parties were in competition. This confirmed that the PS only resisted thanks to its incumbents.

### *Split-ticket voting*

The impact of incumbents led to a decreasing congruence between the results of regional and departmental elections. Election results in Aveyron and Pas-de-Calais, departments in regions of opposite political orientation, reveal an increase of split-ticket voting.

Aveyron was a right-wing governed department within a region, Occitanie, controlled by the left. In this department, the left attained a much higher level of support in the regional elections, where it could lean on PS President Carole Delga. In the first round, the left-wing lists obtained 56.5%, whereas the left-wing pairs obtained only 33.5% in the departmental elections, where they were in opposition. Interestingly, this difference only concerned the PS, which controlled the region; Carole Delga's list reached 44.2% in the regional elections and the PS pairs obtained 21.1% in the departmental elections, while other left-wing forces reached similar levels in both elections (12.3% and 12.4% respectively). More interestingly, the level of the left was very close in both elections in 2015, with 39.8% in the departmental elections and 42.8% in the regional elections, meaning that split-ticket voting increased significantly between 2015 and 2021. A symmetrical pattern affected LR and its right-wing allies, who obtained 18.7% in the regional elections compared to 55.8% in the departmental elections (in 2015, it was 30.5% and 46.6%).

In contrast, Pas-de-Calais was a left-wing governed department in a region, Hauts-de-France, led by the right. In this department, the right was at a much higher level in the regional elections thanks to ex-LR President Xavier Bertrand. In the first round, Xavier Bertrand's LR-UDI list obtained 41.2% in the regional elections, while the right-wing pairs obtained 15.9% in the departmental elections. Here again, the level of the right was almost consistent in both elections in 2015, with 23.6% in the departmental elections and 21.8% in the regional elections. Likewise, the results of left-wing parties had similar differences, with 20.9% in the regional elections compared to 48.1% in the departmental elections.

The increase in split-ticket voting can be assessed by observing correlations between the results for the two types of elections at the level of the cantons (Table 2). Strictly speaking, split-ticket voting refers to a voter who votes for candidates belonging to opposite parties in two elections held simultaneously: the 1992, 1998, 2004, 2021 elections perfectly fit this case<sup>6</sup>. To assess change over time, I include the results for 2010-2011 (12 months difference) and 2015 (9 months difference) although elections were not held on the same day. As a matter of fact, matrices show a weaker congruence between votes in the first round of regional and departmental elections of 2021 compared to previous elections. For the left, Pearson's  $r$  is 0.60, whereas it remained between 0.73 and 0.80 over the 1992-2015 period. As for

---

6 Since 2015, departmental elections have concerned the whole of France whereas cantonal elections used to concern only half of the cantons, which were renewed separately every three years. The number of cantons has remained similar because the new electoral system introduced in 2015 (pair voting) led to their number being reduced by half. The slight variations between 1992 and 2011 were due to by-elections.

the right, Pearson's  $r$  is 0.54, whereas it had been between 0.72 and 0.78 over the same period. Unsurprisingly, the correlation for turnout is perfect or almost perfect between both elections when the elections took place on the same day, but weaker in the two sequences where elections were not synchronized.

**Table 2. Split-ticket voting: correlation matrices between regional and cantonal/departmental elections, 1992-2021**

	Turnout	Left	Right	N
<b>1992</b>	0.98	0.73	0.72	1920
<b>1998</b>	1.00	0.74	0.72	1933
<b>2004</b>	0.99	0.76	0.77	1921
<b><i>2010-2011</i></b>	<i>0.78</i>	0.76	0.72	<i>1915</i>
<b><i>2015</i></b>	<i>0.82</i>	0.80	0.78	<i>1969</i>
<b>2021</b>	1.00	0.60	0.54	1969

NB. Italics indicate that regional and cantonal/departmental elections were not held simultaneously (i.e. the same day).

Split-ticket voting remains to be assessed in other types of elections in France. One might make the assumption that it reveals a pattern of desynchronization between national and local elections in the new political era that emerged following the 2017 presidential election (Gougou, Persico, 2017), which leads to an increase of the impact of incumbents on the vote at the local level.

### ***Second round***

The results of the second round confirmed the results of the first round. Incumbents were all re-elected, 9 of them with a larger share of the vote compared to 2015, 4 of them with a smaller share of the vote. However, these diverging evolutions were the result of changes in second round configurations. In 2015, 38 lists ran in the second round, resulting in 10 three-list *triangulaires*, 2 two-lists *duels* and 1 four-lists *quadrangulaire*. In 2021, 49 lists ran in the run-off, resulting in 7 *quadrangulaires*, 3 *triangulaires*, 2 five-lists *pentagulaires* and 1 two-lists *duel*. In all regions where incumbent presidents lost ground between 2015 and 2021, there were more lists in the second round.

Thanks to the re-election of their incumbents, LR and the PS could maintain their domination over regional governance in France. The presidential majority did not win any region but managed to secure 85 seats in regional assemblies. On the other side, the RN lost almost a third of its seats, falling from 356 to 252 regional councilors. This was a major setback for the radical right's development at the local level.

## Discussion and theoretical perspectives

The results of the 2021 French regional elections revealed remarkable patterns when compared to the 2017 national elections. The two former big governing parties, LR and the PS, which alternate both at the national and the local level from 1981 to 2017, could maintain control on regional executives, whereas President Macron's presidential majority and its main radical-right challenger suffered losses in comparison to the 2017 presidential election. As a matter of fact, the 2021 regional elections confirmed the major features of the 2020 municipal elections. A new era of divided government seems to have emerged in French politics between the national and the local levels. It might be a major feature of French politics since 2017.

For almost four decades, the second-order election model has been the main theoretical framework for analyzing regional elections results in France. As discussed in section 1, this model suggests that regional elections results have three main features compared to the last national elections results: (1) a decrease in voter turnout; (2) a decrease of support for major parties to the benefit of minor parties; and (3) the decline of support for the governing parties at the national level. Some of the results presented in Section 4 fit this model, once assuming LR and the PS have become minor parties in French politics. Nevertheless, these features do not capture the most remarkable results of the 2021 French regional elections, i.e. the re-election of all incumbents and the increase of split-ticket voting.

In contrast, the alternative model discussed in section 1, the model of candidate-centered politics, provides a relevant framework for these 2021 elections. This model includes four key elements: (1) a declining impact of partisanship on voting; (2) a surge of split-ticket voting; (3) a high level of incumbent re-election; and (4) a high level of divided government. None of the empirical evidence provided in this election report challenges these elements. The relevance of this model to understand results of regional elections in other democracies, or results of other elections in France, is still to be assessed. In France, it might be part of a new electoral order in place since the 2017-2019 political sequence.

December 2022

## References

- Ames Barry, Baker Andy, Renno Lucio R. (2009), « Split-Ticket Voting as the Rule: Voters and Permanent Divided Government in Brazil », *Electoral Studies*, 28 (1), 8-20
- Barker David C., Lawrence Adam B., Tavits Margit (2006), « Partisanship and the Dynamics of 'Candidate Centered Politics' in American Presidential Nominations », *Electoral Studies*, 25 (3), 599-610
- Beck Paul Allen, Baum Lawrence, Clausen Aage R., Smith Charles E. Jr (1992), « Patterns and Sources of Ticket Splitting in Subpresidential Voting », *American Political Science Review*, 86 (6), 916-928
- Burden Barry C., Kimball David C. (1998), « A New Approach to the Study of Ticket Splitting », *American Political Science Review*, 92 (3), 533-544
- Dalton Russell J., McAllister Ian, Wattenberg Martin P. (2000), « The Consequences of Partisan Dealignment », in Dalton R.J., Wattenberg M. (eds.), *Parties Without Partisans: Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies*, Oxford University Press, 37-63
- Dinkel Reiner (1977), « Der Zusammenhang zwischen Bundes- und Landtagswahlergebnissen », *Politische Vierteljahresschrift*, 18 (2-3), 348-359.
- Escalona Fabien, Labouret Simon, Vieira Mathieu (2013), « France: Regional Elections as 'Third-Order' Elections? », in Dandoy R., Schakel A. (eds.), *Regional and National Elections in Western Europe*, Palgrave MacMillan, 88-105
- Gougou Florent (2008), « The 2008 French Municipal Elections: The Opening and the Sanction », *French Politics*, 6 (4), 395-406
- Gougou Florent, Labouret Simon (2010), « The 2010 French Regional Elections: Transitional Elections in a Realignment Era », *French Politics*, 8 (3), 321-341
- Gougou Florent, Labouret Simon (2011a), « The 2011 French Cantonal Elections: The Last Voter Sanction Before the 2012 Presidential Poll », *French Politics*, 9 (4), 381-403
- Gougou Florent, Labouret Simon (2011b), « Participation in the 2010 French Regional Elections: The Minor Impact of a Change in the Electoral Calendar », *French Politics*, 9 (3), 240-251
- Gougou Florent, Persico Simon (2017), « A New Party System in the Making? The 2017 French Presidential Election », *French Politics*, 15 (3), 303-321
- Gougou Florent (2021), « Les élections départementales françaises de 2021 : des élections locales de confirmation », *Telos*, July 2021
- Marsh Michael (1998), « Testing the Second-Order Election Model After Four European Elections », *British Journal of Political Science*, 28 (4), 591-607
- Martin Pierre (2004), « Des cantonales à l'image des régionales », *Revue française de science politique*, 54 (4), 681-695
- Martin Pierre (2019), « Les élections européennes de 2019 », *Commentaire*, 167, 537-547
- Parodi Jean-Luc (1983), « Dans la logique des élections intermédiaires », *Revue politique et parlementaire*, 903, 42-70

Parodi Jean-Luc (2004), « Les élections 'intermédiaires' du printemps 2004 : entre structure et événement », *Revue française de science politique*, 54 (4), 533-543

Reif Karlheinz, Schmitt Hermann (1980), « Nine Second-Order National Elections – A Conceptual Framework for the Analysis of European Election Results », *European Journal of Political Research*, 8 (1), 3-44

Schakel, Arjan H. (2013), « Congruence Between Regional and National Elections », *Comparative Political Studies*, 46 (5), 631-662

Schakel Arjan H., Jeffery Charlie (2013), « Are Regional Elections really 'Second-Order' Elections? », *Regional Studies*, 47 (3), 323-341

Tufte Edward R. (1975), « Determinants of the Outcomes of Midterm Congressional Elections », *American Political Science Review*, 69 (3), 812-826

Van der Eijk Cees, Franklin Mark N., Marsh Michael (1996), « What Voters Teach Us About Europe-Wide Elections, What Europe-Wide Elections Teach Us About Voters », *Electoral Studies*, 15 (2), 243-260

Wattenberg Martin (1991), *The Rise of Candidate-Centered Politics: Presidential Elections of the 1980s*, Harvard University Press