

Against the tide

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célébrer.

A review of the 2020
French municipal
elections
and the dynamics of
participatory lists



Minim is a municipalist observatory that amplifies the voice of municipalism by sharing practical and theoretical knowledge with the support of a community of activists, scholars, journalists, and public officials.

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Translation by Emma Cleave

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AGAINST THE TIDE

A REVIEW OF THE 2020 FRENCH MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS AND THE DYNAMICS OF PARTICIPATORY LISTS¹

Introduction

We kept Spain's epic "cities of change" movement in the back of our minds, but also Zagreb, Messina, Jackson (Mississippi), Valparaíso, and many other cities where municipalism has been gaining momentum. Closer to home, pioneers in Saillans, Kingersheim, Loos-en-Gohelle, Grenoble, Tremargat and Ungersheim, they all gave us a glimpse into alternative possibilities. Unexpectedly, there were [408 participatory lists recorded on this map of France](#), and almost 800 acknowledged overall. The municipal elections took place in two rounds, the first one on 15th of March and the second one on 28th of June 2020.

So yes, we were admittedly taken aback by this campaign. By the incredible energy amongst those participating in politics for the first time, and this move to action rather than the usual resignation. We were also expecting this generational and societal reawakening, the feminisation of politics, the reversal of established hierarchies, and the changes in practices of representation. We were daring to pursue a new approach to change, towards strong alliances between cities to bring about a timely and locally-driven renewal of the French state, such that it could be fit to face the challenges of the 21st Century. But of course these are great expectations, and success in local elections can only be one part of the wider strategy to drive this change.

These elections were unprecedented in many ways and had a rare spark about them, full of hope for a local political reset. Whilst victories clearly remain in the minority, they signal a deeper shift that is flying under the radar. They are very much part of a wider awakening amongst people: from the Convention citoyenne pour le Climat (Citizen Convention for Climate), the Grand Débat (the Great Debate), the Gilet Jaunes (Yellow Vests), the young people on climate strike and the Nuit Debout (Rise up at Night movement) to the Zones à défendre (Zones to Defend).

¹ I wish to thank Solenne Boiziau (Mouvement Utopia), Averill Roy and Vladimir Ugarte (Commonspolis), Federico Alagna, Laura Roth and Bertie Russell (Minim), and the Action Commune team for their suggestions and their contribution to this report.

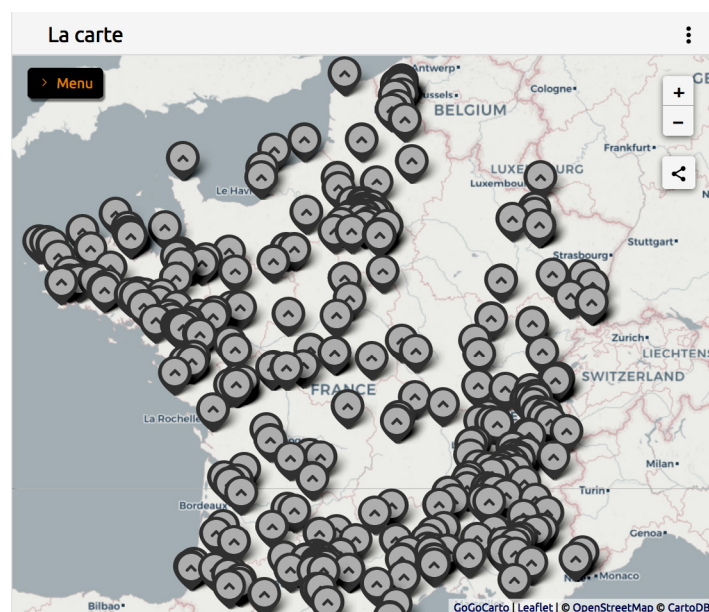
And even beyond our borders, to the international movements that challenge and connect us (from Chile to Catalonia, from Lebanon to Hong Kong, from the Indignados movement in Spain to the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street, etc.).

In observing these currents as they rise up against the tide, we wanted to share insights into the situation on the ground in France, inspired by the views, experiences and analysis of others. This review encourages us to debate what can be learned from this period, which comes to a close with the elections, at the same time as it opens up a rare sense of hope around the possibility for change.

New participatory lists

New kinds of candidacy appeared during the last local elections campaign. Qualifying terms like “citizen”, “participatory” and “in common” were used so frequently during the elections that they no longer seem able to capture the dynamics of this movement. These terms could easily have been part of a mere seduction strategy embedded in the local level, rolled out at a time of mistrust and profound crisis in political representation, particularly with regard to the mainstream parties. They could have been empty in terms of concrete actions and proposals. Nevertheless, these terms really do indicate sincere efforts to try and make sense of a novel form of political action. Participatory and citizen lists were formed, as the name suggests, through radically participatory processes as an open rejection of traditional political party politics, where candidates are typically chosen through intra-party negotiations. These lists also defined themselves outside of the left or right wing split, making explicit that their aim was to challenge traditional representative politics and to truly make space for citizens’ voices regardless of their affiliation. As a consequence, instead of offering a closed political manifesto to their potential voters, they wrote their electoral manifestos through implementing participatory methods.

The “fertile ground” of the recent electoral wave has been mapped, largely by [Action Commune](#) and [La Belle Démocratie](#) (Beautiful Democracy). It takes into account a much broader ecosystem connected by the same hopes for change across [Grenoble en Commun](#), [Grenopolitains](#), [Kingersheim](#), [Loos-en-Gohelle](#), [Châtel en Trièves](#), [les Gilets Jaunes in Commercy](#), as well as local [Pacte pour la Transition](#) (Pact for Transition) collectives that did not present candidacies, but allowed local groups to make ambitious transition commitments or to build local democratic debates and even to propose a citizen election manifesto, like in [Barjols](#).



Source : La Belle Democratie

Differences and commonalities

A new vocabulary emerged during local elections in the form of “citizen” or “participatory” lists. These lists demonstrated a common desire to set free the democratic imagination. They spoke of collectively reinventing what it meant to be a candidate, to manage the municipality, and to make a decision. These lists stood for the redistribution of political power. They wanted to renew political practices and staff, replacing the culture of professionalisation and all-powerful elected mayors with practices of co-decision making between inhabitants, elected people and public servants. Citizen and participatory lists embodied these values in how they built their candidacies: how they built their manifestos together with local residents, how they organized and made decisions, and how they selected candidates using collective intelligence methods. This democratic revolution from the local level aims to be a lever to answer social and ecological urgencies, and to rebuild political confidence. The methods used by the lists will be described below².

Behind this tendency to build participatory and citizens lists we can observe true heterogeneity. It is the plurality of this democratic movement what defines its essence. That said, common features are emerging between participatory and citizen lists, as Myriam Bachir (University of Amiens) lays out in the excellent article “[Citoyennes et participatives: des listes qui réenchangent la politique](#)»:

- ▷ a manifesto written by citizens.
- ▷ hybrid and sophisticated means of selecting candidates (people from political parties and independent candidates, mixed selection mechanisms such as lot, self-designation and cooptation, use of digital and in-person mechanisms, etc.)
- ▷ a commitment to more collaborative public action, including forms of direct democracy.

These dynamics have brought about a political shake-up:

- ▷ by carrying out a campaign designed by, for and alongside communities, these initiatives have prioritised collective intelligence and the process of developing electoral lists over the result of the “win”.
- ▷ by challenging the dominant culture of “ultra-personalisation” of power in favour of feminising politics, and engaging in the dynamics of cooperation.
- ▷ by working to re-politicise the local agenda through public debate and gathering, and by putting social, ecological and democratic crises at the heart of proposals.

The choices that paved the way for these various initiatives can be explained, at least in part, by the broader global context. However they come into even clearer focus with a more precise analysis of the size of the towns and cities, the local history, the local associations, the presence - or lack of - opposition or political alternative, the way in which power was previously wielded by former administrations, etc. This more nuanced approach seems necessary as we continue this analysis in the months and years ahead.

“A green wave and a citizen slap in the face”³

Following in the footsteps of Saillans in 2014, and in line with the Gilets Jaunes (Yellow Vests) movement and the struggles against climate change, an “unprecedented movement in France”⁴ seemed to be taking shape. The French media largely covered the vague verte or “green wave” (the very welcomed green party municipal victories), but said almost nothing about the citizen movement that was radically shifting the way the elections were about to happen. So what results did the participatory and citizen lists achieve?

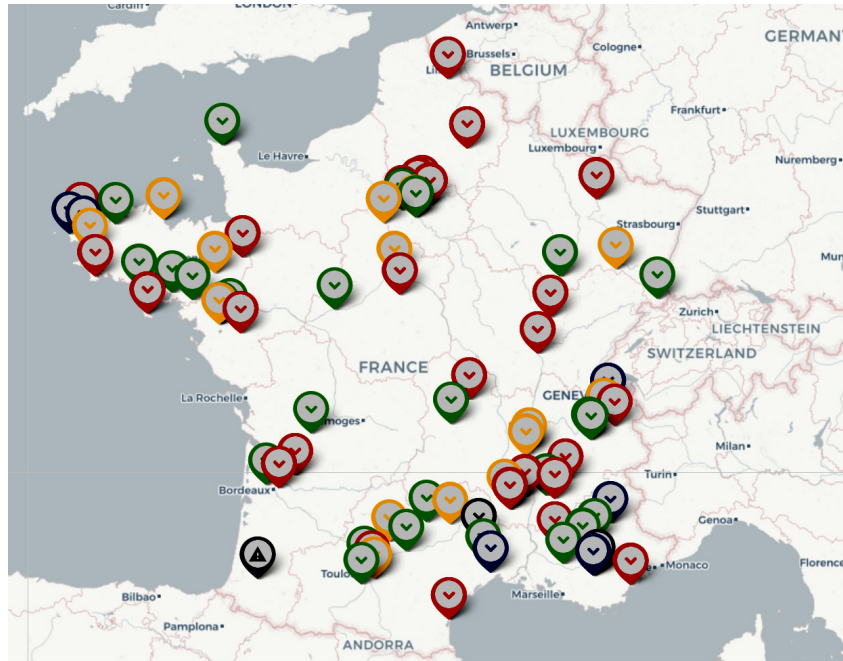
Various conditions, especially concerning the veracity of the official electoral data in identifying

³ From the article *Une vague verte et une claque citoyenne*, Press release, Action Commune, 30 June 2020. Also published in English by Commonspolis.

⁴ For Martial Foucault, director of Cevipof (Center of Political research at Sciences Po), there is an “unprecedented movement” in France. See *Municipales: les listes citoyennes, révolution démocratique ou fausse bonne idée?*, David Pauget, *l'Express*, 14 February 2020.

these initiatives as a group, rendered the available information about the results inconclusive. It was only thanks to the mapping of participatory lists by Action Commune that we are able to pull out certain trends.

As the elections came to a close, the final count showed:



- > 66 elected participatory lists.
- > 1324 local municipal majority councillors.
- > 638 local municipal opposition councillors.
- > 408 local collectives.
- > 279,016 residents who voted for participatory lists.

Source: Action Commune [GogoCarto](#)

Unlike the limited successes of 2014, it is no longer a handful but over 66 municipalities, almost 2000 elected officials, and hundreds of local collectives that comprise the municipal landscape of this new term. Notable amongst them are some of the larger towns like Poitiers, Chambéry, Annecy and Rezé. The latter join other cities like Grenoble, Kingersheim and Loos-en-Gohelle in their desire to experiment locally and to connect key actors in pursuing their democratic, ecological and social justice ambitions. They also form part of the green wave within these municipalities, supporting the desire to put a strong democratic ambition on equal footing with social and ecological demands already championed by the Green Party.

In this new ecosystem promoting radical democracy and just transition, we should also take into account “Cités en communs” (Cities in common), launched by Eric Piolle (Grenoble Mayor) and Anne Hidalgo (Paris Mayor), an informal network that aims to connect the principal ecological and socialist cities as part of a “humanist arc”. Such new alliances could give birth to a new political force, emanating from the local level towards broader struggles and raising the possibility of national political representation (i.e. national elections in 2022). The stakes remain high, as does the need to open up this network to smaller (rural) and medium sized towns and cities that represent more than 58% of candidates on participatory lists.

- > 236 participatory lists in villages or small towns (less than 10,000 inhabitants) in 34,363 communes of this size.
- > 139 participatory lists in medium-sized towns (between 10,000 and 100,000 inhabitants) in 956 municipalities of this size.
- > 30 participatory lists in big cities (more than 100,000 inhabitants) in 42 cities of this size.

As of 13th March 2020

Source: Action Commune [Les listes participatives en chiffres](#)

Whether or not they are inside (or outside) the town hall, from smaller, medium or larger communities, whether they are partisan or non-partisan, radical or more communal, we see that they are citizens, and above all we are witnessing a new energy rising from the ground up, with shared democratic, ecological, and disruptive ambitions.

New French municipalism

In France we have never heard municipalism discussed as much as over the last few months! Lots of reference material⁵ has since emerged on the subject, including a special issue of the

⁵ See, for example: Legros, C. (2020), “Le municipalisme ou la commune au pouvoir”, *Le Monde*, 7 February; Lavocat L. (2020), “Aux municipales, les citoyens se lancent à l’assaut des mairies”, *Reporterre*, 8 January; Binctin, B. (2019), “Dix villes où des listes « citoyennes » affichent leurs ambitions pour les municipales”, *Bastamag*, 16 December; Billette, A. (2020), “Les listes «citoyennes», mirage ou ancrage?”, *Libération*, 2 March; and “Tout le pouvoir au local”, *Socialter*, n°39, February-March 2020.

Mouvements journal entitled “[Vive les communes! Des ronds points au municipalisme](#)» (Long live communities! From roundabouts to municipalism). Organisations such as Commonsopolis and Mouvement Utopia have contributed in their own way through the [MOOC La Commune est à nous!](#) (The city is ours!) and also the [French translation](#) of the [Fearless Cities guide](#) with the aim of sharing practice and reflections from the international Fearless Cities network amongst the French-speaking world.

Municipalism or communalism?

As Murray Bookchin - probably the main voice in libertarian municipalism and social ecology - reflects, there is a particular kind of inspiration that is born in times of crisis (of capitalism, of nation states, of political representation, ecology, health, social and, of course, of democracy). Acknowledging that almost all ecological problems are social problems, Bookchin draws our attention to the close link between the dominant and oppressive ways in which we exert ourselves over nature as well as in our social relationships. Libertarian municipalism brings social ecology back into political organising. It allows us “to create, to renew and to harness the political potential of the community”, to unite around new social and political relationships that are based on foundations of direct democracy and brought to life by participatory institutions and popular assemblies. Democracy can be viewed not only through the lens of an institutional organisation, but equally through the quality of the relationships that we nurture in each other. Both in theory and in practice, this seems to be resonating in a variety of ways today in France and especially around the municipal elections.

On the other hand, new municipalism, as it is advocated for by the Fearless Cities movement, does not (necessarily) adhere solely to libertarian variations. In this current moment it can be better seen as a constellation of practices that go from a more managed version, where progressive local governments simply implement policies that are more in touch with the views of inhabitants, to non-institutional assembly-like projects. In between is where we can find most of the municipalist organisations nowadays: political platforms that want to win elections, but in order to radically change the way politics is done⁶. This is the terrain many municipalist initiatives are exploring nowadays.

Based on her research into libertarian municipalism (or communalism), Sixtine Van Outryve Outryve reminds us that municipalism positions itself (especially in France) as a way for residents to reappropriate their local institutions and deal with political issues at the most local level through citizen participation. Contrary to libertarian municipalism, calling into question

⁶ See, for instance, Roth, L. (2019), “(New) Municipalism”, *Encyclopedia for Educational Innovation*, Springer, and Thompson, M. (2020), “What’s so new about new municipalism?”, *Progress in Human Geography*

the local state is not part of the municipalist strategy. Beyond prescriptive and somewhat limiting frameworks (e.g. obligatory mandates or the ability to revoke elected individuals), very few movements have taken up such ideas and they do not recognise direct, democratic organising. One exception is Commercy, where there was a call from the Gilets Jaunes (Yellow Vests) to organise as a self-governing, popular assembly, having come to the decision that a citizen assembly would face the elections without political affiliation and with a raft of propositions developed during the assemblies.

Commercy's confederal spirit connects a range of territorial "sister" approaches in France, such as participatory lists, yellow vests and communalists beyond those participating in the election⁷. The Vivons et décidons ensemble (Live and make decisions together) list, which reached 9.76% in the first round of the elections, refused the notion of a coalition in the second round, and - finally without any representation in the city council - went on to assemble and develop self-organisation and concrete projects for residents and to establish itself in as a critical voice speaking from outside the local council.

From libertarian communalism to municipalism⁸, and even beyond into the realms of "citizenism", we repeatedly come across tricky terrain. The heterogeneity of this emerging municipalist movement in France reflects different positions towards, for example, the critique of and rupture with capitalism and the nation state and towards the desirability of playing the game of representative democracy by presenting candidates to elections. In addition, there is a lot of diversity in terms of the degree of self-organising or radical democracy that is implemented in the internal dynamics of the collectives, the support (or not) for the creation of democratic spaces such as popular assemblies in parallel to legal institutions, and the social background of the people who participate in these collectives. As it is today, new municipalism in France seems to be concentrated in participatory processes of local democracy with mainly educated people participating, and quite far away from libertarian municipalism based on more self-organized and radical democracy outside local institutions.

There is still a lack of information about this emergent movement in France. Based on a survey from February 2020⁹ that was carried out on a reduced sample of 112 participatory lists, Guillaume Gourgues, Vincent Lebrou and Jessica Sainty¹⁰ wrote an article where they mention:

7 See this article by Didier Fradin.

8 Cossart, P. and Sauvêtre, P. (2020), "Du municipalisme au communalisme", *Mouvements*, 1, n°101, <https://www.cairn.info/revue-mouvements-2020-1-page-142.htm>

9 Contribution based on the Action Commune - Gourgues, Van Outryve, Sainty, Dau. Survey on a sample of 112 lists between 1 and 13 February, 2020 and Gourgues, G., Lebrou, V. and Sainty, J. (2020), "L'essor des listes participatives. Autour de la campagne des élections municipales 2020", *La Vie des Idées*, 17 March.

10 "L'essor des listes participatives", *op. cit.*

A conflation between participatory lists and municipalist movement due to media appetite sparked off by those two phenomenons, and due to the similarity of some of their recommendations (especially inhabitants participation for the manifesto and list production process and the rejection of political parties labels).

During the workshop *Quels bilans et espoirs pour le municipalisme en France à l'issue des municipales de mars 2020?*, Guillaume Gourgues noted some characteristics of participatory lists that situate them close to municipalism:

- ▶ participatory lists are heavily weighted towards the left (64%)¹¹. Although they do not usually describe themselves as municipalists, in the larger cities, the more politicised activists do make the link with municipalist thematics.
- ▶ participatory lists re-invest in so called “empty” themes like participatory democracy or ecological transition in order to re-politicise them and integrate them into their programmes as pillars of their vision of the territory.
- ▶ 29% said they have electoral ambitions and 59% of them believed that they could win the elections, but their main goal is to demonstrate that it is possible to do politics differently (40%) and sometimes to build a social movement beyond elections (24%)
- ▶ these lists forge strong links with more traditional political camps (former elected officials, activists or incumbent political parties), although only 31.2% of them are supported by political parties.

We really need to go further to analyse this possibility of a French new municipalism. As Guillaume Gourgues et al. concluded in their article¹² :

Politically, followers of municipalist movements contribute to the passion for these lists.(...) For the ones who want to change the system from the bottom up, inhabitants gathering who want to take the power in their city, bypassing classical rules of the political game, give a formidable space to implement municipalist principles, both in the form of action - a required level of democracy in the list composition, manifesto, etc. - and political goals - eco-socialism, direct democracy.

And between communes?

The democratic ambitions held by these lists resonated just as much at the inter-communal level; that is to say, the administrative scale organized to gather municipalities of the same territory (voluntarily or not) to mutualize their resources (human, financial, technical) and competences. The process to elect the presidents of the inter-communes typically occurred without any transparency in behind-closed-doors negotiations and alliances between mayors. This unaccounta-

¹¹ See results of the Action Commune survey - Gourgues, Van Outryve, Sainty, Dau, op. cit.

¹² “L'essor des listes participatives”, op. cit.

ble process was deemed illegitimate and widely denounced¹³. Although this was generally not deemed as a focus for strategic alliances or proposals, two interesting initiatives emerged in response. The “Grenopolitains” digital platform based on Decidim, for example, made it possible to collect local rural and urban residents’ propositions from the Grenoble metropolitan area. In addition, the Drôme Diois Valley’s Citizen Participation Charter holds municipal election candidates (future elected community representatives) to the commitments of citizen participation, including during inter-communal decision-making.

Municipalism and communalism offer an encouraging reminder that power does not rest solely in institutions and in the hands of elected officials, but that it goes beyond the ballot box and also comes from citizens themselves. Small and medium vague verte (green wave) and citizen-led cities platforms as well as for candidacies in more rural areas serve as a testing ground for both municipalism and communalism. The creation of assemblies (local, grassroots, citizen) complements the blueprints of municipal democracy laid out by electorally successful municipal groups (Saint Médard en Jalles, Poitiers, Grenoble) as well as those lists that may have stumbled in the elections but are committed to long-term mobilisation (Archipel Citoyen à Toulouse, Commercy-Gilets Jaunes). This non-institutional dynamic is a way of making it clear that public debate can revolve around local assemblies instead of elections. Municipalism “is also about regaining power over life”¹⁴: power over how we want to live together. In this sense, municipalities are the privileged spaces where we are able to rework the connections between the social, political and the institutional.

A new electorate?

The results of the most recent local elections in France show different voting tendencies compared to the past: 86% of mayors were reelected in the 1st round of the elections¹⁵, but the second round consecrated a new strong position for the ecological party at the local level (vague verte), and participatory lists were an unexpected new political movement crowned with more than 66 victories. In a context of general political disaffection, massive abstention and with the Yellow vests movement challenging, what does this reconfigured electorate look like?

13 Desage, F. (2019), “L’élection des présidents dans les métropoles: la démocratie confisquée par les élus”, Médiacités, 13 July.

14 Magali Fricaudet - AITEC (2020), “Le nouveau municipalisme”, Conference, La démocratie locale et les nouvelles formes d’intervention citoyenne, Paris, 5 February.

15 Bué, N., Desage, F. and Lefebvre, R. (2020), “Le premier tour des municipales n’a pas eu lieu”, Libération, 18 March.

In these elections, like in the past, old parties knew the characteristics of their electorate quite well and were therefore able to design a very focused strategy. Participatory lists started from scratch and claimed to draw together a diverse range of voters. Their ambition was to touch a large part of the population, but they did not have an idea regarding what their new electorate looked like, where it was located, etc. Also unlike traditional parties, they did not focus on one issue or one neighbourhood, but large ambitions, measures, arguments and areas.

A desire to open up, but reliant on support from the usual social classes

The capacity of the participatory lists to unite in a “citizen-led” effort went beyond the usual left-right divide, even though they positioned themselves - or were identified - as being more to the “left”. In terms of demographics, participatory lists have remained fairly limited to those who have the time, economic and social capital to get involved. Their presence in working class districts or urban peripheries has been regularly acknowledged as lacking, even by the lists themselves. They have not always known how to become accessible since their propositions for democratic overhaul and their processes (collective decision-making, combination of methods such as sortition, elections without a candidate, etc.) were perceived as too complex for many people. They often attempted to get out of their immediate circles and to find excluded residents or those who had self-excluded, to reach out to those who had avoided the ballot box in the past (especially in the case of Toulouse), and to new voters. However they have for the most part only really reached and mobilised the middle and upper classes¹⁶.

A context complicated by COVID 19, numerous electoral lists and a new kind of candidacy

In the context of COVID 19, fear and tendency to withdraw from open social interaction made voting for well-known political forces - and the status quo - more likely. The situation does not favour new political offers, which have limited means of publicity. It is through their alliances with other, more traditional party forces, that some of the lists have reached out to a new electorate. Some lists have found it possible to bring together these different worlds, whilst others found that the introduction of new actors resulted in some of the earlier supporters of the citizen initiatives stepping back, no longer seeing themselves represented.

These unprecedented circumstances may also explain, in part, the reelection of so many mayors. It also shows that political parties still represent a kind of sanctuary, especially in the context of

¹⁶ About the case of Toulouse in particular, see Cerez, G. and Benoit, R. (2020), “Municipales 2020 : Autopsie d’une défaite de la gauche à Toulouse”, *Médiacités*, 6 July.

a fragmenting political offer and eruption of new candidacies (E.g. 14 lists in Montpellier, 12 in Toulouse). Furthermore, as Rémi Lefebvre observed, there was “a strategy of erasure and scrambling” on the part of political parties during these recent municipal elections:

Whilst perhaps invisible at first glance, political parties have not deserted the municipal political sphere. Quite the contrary. On closer inspection they are omnipresent. At the level of the municipalities, the battle for nominations was bitter and parties are still structuring the offer of candidates. The parties are always carriers of essential resources in the electoral struggle. They hide behind the facade of citizen lists who need their organizational support in large cities. Municipal elections remain a key issue for most parties. The pressure exerted, in particular by Les Républicains (LR), to keep the ballot scheduled a few days before the first round, despite the Coronavirus pandemic, attest to this.¹⁷

Participatory lists set themselves apart from the internal workings and “electoral machine” of mainstream party politics. They see power differently (“take it to share it”)¹⁸ and the elections as a means, rather than an end. However, this desire to change political practices is not shared with a significant portion of the electorate, many of whom still seek a more paternalistic mayoral figure. Participatory lists went against the grain in this sense, from their candidate nomination process, to the relevance of female figures and double-headed candidate lists.

The wide scale involvement of residents in participatory lists

Whilst acknowledging the aforementioned weaknesses of participatory lists, we should also flesh out the nuances. For instance, participatory lists have taken public spaces (the streets and public squares), carried out fieldwork and brought residents together, most notably around the design of their programmatic content. Over 93% of lists have co-written their programme alongside residents. In Chambéry, over a period of two years, the Chambé citizen list organised citizen assemblies every six weeks. These assemblies created space for the development of value-based programmes oriented towards social justice, ecological transition and gender equality. In Montpellier, through direct participation in the #NousSommes (#WeAre) list, the local Montpelliérains’ have brought about strong new measures around security and waste management, although these issues are usually considered politically “sensitive”¹⁹.

Whilst it is challenging to put these more immaterial dimensions of resident mobilisation into numbers, the proximity of the participatory lists and the propositions they put forward struck a chord with voters and urged many to join their ranks. Nonetheless, whilst conventional candidates tended to frame their candidacy around a single issue, the citizen lists typically made a

17 Lefebvre, R. (2020), “Municipales 2020 : les partis politiques, invisibles et omniprésents”, *La Vie des Idées*, 23 June.

18 The slogan of La Belle Démocratie.

19 See in this regard this work of Arnaud Blin.

concerted effort to produce alternative policy agendas. The sheer density of some of these programmes, with as many as several hundred proposals in some cases, often made them inaccessible and difficult to digest, with implications on the quality and clarity of public debate.

- > 93% of the participatory lists have co-written their program with the inhabitants (on average 70 people)
- > 75% of participatory lists define their program as “rather leftist”
- > 17% of participatory lists define their program as being “neither left nor right”

Word cloud based on occurrence, from answers to the question: how will you define the central values defended by your program?

Source: Action Commune [Les listes participatives en chiffres](#)

During these elections there has certainly been a sense of curiosity, enthusiasm and hope, even if it has mostly translated into minority votes. Yet the movement is looking for a long term change, and it is only just getting started. For instance, it would be interesting to dig deeper into the subject of 18-25 year-old voters, whom we know are more politically active today, compared to previous generations, particularly around climate issues, and who opt for green or citizen candidates on the ballot paper²⁰. In any case, the new dynamics of these citizen lists invite us to shift in a new direction, to step into diversity, complexity, sensitivity and subjectivity. The invitation is to go beyond the old left-right protocols, the electoral point-scoring etc. and to perceive new ways of understanding progress, new openings, and change.

New profiles and the feminisation of politics

“Are the new municipal councils more representative of France as it actually is in reality?”²¹.

²⁰ Youth and municipal voting survey 2020, carried out by the IFOP for Anacej, in partnership with the French Forum for Youth, 3 March 2020.

²¹ Huet, D., Magnaudeix, M. and Salvi, E. (2020), “Municipales: la représentation des femmes et des minorités progresse lentement”, Médiapart, 5 July.

Even though the first round of the elections seemed to fall short of a large-scale shift in terms of social background and age, we can nonetheless note some tangible move towards it.

New profiles and elected officials on participatory lists

In the case of some lists, and particularly on the part of participatory lists, there was a concerted effort to shake up the age hierarchy of elected officials. The average age of a French mayor was 60 years old in 2014. In 2020, the average age of candidates heading up participatory lists was 47²². At the age of just 30, the new mayor of Potiers, Léonore Moncond’huy, who is from the Poitiers Collectif participatory list, is representative of this broad generational change. The trend is also being replicated across larger cities, with mayors having an average age of 48.8 years.

Donatien Huet, Mathieu Magnaudeix and Ellen Salvi²³ observed in a review for Médiapart dealing with women and minorities (racialized people, popular classes, LGBTI) that working classes are “under-represented”. For racialized groups “the glass ceiling is breaking in certain places, but remains intact” notes sociologist Julien Talpin, interviewed for the same article.

Despite the frequent homophobic remarks and defamation that took place over the course of many campaigns, even in larger cities, the new municipal ballot signifies the election (or the reelection) of people for whom homosexuality is no longer a taboo. Furthermore, France now has its first transgender mayor representing the Tilloy-lez-Marchiennes commune. Behind these individual wins is a wider politicisation of, and a positive change in, representation.²⁴

The feminisation of politics: definitions and numbers

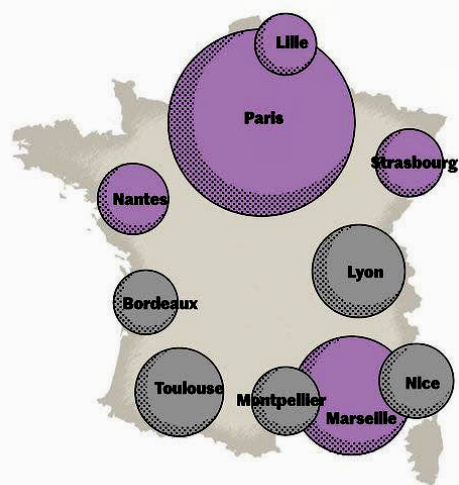
In the early stages of the municipal elections, the feminisation of politics translated simply into higher numbers of female candidates. Participatory lists stand out quite clearly in this respect, as 40.7% of them had women heading up the list compared to 23.1% of all other candidate lists in France. This is part of a broader trend that has seen women elected as mayors in 17.8% of municipalities with over 3,500 residents, putting them in charge of half of the 10 largest cities in France (Paris, Marseille, Lille, Strasbourg, Nantes).

22 Voir résultats de l'enquête Action Commune - Gourgues, Van Outryve, Sainty, Dau, op. cit.

23 Municipales: la représentation des femmes et des minorités progresse lentement, op. cit.

24 “La gauche s’est assoupie dans la lutte contre le racisme, il est temps de réagir. Entretien avec Priscilla Zamord”, Reporterre, 25 June 2020.

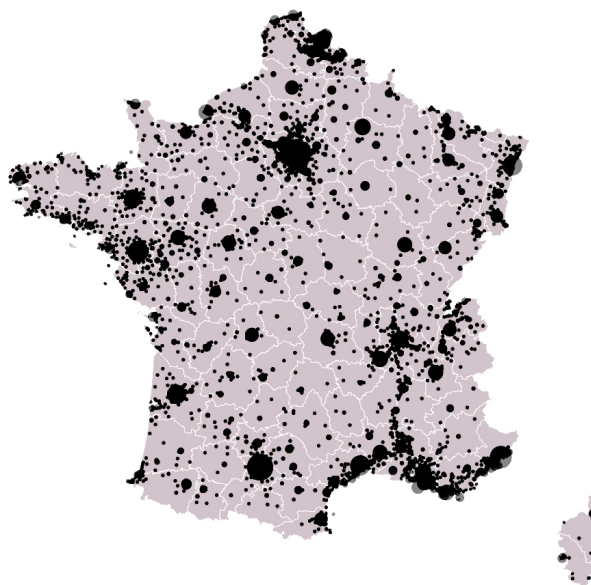
**Cinq des dix plus grandes villes françaises
tenues par des femmes**



Infographie Le Monde

Five of the ten largest French cities held by women

Sources: Le Monde et [Médiapart](#) (Ministère de l'intérieur)



But the feminisation of politics is not (only) about the presence of women on lists or in town halls. At the heart of the demand for the feminisation or depatriarchalisation of politics, we find a questioning of existing ways of building political power relations. On this point, let us turn to Averill Roy's remark that "the terms care (or cuidados in Spanish) and feminization of politics are particularly emphasized by municipalist platforms (especially in Spain), for whom these concepts are intrinsically linked to municipalism.[...]25. Also, a recent report26 shows the links between municipalism and feminist practices throughout the world. Here, the feminisation of politics is understood as "changing structures, relationships, language, times and priorities" and not simply about gender balance or feminist policies.

To start with, there is a lot to be said for the lived experience of those women who occupy top positions on lists27 and how they were considered (or unconsidered) as a serious candidate by male competitors. This extends to their engagement with the media, and with the subtle or explicit ways in which attention is drawn to their appearance (what they are wearing, their hairstyle, their make up, etc.), thus forcing them to engage in a superficiality that is not equally expected of candidates of the opposite sex.

During the electoral period, a workshop dedicated to this issue explored potential solutions to

25 Faire Commun.e, *Lundi en Commun*, Fearless Cities special edition, 27 April 2020.

26 Roth, L., Zugasti, I. and de Diego Baciero, A. (2020), "Feminize Politics Now! A toolkit created by the municipalist movement", Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung, March.

27 Interviews with Charlotte Marchandise and Fanny Lacroix, panel Féminisation de la politique et "care": quels liens avec le municipalisme ?, Faire Commun.e, op. cit.

these challenges²⁸. This experience has only further demonstrated the grip patriarchy holds over the collective imagination of men and women alike. Before changing our practice, we need to first address the language and representation we use, by using and clarifying what is meant by terms like depatriachalisation more frequently, for example. In order to see a new type of leader elected, and alternative models of leadership employed, we need to suspend our collective belief in the “male saviour” and allow more space for humility and the right to make mistakes. This approach inspired the process of “election by consent” frequently used during the formation of the candidacies, which gets away from having just one person stand (as leader) a priori, alongside the rise of new ethical charters promoting “servant leadership”. These changes have come about through increased awareness amongst men about the amount of discursive space they take up, but also amongst women, about the space they do not dare take up, or are waiting for permission to take.

Other practices that aimed at deconstructing established roles were agreeing a code of conduct and creating a safe environment for everyone to feel they belong, for example, not cutting people off mid-sentence, giving time for each other to speak as well as respecting silence, assigning a rotating facilitator role for meetings etc. Creating and modelling care through example and best practice (keeping spaces clean and tidy, for example) encourages people to pay more attention to details they may ordinarily miss. Liberating women from the additional duties that take up their time (for example childcare) by organising dedicated facilities also allows more women and their families to participate in democratic life. This issue was a priority for many participatory lists throughout the election campaign, thus there were dedicated spaces for children, flexible timetables and childcare options available.

It is, of course, still challenging to balance the tension between private, professional, activist and public life. New mayoresses will certainly testify to this fact, especially during the lockdown period, where they had to manage family, public and professional life all at once, and sometimes single-handedly. Adaptations to the role and status of elected officials are long overdue, including fairer, more needs-based distribution of local elected officials’ allowances (instead of salaries based on hierarchy), and more capacity for teamwork and delegation to avoid the list of responsibilities becoming endless, especially for female mayors and other public officials.

Certain participatory methods and tools, for example collective intelligence tools, are often called into question for their tendency to create a sort of “technology” around democratic processes. Whilst it is true that «the method shouldn’t overshadow everything else», it remains essential that there is the space to speak up, especially for women, and establishing such feminist methods and tools is «the only way to change the way things are done».²⁹

28 [Faire Commun.e](#), op. cit.

29 [Comments from Charlotte Marchandise during the workshop Faire Commun.e](#), op. cit.

A revolution of methods and a pushing of boundaries

Although the cities of change in Spain came to municipalism through the Indignados movement and its claims for “real democracy now”, the movement was also marked by the resistance to forced evictions and the mobilisations austerity-induced economic crisis. Things were a bit different in France, where the development of participatory lists seems to have been more geared towards the question of democracy itself.

The importance of questioning democracy

Without putting into question the importance of social, economic and ecological demands, in the end it was the desire for more participatory democracy that seemed to be the main entry point to the electoral candidacies, echoing the demands of the Gilet Jaunes in the Référendum d’Initiative Citoyenne (Citizens Initiative Referendum). This also explains the focus on tools, methods and collective decision-making processes. In fact, 65% of all participatory lists are using collective intelligence methods in key decision-making processes.

These democratic methods are an integral part of the participatory lists, from the process of setting up the electoral campaign (their candidature, programme and alliances) through to their future governance plans once elected. From Decidim³⁰ to Discord, Slack, Telegram, Facebook or Twitter, this campaign also utilised, like never before, social networks and digital tools (particularly free and open source software). These tools provided a space for the day to day management of the lists, connected them to a much broader audience, and played a part in amplifying the public debate. Nonetheless, while digital tools may have encouraged the free-flow of information internally (for example between working groups), the participatory lists knew they cannot be a substitute for face-to-face interactions. The lockdown period only further confirmed this to be the case. Nor do they allow for widespread engagement, as they reach residents according to their digital access and ability, their literacy levels, their command of language and their familiarity with putting proposals together.

30 Decidim is an open source participatory democracy software, entirely designed and produced in a collaborative manner according to the rules of free software. Originally created thanks to a public investment by the Municipality of Barcelona, it is recognized and used worldwide by different cities and organizations.

Democratic methodologies: what processes for what kind of change?

A new vocabulary emerged around the time of this campaign to describe these tools and methods: collective intelligence, shared leadership, sociocracy, holacracy, election by consent, decision by consent, majority judgement, drawing lots (to select candidates), identifying a *raison d'être*, constructing a collective identity, formulating objections, active listening, etc. But what do these tools mean in terms of political change? And what might their boundaries be?

It remained encouraging to see participatory lists apply the changes that they set out to achieve at the beginning of the campaign in practice, as part of their means and not just their ends. Myriam Bachir's analysis³¹ documents this well, noting the "citizen make-up of the programme; the combination [of different kinds of tools], the deeply considered and inventive methods used to designate fellow candidates and the engagement with much more directly participatory forms of democracy".

Election by consent

Election by consent is a fascinating process "that makes it possible to decide by consent who will take responsibility for a role, position or function".³² The preliminary steps of this process help us to pose fundamental questions that we do not ask often enough: What kind of elected official do we want? What candidate do we need? What does the list that we want to create look like?

Contributions from Manon Loisel (Acadie) and Nicolas Rio (Partie prenante) on the subject of the "impossible mission for mayors"³³ and the necessity of redefining the role are particularly illuminating on this subject. "Nothing worse than being presented as a superhero when you don't have super-powers" summarises their claim. They argue that qualities like listening, facilitation and cooperation are increasingly valued in the complex field of local governing, which is often gripped by crisis. The invitation is not to establish a skillset in advance, but to engage in a collective endeavour to redefine local objectives, and the qualities and criteria for choosing the elected representative of a given territory.

31 Bachir, M. (2020), "Citoyennes et participatives : des listes qui réenchangent la politique", *Le Monde*, 26 February.

32 Fiches outils de l'Université du Nous

33 Loisel, M. and Rio, N. (2019), "Elu local: mission impossible ou métier à repenser?", *Horizons Publics*, 8 April.

Such a method, adopted by many participatory lists during the campaign, could have fallen foul of a kind of mere instrumentalisation, particularly when selecting heads of the lists. In some instances, election by consent did seem to methodologically “endorse” the established leaders. Where this was the case, it at least served as a process of designation, “confirmation” AND (!) of dialogue. This resulted in some unexpected benefits. It opened up a space for honest discussion on the qualities, roles, doubts, and potential objections concerning a person occupying the top of the list (or indeed any other place on the list). This listening exercise helped to ease tensions and resulted in greater legitimacy for the chosen candidates.

60.4% of participatory lists used a collective intelligence method to select their candidates

How did you choose the official candidates for your list?

- > 60.4% used a method of collective intelligence: election without candidate and/or majority judgment and/or drawing of lots
- > 25% by cooptation: the appointment of a new member by those who are already part of the list

How did you chose the head of the list?

- > 39% by election of the candidate
- > 25% by majority judgement
- > 20% by a classic election
- > 16% by cooptation

Source: Action Commune

Finding the delicate balance between the collective and candidates

Experimentation with democratic methods has revealed the challenges of inducting and repositioning leaders within more horizontal dynamics. Leaders can play an incredibly positive role as long as they are positioned as contributors, in the role of a “cooperative leader”. But this collective aspect is difficult to reconcile with the sheer pressure of an electoral system that seeks out the embodiment of the one “almighty leader”, she or he who will become (or not) the list’s representative. In light of this kind of pressure, some creative measures were taken. For instance, in the case of Montpellier citizens are very familiar with an intense individualisation of power exemplified by previous figureheads like Georges Frêche (Montpellier’s Mayor from 1977

to 2004, deputy and French politician). Therefore, the list #NousSommes (#WeAre) decided to combine collective functions alongside visibly elevating Alenka Doulain as the head of the list. In order to be recognised as the main contact and a credible candidate in the eyes of the local press and political competitors, the #WeAre list felt the need to identify its head of list as soon as possible and centre its electoral campaign (e.g. posters) around her. Strategic decisions and operational organisation were established through collective decisions. A “comité de suivi” (monitoring committee) was dedicated to organize debate sessions and adapt methods to guarantee the qualitative and collective process of decision making. Alenka Doulain, head of the list, always applied and respected the collective will. These choices around political communication clearly demonstrate the tension between the need for an embodied leader and the collective element of these candidacies.

Drawing lots

The drawing of lots, organised amongst the electoral population (e.g. Toulouse, St Médard en Jalles) ensured a better inclusion of people living in peripheral and popular neighbourhoods and put the question back to ordinary citizens: do you want to be our elected representative? The democratic experiments of #MAVOIX (#MYVOICE) (2017 legislative elections) and [La Primaire.org](#) (2017 presidential elections) were inspiring forebears. The recent [Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat](#) (Citizens’ Climate Convention) with its 150 randomly selected citizens was another interesting contribution to making the limits of representative democracy more evident. The global Citizens’ Climate Convention process is a good demonstration that, with good information, good training, qualitative debates, methods and independent guarantors we can take good public decisions, and citizens can usefully contribute to this democratic debate.

Despite the significant logistical challenges of getting the process of drawing lots off the ground (access to the electoral register, the pedagogy behind the process, the revival of meetings to draw lots etc.) and the low positive response rate, sortition organized by participatory lists during local election campaign nonetheless constituted a serious qualitative effort. What is more, some individual trajectories emerged, as was the case with Agathe Voiron, for example, a citizen of Toulouse whose lot was drawn and who went on to become a spokesperson on behalf of the Archipel Citoyen list.

Direct and representative democracy: competitive or complementary?

Underpinning all the methods, there is a will to put inhabitants at the center of decision making. In France, there has been a good deal of experimentation with participative democratic

approaches at the local level, but this has been critiqued for being largely organised without sufficient resources and for failing to give inhabitants a substantive role in decision-making. Today, particularly with the Yellow Vests movement, people are demanding more direct and real democratic processes. Indeed, it is one of the central purposes of the participatory lists: to share political power and include inhabitants directly in decision-making. This is no simple thing, and it will be an ongoing project over the next six year mandate of local government.

In this attempt to give citizens a central role we come across a possible tension between representative and deliberative, even direct, democracy. Is the drawing of lots, for example, done in opposition to - or even in place of - the role of elected officials? This debate has recently been reinvigorated with the rumblings brought about by the Citizen's Climate Convention (CCC). Loïc Blondiaux, political scientist and member of the CCC organising committee, responded on this matter in an interview with the *Gazette des Communes*³⁴. The question was: Some people have denounced this triumph of direct democracy as an attack on representative democracy. What would you say to them?

That it's over-simplifying matters and it's a backseat comment! We are not talking about direct democracy, as it's not the people who decide: they participate in unpacking the decision and proposal. We are rather talking about deliberative democracy, in which the process of constructing the decision is fundamental to ensuring it is accepted and considered legitimate. In our current system, the decision-making space is reserved for a small number of actors (elected officials, experts etc.). Deliberative democracy is therefore a deepening of representative democracy, not an alternative. In the context of ever-increasing abstention rates in elections, we are called to imagine other possibilities if we do not want our political institutions to disappear and be replaced by authoritarian versions of power.

Participatory lists certainly made tangible use of creativity and imagination over the course of the campaign. The political tapestry is woven through interactions between different actors (elected officials, bodies, intermediaries and residents) as well different social, political and institutional spheres, economics and media. This systemic perspective sits at the heart of the municipalist approach. Furthermore, there is an invitation to regulate these new forms of dialogue that are positioned alongside or against institutions (municipal institutions in particular) because, no matter how civilian or grassroots they may be, they are opening up new spaces to speak truth to power. Such a step, if finally implemented, would be a first step to change some of the problems of representative democracy.

34 Blondiaux, L. (2020), "Il y aura un avant et un après - convention citoyenne", *Gazette des Communes*, 27 July.

Charters and codes of ethics

The work that took place to draw up charters and codes of ethics gives cause to note the richness of inspiration between Spain³⁵ and France based on the previous experiences from Spanish cities of change. There was also a good peer-to-peer collaboration between different participatory lists in France³⁶. These codes of ethics made it a point of honour to stand up against the professionalisation of politics, conflicts of interest, non-ethical campaign funding, limiting the number of mandates and ensuring better transparency around the official agenda etc. The charters shone a spotlight on the importance and responsibility of citizens in ensuring that commitments are upheld. The experience in Spain tells us that, whilst this exertion of pressure is more than necessary, it has a tendency to wane over time and in the end the commitments taken on by those elected are not always respected or codes of ethics are modified. It is unfortunate that insufficient attention was paid to revocability, monitoring and citizen control protocols during these elections. This political ethic is a clearly important lever in rebuilding confidence in political representatives and one to keep alive.

These methods and tools justifiably advocate for the mutual responsibility of everyone within the democratic system, from elected people to inhabitants in the way to contribute, to take decisions, to control respect of engagements, to care for cities, villages, people, nature, etc. They give us an opportunity to rebuild trust in future elected officials, both personally and interpersonally. All this progress marks a profound, personal and cultural change, which is vital if individuals, collectives and institutions are to achieve long-lasting transformation. We have observed changes in behaviour, habits, the creation of conditions for listening, dialogue, working through disagreements, a better distribution of power. We have also seen the rise of political ethics and esteem, and a belief in the capacity to make change happen both individually and collectively. Are these not the first steps towards a more systemic transformation?

The knot of alliances

Working in political confluence (open platforms that include political parties but also other organisations and individual citizens) was a central theme of discussion amongst the “cities of change” in Spain. Although they produce a lot of tensions too (and many of the confluences

³⁵ See for example *Governing by obeying. Barcelona en Comu's Code of Ethics*.

³⁶ For example, the Code of Ethics for Candidates of the Archipelago Citoyen de Toulouse has been widely shared with others, inspiring and providing the base for the drafting of many other ethical codes of participatory lists.

were actually dismantled after a few years), some political alliances seem to have been better regarded and made it easier to “get rid of political labels”³⁷. In France, however, these alliances were seen more as a source of tension and a reflection of traditional, party politics. In the words of Rémi Lefebvre:³⁸

As we know, political parties arouse a strong sense of mistrust (in the latest CEVIPOF surveys, French confidence rates fall below 10%). Municipal elections traditionally distance themselves from party politics, especially in small and medium-sized towns. But this anti-party attitude was radicalised during this ballot. A kind of erasure is at work both at local and national level. It is accompanied by an unprecedented scrambling of the political offer.

The tension between defiance and political alliances

The subject of alliances has generated layer upon layer of tension: between naivety and the threat of being consumed by old-school politics, between political purity and realpolitik, between the desire for long-term movement building and the desire to win elections at all costs, between political shake-up and upholding the status quo, between vertical and horizontal models, between cooperation and domination, etc. There are many lessons to take from these efforts to refresh practices and representations.

These tensions have been palpable from the outset of the election campaign, both in the setting up of lists and the choice over whether (or not) to collaborate with party politics. The lockdown between the two rounds of the election played a more or less positive part. For some, “this allowed for exchange and for us to take our time in forging alliances and contracts of cooperation that would never have existed had we had only had 48 hours between the two rounds”, argued Bruno Cristofoli from Saint-Médard-en-Jalles³⁹. For other lists (Toulouse, Montpellier, Perpignan), the lockdown instead led to a distancing, cutting short the collective ambition and the energy of connection (including through face to face interaction) that it generated.

These alliances therefore, more or less, were negotiated under the pressure and urgency of the impending second round. On the whole, alliances (or schisms) between candidate lists were not anticipated and the situation was therefore insufficiently prepared for. There is, however, a more fundamental debate to be had on the subject of the ultimate ambitions of these lists. Striking the right balance between winning power this year and the slower work of building a social movement is no simple task during an election campaign. According to Rémi Lefebvre⁴⁰:

37 Lamant, L. (2016), “Squatter le pouvoir. Les mairies rebelles d’Espagne”, Lux Éditeur, November.

38 “Municipales 2020: les partis politiques, invisibles et omniprésents”, op. cit.

39 Action Commune (2020), “Lundi en Commun #6 Second tour et premiers pas à la mairie”, 8 June.

40 Ibid.

Citizens bring a sort of virginal quality to (political) parties; in their freshness, their social diversity, democratic commitment and their new political aspirations (municipalism, participation...). But citizens also aim for electoral efficiency, rejecting the principle of a candidature de temoignage⁴¹. The reality of an election puts pressure on parties to bring people together, to be credible, to possess certain resources (electoral aptitude, funding, notoriety, experience...)

Pragmatism and tactical politics

In the end, participatory lists showed their pragmatic side and engaged in “tactical politics”⁴². They accepted the need to get out of their comfort zones, open themselves up, and occasionally take risks. Still, candidates paid the price for the collective choices of alliances, both in their private and in their professional or activist lives (divorce, dismissal, exclusion by their association, etc.).

At some point over the course of the election campaign (either before the first round or in between the two rounds), lists established the conditions of their alliances. In the Archipel Citoyen list (Toulouse), this was carried out through a nomination process (combining voluntary candidacies, polling, majority judgement and drawing lots), 5 pillars and a manifesto which served as a basis for all candidate applications.

As Jonas George from Archipel Citoyen pointed out, they had to go beyond simply signing up to manifestos and concern themselves with the political forces that comprise the lists: “we have to go further in the operating agreements” is what he claimed in an informal interview.

For example, a cooperation contract⁴³ was drafted during the merge of the Saint-Médard en Jalles Demain and the Saint-Médard en Jalles Pour Vous lists with the purpose of ironing out these common operating principles (measures, ethics, citizen participation, role of the town hall and in the city, etc.). We will see alliances testing and adapting their systems in practice in the places where they succeeded, such as Saint-Médard en Jalles, Poitiers, Chambéry, Rezé and Annecy.

Somewhere between radicalism and a well-oiled political system, the way things are done has been challenged and hybridised. “Municipal policy remains a party affair, all the more so as the size of the municipality is bigger” concludes Rémi Lefebvre in his article⁴⁴.

41 A candidacy that is merely symbolic in the sense that they have no real chance of winning.

42 “Faire Commun.e”, op. cit.

43 <https://www.christian-proust-citoyen.fr/municipales-2020/m7/>

44 “Municipales 2020: les partis politiques, invisibles et omniprésents”, op. cit.

Political communication

Without denying the role that parties play at the local level, it was difficult to find anything other than a detailed analysis of the traditional party forces in the media coverage surrounding this municipal campaign, thus missing the alternative political proposition being put forward, especially on the part of citizens.

Whilst participatory lists clearly set themselves apart in their dedicated efforts to revitalise relations with local residents, it is still important to unpick their political communications. Not only can we speak of the shortfalls of the lists themselves.

Getting abstainers back to the ballot box, especially the working class and in the context of a global pandemic, is a colossal task that the governing political elites and the local media are first to lose interest in. Almost nobody made the effort to have a real local debate. The fundamental issues remain invisible. We could never have expected, therefore, the sheer miracle of these citizen collectives and participatory lists⁴⁵.

A political UFO

By the end of these municipal elections the participatory lists sit outside of political categories, like political UFOs. This was confirmed when it came to declaring candidacies, when many lists found themselves automatically ascribed to the miscellaneous left wing category of lists even though they were clearly cross-party in their configuration. Stuck in the left-right divide, they were on occasion radicalised by commentators as being “extreme left”. Caroline Forgues from the L’alternative - Perpignan list attests to this struggle which led her to write to local journalists, as she was not comfortable with this inaccurate labelling. In a similar case, the Leucate Citoyenne list went as far as making an official request to the prefecture to change their category from “miscellaneous left” to simply “miscellaneous”, although this was an unsuccessful attempt. Political labelling is limited and does not yet allow for these approaches.

Political responsibility of the media?

This take on matters is amplified through the media’s gaze, which endlessly repeats the same old story of traditional political systems: the prioritisation of political parties, the left-right divide, the hyper-personalisation of power, national politics and, sometimes, sensationalism. This is all the more apparent with the development of an independent, decentralised press and investiga-

45 Disson, A. (2020), “La société civile doit s’organiser pour peser sur l’agenda municipal”, Interview with Guillaume Gourgues, Médiacités, 21 July.

tive journalism, which engaged in a deeper analysis and reflected the nature of the candidacies more accurately (Médiapart, Reporterre, Médiacités, Bastamag, Le D'Oc, etc.).

A few weeks before the first round, and then again as the final results of the second round came to light, media interest in this “new” phenomenon began to wane significantly. Coverage focused on rifts between parties, big cities, party headliners and the “green wave”. All of this against the backdrop of national politics (in a quite centralised country) and the implications of the municipal elections for the political strategies ahead of the 2022 presidential elections. So this groundswell in citizen forces remained invisible: the impact of their local projects in designated territories, the strength of the alliances that carried them to victory (especially the green wave), the qualitative work that went into developing their programmes, their way of doing politics, their ability to unite people, their long-term trajectory, etc.

This issue gives us cause to work on the way that the change in practice demonstrated by lists is unpacked and portrayed in the media (from ethical charters and drawing lots from the local population, to collective decision-making, co-creation of programmes with residents, and nomination processes for identifying leaders and managing lists). Likewise more work can be done on the way in which these results are analysed beyond electoral point-scoring (the trajectory of collectives, their impact on local organising and activism, the changing relationship with politics etc.)

Deplorable political violence

Without a doubt, democratic transformation happens only through the concrete, lived - even personal - experience of it in practice. It affects us on multiple levels - political, social, professional, activist, familial, etc. - as well as on a psychological and emotional level⁴⁶. Whilst collective ambition can be an immensely uplifting emotional experience, during campaign time, unprecedented levels of violence can erupt.

Political competitors of the participatory lists sometimes used this violence. Snatching measures proposed by participatory lists and positioning them as their own, tactical fear-mongering aimed at competitors, engaging in homophobic discourse, carrying out acts of vandalism and passing them off as their opponent's actions, threatening shopkeepers to make them stop supporting the competition, and putting pressure on local collectives to force candidates that work their to resign are just some examples. “I am shocked and I didn't think that we could stoop this low with such nastiness” confided one of the candidates during a “Lundi en Commun” meeting.

⁴⁶ See, in this perspective, Blondiaux, L. and Traïni, C. (2018), *La démocratie des émotions. Dispositifs participatifs et gouvernabilité des affects*, Presses de Sciences Po, Paris..

Can we carry on tolerating this kind of trivialised violence? Some activists from the participatory lists opt out and chose to ignore this violence, demonstrating strength in their refusal to perpetuate the cycle.⁴⁷

Conclusion

“In this ‘citizenist’ trend we see a two-fold movement that may appear contradictory, on the one hand spontaneous and on the other, deeply-rooted in citizen lists. [The lists] appeared seemingly out of nowhere and in a piecemeal fashion, which makes them come across like a passing fad. But we would be wrong to see them only through this lens. Neither entirely spontaneous or isolated, and far from being one-off occurrences popping up at random, these lists are linked, they are assigned support networks to assist their set-up and training in France, Spain and across Europe (...) For this reason they form part of a deeper movement that shares methods and common processes”⁴⁸

By the end of municipal elections and the testing times of the COVID 19 health crisis, municipalities affirmed their vital role in providing urgent local responses and support. They can be the fertile ground, the base on which to build resilience and make the monumental decision to part with a system that has led us into crisis after crisis, each more serious and irreversible than the previous. This new awareness, however fragile, is one of the undeniable results of these unprecedented municipal elections. Wins aside, humility is key for a movement that remains a minority. However, as Myriam Bachir points out, this can not simply be seen as a passing trend. The lists represent a much deeper movement that is crossing borders.

The P2P learning that preceded the municipal elections in France made it possible to share experiences and connect with other municipalist actors in Spain, across Europe, and globally. It was bursting with inspiration and proposals. This was the case, for example, with proposals based in the *Agenda pour le droit à la ville* (Agenda for the Right to the City) platform, those inspired by commoners experiences and tools in the municipal context through the website “*politique des communs*” and then, international efforts concerning the “*remunicipalisation*” of public services project, with experiences from over 1400 cities around the world. This is strengthening the field of social and democratic experiments in newly elected municipalities. At the local level, the commitment to the development of democratic public action has inspired new forms of cooperation (between actors, self-organized dynamics and more institutional ones, scales of public decision, thematics from health to social, economic or ecological issues, etc.), along with policies and services co-produced with inhabitants that respond both to urgent needs and long-term visions.

⁴⁷ Charlotte Marchandise encapsulates this position in her most recent book *Radicale Bisounourse*, Le Hêtre Myriadis, 2019.

⁴⁸ “Citoyennes et participatives: des listes qui réenchangent la politique”, op. cit.

Beyond electoral victories there is a cultural battle underway, a battle of imagination and representation that is in it for the long haul. It involves cracking direct democracy wide open, ambitious transition policies, and takes into account the relationship of living beings and their institutional spaces in the long term. It requires a return to “wellbeing” and “care” in order to maintain coherence between the process and results. And to remain open to all and possible in the long term, it requires us to learn self-care. Whether or not the new candidacies to the municipal elections were successful during the March and June 2020 rounds, a much deeper lever for change has been well and truly activated by these dynamics.

Now we need to take a step back and keep on analysing, posing critical questions, learning, sharing and telling the story! Reflective and analytical spaces are just as necessary as social, political and active spaces. They allow for these experiences, and those who lived them, to recharge and seek the inspiration to experiment all over again in the coming years.