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Reading tea leaves

Despite wins in Paris and Marseille, the local elections offer little clue to what comes next. The key question remains: will France's left unite?

It comes as no surprise to him that virtually every French party is claiming victory in the local elections. And that everyone seems somewhat relieved. Political scientist Jean-Yves Dormagen, founder of the polling institute Cluster17, shakes his head. 'The longer I look at the local election data, the less it tells me.' Everyone can read something different into it. Yet France observers had so desperately hoped to glean clues for May 2027 from the election results. That is when France will elect a new president. Will the far-right *Rassemblement National* capture the Élysée Palace and govern Europe's second-most powerful country? Such were the questions posed in interviews surrounding these nationwide elections.

Yes, the local elections were the final test of public sentiment ahead of the all-important presidential elections. Yet it seems rather futile to try to gauge the country's political future from the results of nearly 35000 individual elections. Two-term incumbent Emmanuel Macron is barred from standing again. He leaves behind an indebted but dynamic economy and a democracy that is fragile in every respect. The hysteria with which every political news item from Paris will now be assessed stems from the fact that the French presidency is endowed with almost monarchical powers — and with the ability to shape the future of Europe even beyond its own sphere of influence.

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Yet, other analysts are certain that, on reflection, some aspects of the local elections do stand out. Overall, the political right fared better than the left. Despite all its weaknesses at national level, this demonstrates the continued strong grassroots support for *Les Républicains* (LR), particularly in medium-sized and small towns. LR also managed to capture socialist strongholds, including Brest and Clermont-Ferrand.

What also became clear is that even in France, where people have been talking about the implosion of the political centre for a decade, the centre has won: despite aggressive campaigns by the radical political fringes, centrist candidates prevailed. Centre-left alliances were successful at 37 per cent, ahead of left-right coalitions (36 per cent of the vote) and centre-right lists (30 per cent). Jean-Yves Dormagen remains sceptical. He argues that it is difficult to declare centrists the winners of the election – there are too many cases of 'false labelling' amongst them for him to recognise a reliable trend.

The socialists face difficult conditions

The Parti Socialiste (PS) is breathing a huge sigh of relief, having celebrated its surprisingly comfortable victory in Paris at length. The Socialist Emmanuel Grégoire secured the country's most important town hall, which the PS has held since 2001. Numerous other major cities, such as Marseille, also remain in the hands of the Socialists. But there have been no real territorial gains, so the balance sheet is stable but lacks the urgently hoped-for growth momentum.

The elephant in the room, the far-right RN, also claimed a resounding victory on election night. It saw a significant increase to over 60 town halls, compared with nine in the 2020 elections. The number of city and municipal councillors also rose from around 800 to over 3000, and in many other local councils the RN assumed the role of the largest opposition party. This growth also means that in September's Senate elections, France's second chamber of parliament, the RN will be able to form a parliamentary group with nearly 10 members. The RN made gains primarily in areas where it has long been strong: in the south along the Mediterranean coast, in the north, and in Alsace. In other regions, the far right was mostly only able to win when the existing 'firewall' — an alliance of democratic parties forming electoral alliances to counter the RN — was abandoned.

Measured against its national successes, the RN's results remain surprisingly meagre. The party led by Jordan Bardella and Marine Le Pen fell far short of the support levels that made it the strongest opposition group in the National Assembly in 2024. Observers warn against interpreting this as a sign of the RN's waning strength. The complex local elections do not simply reflect what the French population wants for its national politics. Thus, the fact remains that the RN holds the mayoralty in only one of France's 42 major cities with over 100000 inhabitants, namely Perpignan.

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The first internal party meetings, which have been heralding the presidential election campaign since the start of the week, suggest that the French political landscape will remain in this state of flux. The parties now have 13 months until the presidential election and many unresolved issues. Symbolically, the day after the election, the death of a key figure in French socialism served as a reminder of what is arguably the most difficult of all challenges: Former Prime Minister Lionel Jospin had passed away.

Jospin, the presidential candidate who was respected across party lines but ultimately failed, offers cause for reflection like few other left-wing leaders. As Prime Minister, the former First Secretary of the PS succeeded in uniting all wings of the left, from the Communist Party through the Radical Left to the Greens. His alliance lasted five years and provided the impetus for significant reforms, including the 35-hour working week for all. A policy that continues to shape France to this day.

Not a real alternative

That era is over; the 'pluralist left' is further away than ever, and with it the possibility of a joint programme and candidates for the presidential elections. None of the left-wing parties currently commands significantly more than 10 per cent of the vote. Only the two candidates with the highest number of votes each will make it through to the second round of the presidential race. The RN can almost certainly expect to secure 33 to 35 per cent of the vote. This means, conversely, that both the fragmented political right and the left face the same challenges.

To have a realistic chance, the PS, which claims leadership of the left-wing camp, would not only have to join forces with its traditional allies, the Communists and the Greens, but would also need the support of the radical-left *La France Insoumise* (LFI). This party appeals primarily to well-educated young voters and people from migrant backgrounds in the major cities — yet it only scored modestly in the local elections. Admittedly, today's Socialists and 'Insoumis' sometimes manage to cooperate purely for electoral gain, for instance in the 2022 and 2024 parliamentary elections or in 'technical coalitions' for local elections. The rest of the time, however, Jospin's political heirs can barely stand each other.

Analysis of the local elections also shows that, with a few notable

exceptions, lists featuring LFI were less successful, winning only 24 per cent of the votes. LFI has made polarisation its strategy. Its leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon is courting the predominantly Maghreb-origin electorate with pro-Gaza and anti-Israel stances. Most recently, he provoked fierce and widespread criticism with anti-Semitic remarks.

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This criticism also hit the First Secretary of the PS, Olivier Faure, immediately after the election. Above all, Boris Vallaud, PS group leader in the National Assembly, criticised the 'lack of clarity' regarding LFI. 'Eight years in opposition, and we are still not the only alternative. Our project is simply not recognisable,' he criticised. Together with the re-elected mayor of Rouen, Nicolas Mayer-Rossignol, a key internal party rival of Faure's, Vallaud denounced the party leadership's zigzagging course during the local elections in a written statement. Both are calling for the PS to adopt a clear course of self-assertion and to draw a clear line between itself and the radical left. Faure, on the other hand, refused to put the text – signed by 38 of the 72 members of the National Executive Committee – to a vote, which would normally be the standard procedure.

All this offers a foretaste of the struggles and wrangling over the left's self-image, which have plagued it since Jospin's time due to a lack of majorities. In any case, there are as yet no campaign-ready answers in sight that will lure the vast majority of non-voters back to the ballot box. However, whatever arguments these may be could prove decisive in the battle for French democracy.



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