# Preparing for a protest vote?

# Socialist Party notables braced for battle

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**Series: Local elections as seen by the social sciences**

*Between 2008 and 2014, the French Socialist Party was, more than ever before, a party of "local politicians". Here, Rémi Lefebvre describes how, in the face of a protest vote, the party has sought to reduce the recent municipal elections to their "local" dimension alone, thus contributing to a further depoliticisation of the issues at stake, and indeed of the significance of these elections.*

*Note: the French version of this text was published on 31 January 2014, several weeks before the municipal elections were held in March.*

While journalistic analyses and interpretations abound on the "turn to social democracy" and "supply-side socialism", the French Socialist Party (Parti socialiste, or PS) was focused on the municipal elections of March 2014. During the 10 years that the party was in opposition, midterm elections were very favourable for the Socialist Party (PS). These elections enabled the PS to capitalise on the unpopularity of the right-wing governments of the time on the one hand, and to make the most of its strong local structures on the other, consequently confirming and reinforcing the party's image as a party of elected politicians (particularly mayors and local councillors). The PS controlled practically every regional council and over half of departmental councils, but it was above all at town and city level, following the municipal elections of 2008, that the party was most successful, winning the highest ever number of councils in the party's history. Socialist domination at municipal level had never been so strong: between 2008 and 2014, seven of the ten largest French cities were headed by Socialist mayors. In total, the PS controlled 25 municipalities with over 100,000 inhabitants, compared with 12 for the right. Furthermore, 22 towns and cities with populations over 50,000 fell into the hands of the PS in 2008, including Amiens, Caen, Rouen, Metz, Toulouse, Reims, Strasbourg, Saint-Étienne and Saint-Denis (Réunion).[1] The position occupied by professional PS politicians, in numerical and strategic terms, has gradually changed the party's internal and moral economics (Lefebvre and Sawicki 2006). Electoral interests have become paramount at all levels, and in particular at municipal level.

Although this "municipalisation" of the PS has increased since the 1980s, especially as a result of decentralisation reforms, it is the product of a long history. Socialism came into being in the late

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[1] On the eve of the 2014 elections, 45% of towns with over 30,000 inhabitants were controlled by a socialist council (compared with 29.6% in 1983). More generally, left-wing parties retained or gained control of 54.5% of towns with over 9,000 inhabitants (1,081 towns in total) at the 2008 municipal elections, while right-wing parties lost 29 towns with over 30,000 inhabitants (Rouban 2014).

19th century, based around town halls, and drew most of its organisational resources (networks, support for associations, social policies to foster loyalty among local voters, jobs in local government as rewards for party activism, etc.). The politicisation of municipalities made them levers for social transformation.[2] The PS is today, more than any other party, organised and structured at municipal level,[3] although the local councils in areas with socialist politicians have been largely depoliticised. While "municipal socialism" is no longer a political marker or emblem of the party, the PS has nevertheless become something of a machine for producing municipal election candidates (Lefebvre 2009). Nearly a third of Socialist Party members are elected officials (not to mention all those who are local government employees or political staff, for instance, and thus with a direct personal interest in municipal politics and the preservation of the party's electoral interests).

With this in mind, the 2014 municipal elections would represent a key political challenge for the Socialists, and indeed even a threat to the party, given a political context marked by the significant unpopularity of the national executive. Since 2012, the PS has not won a single parliamentary or departmental by-election, with candidates sometimes even failing to make it to the second round. This March's elections mark the start of a cycle of midterm elections (municipal, European, regional and departmental) that will, by all accounts, call into question support for the party at local level.[4] The PS will be relying on its "party notables" and on a localist political stance to mitigate the impending "protest votes" that have been predicted by the media for months.

**The production of "party notables"**

In order to be as prepared as possible for these challenging municipal elections, the PS was the first party to nominate its mayoral candidates. At this first stage of the electoral process, great emphasis was placed on the open primaries that were tested in a handful of cities. Traditionally, local PS activists are in charge of selecting their own candidates; this year, however, for the first time, the Socialists implemented American-style primaries – open to all party supporters – in six towns and cities (Aix-en-Provence, Béziers, Boulogne-Billancourt, Le Havre, Marseille and La Rochelle)[5] to select mayoral candidates. For the PS, the aim was to extend the "democratic" dynamic that was initiated by its presidential primaries in 2011, and to project an image of a party "undergoing renovation" without upsetting local selection modes[6] and the party rule whereby incumbent politicians are automatically proposed as candidates. In this respect, the organisation of primaries in Marseille – which gave rise to intense media coverage – did indeed have the effect of showing "democracy in action".

Let us be clear, however: the roll-out of this new method of designating mayoral candidates proved to be limited and farm from systematic. It was strictly controlled by the party leadership, so as to spare the interests of incumbent mayors. Consultation was open to supporters only in certain well-defined local contexts: local party groups and politicians ensured that nominations were extremely closely controlled. The PS organised open primaries only in places where the party had no incumbent mayor (or where the PS mayor was standing down) and where victory was considered

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[2]  Social policies, school canteens, summer holiday camps during the interwar period, support for culture and participatory democracy in the 1970s, etc.

[3]  The Socialist Party is divided into sections based on municipal boundaries, whereas the right-wing UMP party is organised on the basis of parliamentary constituencies.

[4]  Before François Hollande came to power in 2012, PS leaders such as Daniel Percheron, president of Nord–Pas-de-Calais Regional Council, made no secret of their views that the party's rise to national government could harm its record of success at local level.

[5]  For a more in-depth analysis, see Lefebvre (2014).

[6]  Namely, where mayoral candidates are nominated by activists from party sections that are often controlled by local politicians.

feasible. The only exception to this pattern of "conquest primaries" was La Rochelle.[7] A "case-by-case" assessment of local contexts prevailed, as Christophe Borgel, the party's national secretary in charge of elections, explained: "It is not a question of automatically going from national primaries in 2011 to local primaries in 2014. The only question that counts is: What is the best way, in each individual case, to ensure the left wins? Via a primary or via selection by the local federation?".[8] Electoral pragmatism is therefore the order of the day.

In our book published in 2011, we suggested that the presidential primaries were a way for this "party of elected politicians" to "create a smokescreen without burning any bridges" – that is to say, to give the impression of openness without fundamentally changing the nature of the Socialist Party (Lefebvre 2011). Here, we shall seek to test this hypothesis. The principle of automatically allowing incumbent politicians to stand for re-election has always been considered sacrosanct within the PS, which goes a long way to explaining the relatively advanced age of outgoing Socialist mayors on the eve of this year's elections. In 2013, the average age of the 226 Socialist mayors of towns with over 15,000 inhabitants was 59.4 (Bivès 2013), and 56 Socialist mayors of towns with populations of over 20,000 were invested as candidates for at least a third term.[9] The primaries organised for the municipal elections were closed primaries almost everywhere. On 10 October 2013, party activists selected the mayoral candidates for their municipalities. In the 520 towns and cities in France with more than 20 000 inhabitants, 203 party sections had to give their opinion on a single candidate only (while in 140 cases the choice was between just two candidates).

**A new kind of candidate profile**

Nevertheless, a certain generational shift can be seen in the cohort of candidates selected for the 2014 elections. The generation of local politicians that rose to power in 1977 – often teachers who entered the PS via trade-union and association-based activism – began to retire in 2008, and continued to do so, in even greater numbers, this year. An analysis of the new Socialist candidates confirms a phenomenon of professionalisation that has been under way within the PS in recent years,[10] resulting in a new kind of candidate profile: typically, they have studied political science[11] and subsequently occupied cabinet positions in local government or key local civil service posts.

The candidates in Nantes, Rennes and Grenoble – whose chances of victory are high – are emblematic of this new path into politics. In Nantes, Johanna Rolland, age 34 and first deputy to the outgoing mayor, has been nominated to succeed Jean-Marc Ayrault, for whom she was a parliamentary assistant in 2004 and the campaign manager in the last two parliamentary elections. A graduate of the Institut d'Études Politiques de Lille (Lille Institute of Political Studies) with a master's degree in urban policy and local democracy, she worked for several years in a town hall after obtaining the status of *attaché territorial* (a national open examination that grants access to certain high-grade local civil service posts). Jérôme Safar, who hopes to succeed Michel Destot in Grenoble, followed a similar path. A graduate of the Grenoble Institute of Political Studies, he began his political career as a parliamentary assistant to Michel Destot, before becoming chief of

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[7] The outgoing socialist mayor, who chose not to stand again, created an opportunity for a "succession primary".

[8] *Le Monde*, 31 January 2014. Except in Marseille and La Rochelle, the primaries that were organised did not enjoy the anticipated turnout levels (no doubt because, in most cases, the results were something of a foregone conclusion).

[9] *Mediapart*, 20 January 2014.

[10] A third of the new socialist members of parliament elected in 2012 had previously worked with politicians (as cabinet advisers, parliamentary assistants, etc.).

[11] More generally, a rise in the average level of cultural capital of politicians has been observed, together with a sharp decline in the number of politicians from working-class backgrounds. Of the 226 mayors in the study mentioned above, Anthony Bivès noted that 8 were company directors, 156 were executives or from higher intellectual professions, 41 were from intermediate professions, 3 were salaried workers and... just 2 were manual workers.

staff for Jean-Paul Huchon, the leader of Île-de-France[12] Regional Council. After a few years in the private sector,[13] while also a regional councillor in Rhône-Alpes,[14] he was elected to Grenoble City Council and made first deputy mayor, responsible for finances. In Rennes, it is Nathalie Appéré, member of parliament for Ille-et-Vilaine (the *département* of which Rennes is the administrative centre), who has been selected to succeed outgoing mayor Daniel Delaveau. A graduate of the Rennes Institute of Political Studies, she holds a master's degree in local public action and also has experience of working in local government. These new local elites, trained in public management and lacking the militant ethos of the 1970s generation, are contributing to the growing technification and depoliticisation of municipal government that can be observed more generally within the Socialist Party.[15]

## "Denationalising" municipal elections

By relying on its established local leaders and these new "managerial" profiles, the PS is hoping, as far as possible, to focus all attention on local issues and strip away any "national" dimension.[16] On 15 February 2013, Christophe Borgel said to *Le Figaro*, not without irony: "Obviously, when you are in power, you say that municipal elections are all about local issues, and when you're in opposition, you say the exact opposite." Indeed, on 13 December 2007, François Hollande, then first secretary of the PS and in opposition to the ruling right-wing UMP government, said that he wanted to make the 2008 municipal elections "a great national event centred on the issue of purchasing power". And six years later, in the face of the UMP's efforts to turn the 2014 polls into a "protest vote", first secretary Harlem Désir made the following declaration during the Socialist Party's national convention on 7 December 2013: "The municipal elections will first and foremost be local elections in which voters will answer the question: Which woman or man is the best person to lead our community and to bring development projects to our community?". This localist strategy builds on the managerial, apolitical stance that Socialist mayors are increasingly adopting quite openly.[17] To complement this, the PS has produced a "safe" election slogan that avoids any hint of divisiveness ("*La ville qu'on aime pour vivre ensemble*" – "The city we love to live together") and a five-page-long[18] "charter" (in the absence of a manifesto) outlining the "shared values" of Socialist politicians and candidates, who employ consensual buzzwords throughout (the Socialist city should be "creative", "pleasant to live in", "environmentally friendly", "attractive", "committed", "citizen-oriented", "supportive", "safe", "well managed", etc.).

So, who will win the forthcoming municipal elections? On the eve of the second round of voting, it will likely be a difficult poll to call, as the "interpretational options" are endless in an election played out simultaneously in over 36,000 municipalities varying in size from tiny villages to large cities (Lehingue 2005). While PS leaders are making every effort to steer the municipal elections firmly towards exclusively local issues, they will nonetheless be preparing for the inevitable announcement of a national "verdict" by the media on results night. On these occasions, local considerations traditionally all but disappear from journalistic commentary, where national or

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[12]  Île-de-France is the region around Paris.

[13]  In the human resources department of Bouygues Construction.

[14]  Rhône-Alpes is the region around the cities of Lyon, Grenoble and Saint-Étienne, stretching from the south of Burgundy to the north of Provence, and from the Massif Central to the Swiss and Italian Alps.

[15]  On this matter, see the recent article by Fabien Desage and David Guéranger (2014).

[16]  The PS has also sought, not without difficulty, to maintain alliances forged as part of the "Union de la gauche" ("Union of the Left"). In 210 towns and cities with over 20,000 inhabitants, the PS has presented a joint list with the French Communist Party (compared with 288 lists in 2008).

[17]  Here, we might cite (among others) François Rebsamen in his capacity as mayor of Dijon: "The role of mayor is one where you are constantly obliged to transcend party politics" (*Le Monde*, 21 February 2008).

[18]  The Socialists' 1977 municipal election manifesto, titled *Citoyen dans sa commune* ("Citizens in their communities"), was over 100 pages long, despite the fact that local councils' scope for manoeuvre was presented as being far more limited than today.

"governmentalised" analyses of results dominate instead. The media, which will assign a national meaning to these municipal elections, also tend to favour coverage of large cities used as electoral "test beds". In this context, a (plausible) victory for the PS in Marseille – a city that has been the subject of much attention by Socialist Party leaders – could overshadow the loss of a large number of medium-sized towns and cities (Angers, Amiens, Auxerre, Metz, Poissy, Saint-Étienne and Valence could all switch to the right).

The battle for municipal success is also fought on the symbolic ground that is electoral interpretation. For the party in power, this is essentially a matter of "managing" the prophecy of an impending defeat.

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