

The shock of Sunday's French municipal elections was the Socialist defeat, not Front National success

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France held municipal elections on 23 and 30 March. As [Jocelyn Evans](#) and [Gilles Ivaldi](#) write, François Hollande's governing Socialist Party (PS) endured a particularly disappointing result, losing many of the gains it had made in the 2008 elections. They argue that while much of the media coverage centred on the success of the Front National; the PS's defeat, and the subsequent reshuffle in the government with Manuel Valls becoming the new prime minister, will have important ramifications for the French left.



As unemployment continues to rise and France struggles to meet EU obligations to reduce its public deficit, the French municipal elections, held on 23 and 30 March, are bad news for the French socialists (*Parti socialiste* – PS). For a party whose local politicians tried to make the election one of local issues, the national balance-sheet has weighed heavily on their results. Sunday's results have confirmed the nationalisation and politicisation of the local agenda. Abstention hit a new record of 38.5 per cent, with even lower turnout amongst left-wing supporters.



The blow to the Socialists was inevitable – the strength of that blow was the only unknown. President Hollande and the government were severely punished in the polls by voters sending another message of discontent over the economy and the increased fiscal burden both nationally and locally. By any measure, the Socialists suffered a heavy defeat, the biggest since 1983. Contrasted with the 2008 election, where the PS had won 54 per cent of municipalities with more than 10,000 inhabitants, the 2014 election represented more than a simple pendulum swing back to the right. The party lost more than 150 towns, giving a 62 per cent majority to the UMP and its centre-right allies.



François Hollande and (now former) prime minister Jean-Marc Ayrault, Credit: Jean-Marc Ayrault (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

The Socialist Party took some solace from victories in its strongholds – Paris, Lille, Lyon, Rennes and Strasbourg, for example. Swings in its favour were effectively nil – just the towns of Douai, Avignon, Verdun and, for its Radical Left ally, Lourdes. But so many other major towns fell to the UMP and its allies – Amiens, Caen, Limoges (left-wing since 1912), Reims, Tours. Worse, many other towns fell to its own 'allies' – Grenoble, where a Socialist candidate refused to stand down in favour of the Greens, La Rochelle, Dunkirk. Six of the seventeen ministers standing for election locally lost, including Pierre Moscovici, the Minister of Finance.

A victory for the right

To the right, the UMP can legitimately claim victory. At least 155 towns of over 9,000 inhabitants changed hands from left to right. Most UMP leaders were elected in their municipalities, some of them such as Jean-François Copé or Alain Juppé winning comfortable first-round majorities. Symbolically, the right-wing coalition won some of the left's historical strongholds such as Toulouse, Limoges, Montbéliard and Quimper. Whilst the PS retained the capital city, the right made significant gains in the suburban 'red belt' around Paris, taking a number of former left-wing bastions

(Villejuif, Villepinte, Aulnay-sous-Bois, Argenteuil, Colombes, Saint-Ouen, Bobigny).

As demonstrated in Pau or Bordeaux, this success owed a great deal to the rebuilding of the traditional alliance between the UMP and the centrists. Together with François Bayrou's [MODEM](#), Jean-Louis Borloo's [UDI](#) has contributed a total of 115 mayorships to Sunday's blue wave. With most of Bayrou's troops returning to the UMP, the 2014 race might herald the building of a more coherent centre-right pole in future elections.

The Front National

Such reconfiguration opened a political space for the Front National ([FN](#)) on the right of the party system. Measured in mayors and seats, the FN victory is an order of magnitude smaller, but has taken up just as many column inches. With 12 wins and around 1,534 councillors, the result is a huge advance on 2008, particularly in the Southern regions. More importantly, it is an advance on the number of mayors and councillors won in 1995, its highest level to date, and a confirmation of the stabilisation of its vote since the 2012 legislatives, from a national to a local election.

True to form, the party produced some surprises as relatively unknown candidates outperformed some of the more established party apparatchiks. Three of its national *notables* who had led in the first round did not add to their portfolios – Louis Aliot lost in Perpignan, Gilbert Collard in Saint-Gilles and Florian Philippot in Forbach.

Elsewhere it was the night of the young turks in Fréjus, the FN's biggest win, for David Rachline (26), Beaucaire for Julien Sanchez (30), and Hayange in the Moselle for Fabien Engelmann (34). Perhaps what has distinguished the younger candidates has been their consistency in emphasising the economic problems of their regions and a need for social justice, rather than a reactionary take on immigration. That said, in larger cities such as Béziers, Marseille and Fréjus, criminality issues were certainly key to its success.

The economic priority reflects the more general leftist policy turn taken by the FN nationally. The party's heterogeneous platform mixing national redistributive policies with tax cuts at the local level has increased its appeal to both the working class and lower middle-class strata of the municipal electorate. Perversely, the FN is probably happy that it did not win more seats. It will already be stretched to its limits in staffing the towns it now runs, especially the larger ones such as Fréjus, Hénin-Beaumont and the 7th sector of Marseille. As a party without a local power-base for the past 20 years, running a dozen towns on a day-to-day basis will be a challenge.

Fragmentation of the left

Across all municipalities, a national context has pulled every one to the right as inexorably as the tide. Unlike in 2012 where anti-Sarkozysme had united the forces of the left, the 2014 municipals showed greater fragmentation. The waning in particular of *discipline républicaine* was apparent in many second round runoffs where radical left voters turned away from mainstream socialists.

Lyon for example remained to the left, but with one more arrondissement no longer within the direct purview of its mayor, Gérard Collomb: the first arrondissement re-elected the dissident Socialist Valérie Perrin-Gilbert, who joined the radical *Front de Gauche* in protest at the PS's official programme. Marseille, a [thorn in the side of pollsters](#) from the beginning of the election, stayed firmly with the UMP, who increased their majority of seats. The crucial first sector took Jean-Claude Gaudin over the 60 seat mark, and simultaneously deprived the Socialist leader, Patrick Mennucci, of an individual mayoralty in the race.

Together with fragmentation, Sunday's results also underline the spatial and social polarisation of the PS support. The areas where the Socialists stood firm, in particular two large and wealthy cities, possess sufficient populations of educated liberal middle-classes loyal to a progressive party and its allies to remain in power, although even here with reduced majorities. Elsewhere, left-wing voters in the lower social strata deserted the socialist ranks to either abstain or support the FN. As suggested by the latter's gains in left-wing territories, a number of former socialist supporters turned to the extreme right on Sunday to protest against Hollande's social-liberal policies. To take but one example here: the Marseille municipals saw the FN overtake a desperate Socialist Party at the heart of its natural

working-class strongholds in the northern arrondissements.

Hollande's response

In the wake of its worst local defeat since the mid-1980s, talk of a cabinet reshuffle by François Hollande to show some element of 'response' to the electorate's sanction had already begun before second-round results were in. Here, the only question was whether prime minister Jean-Marc Ayrault would survive the reshuffle, or whether one of the younger Socialist *notables*, such as Manuel Valls, would lead the second Hollande government. Reports on Monday [confirmed](#) that Valls would become the next prime minister.

The socialist president is faced with a profound political dilemma, however. Whilst the Ayrault government has been increasingly distancing itself from the demand-side economics of Hollande's presidential platform, Sunday's voters sent a strong signal for a return to the redistributive agenda that had formed the core of the socialist campaign in 2012. With all eyes turned to the supply-side shock anticipated from the Responsibility Pact, and Brussels putting greater pressure on France to reduce its public deficit, the next government might simply end up with an insurmountable task. The municipals have clearly weakened Hollande's authority: already voices are being heard from within the leftist sectors of the PS calling for a radical change in the government's economic policy, and threatening to jeopardise the next government's vote of confidence.

Following the 1983 austerity turn, the PS lost all subsequent elections in 1984 (European), 1985 (cantonal) and 1986 (legislative). The implications for the next two years of elections are also painful for the present-day Socialists. June's European elections inevitably put the party back in third place behind the UMP and FN. In a [poll](#) published by Ipsos on the eve of the second round, the mainstream party led the FN 24 points to 22 in vote intentions. The media coverage of the FN's success notwithstanding, the UMP's success as official opposition seems likely to entrench this lead.

The PS is at risk of losing part of its local power-base and wide network of local *notables*, which have served as fallback positions in times of national political hardship in 2002 and 2007. The current wave of voter discontent threatens to weaken further socialist support in the 2015 departmental and, more dramatically, the 2016 regional elections where the socialists currently hold 61 (out of 101) departments and 21 (out of 22) metropolitan regional councils.

Marine Le Pen is now talking of this year's September senatorial elections, an indirect system whose electoral college has until now been a firmly closed door for her party. Again, a UMP blue wave looks inevitable in the light of the municipal result as the right-wing opposition might claim back the majority lost to the left in the historic senatorial alternation of 2011. Finally, while keeping hold of large cities, socialist losses in the smaller peripheral communes mean that the PS is very likely to lose control over municipal corporations (*intercommunalités*) such as Paris, Marseille, Lyon and Lille.

The Socialist Party finds itself politically in a crisis equal to that of 21 April 2002, when its presidential candidate was knocked out in the first round by Jean-Marie Le Pen. It may hold the presidency this time around, but that prevents it from withdrawing and regrouping. Should Hollande's actions after this local catastrophe not draw some of the opposition UMP's momentum, the next two years may see the steady dismantling of his party electorally, and of the left bloc in France more generally.

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Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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