

A PERILOUS DEMOCRATIC EXERCISE WITHIN AN EXCEPTIONAL HEALTH CONTEXT

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Abstract

This article questions the organization of the French municipal elections within the context of a global pandemic (COVID-19). In a little-explored scientific field in the cities of Le Mans, Allonnes, Coulaines and Arnage, we examine the practice of abstention on the part of voters in Le Mans Métropole. In this regard, principal component analysis followed by hierarchical cluster analysis was performed. We used the data of both the French National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE) and the French Ministry of the Interior. Our main goal consisted in highlighting the electoral geography of Le Mans Métropole at the municipal and sub-municipal levels, using maps. We thus report that abstention rates soared. This fact corroborates the initial hypothesis of low turnout by the population at the end of this first round of the municipal elections and benefiting certain candidates on the local electoral scene. This was particularly the case for the left-wing party, the victory of which was also analysed within a national context of the Socialist Party's decline.

Keywords: Municipal Election, Abstention, Covid-19, France, Urban Community Of Le Mans, Spatial Analysis.

Resumo / Résumé

UM PERIGOSO EXERCÍCIO DEMOCRÁTICO DENTRO DE UM EXCELENTE CONTEXTO DE SAÚDE

Este artigo questiona a organização das eleições municipais francesas no contexto de uma pandemia global (COVID-19). Num campo científico pouco explorado nas cidades de Le Mans, Allonnes, Coulaines e Arnage, examinamos a prática da abstenção por parte dos eleitores em Le Mans Métropole. Nesse sentido, foi realizada análise de componentes principais seguida de análise hierárquica de cluster. Usamos os dados do Instituto Nacional Francês de Estatística e Estudos Econômicos (INSEE) e do Ministério do Interior francês. Nosso principal objetivo consistiu em destacar a geografia eleitoral de Le Mans Métropole nos níveis municipal e submunicipal, por meio de mapas. Assim, relatamos que as taxas de abstenção dispararam. Esse fato corrobora a hipótese inicial de baixo comparecimento da população ao final deste primeiro turno das eleições municipais e beneficiando determinados candidatos no cenário eleitoral local. Este foi particularmente o caso do partido de esquerda, cuja vitória também foi analisada num contexto nacional de declínio do Partido Socialista.

Palavras-chave: Eleição Municipal, Abstenção, Covid-19, França, Comunidade Urbana De Le Mans, Análise Espacial.

UN EXERCICE DÉMOCRATIQUE PÉRILEUX DANS UN CONTEXTE SANITAIRE EXCEPTIONNEL

Cet article interroge l'organisation des élections municipales françaises dans un contexte de pandémie mondiale (COVID-19). Dans un domaine scientifique peu exploré dans les villes du Mans, d'Allonnes, de Coulaines et d'Arnage, nous examinons la pratique de l'abstention des électeurs de Le Mans Métropole. A cet égard, une analyse en composantes principales suivie d'une analyse hiérarchique des grappes a été effectuée. Nous avons utilisé les données de l'Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques (INSEE) et du ministère français de l'Intérieur. Notre objectif principal consistait à mettre en évidence la géographie électorale de Le Mans Métropole aux niveaux communal et infracommunal, à l'aide de cartes. Nous signalons ainsi que les taux d'abstention ont grimpé en flèche. Ce fait corrobore l'hypothèse initiale d'une faible participation de la population à l'issue de ce premier tour des élections municipales et profitant à certains candidats sur la scène électorale locale. C'est notamment le cas du parti de gauche, dont la victoire est également analysée dans un contexte national de déclin du Parti socialiste.

Mots-clés: élection municipale, abstention, covid-19, France, communauté urbaine du Mans, analyse spatiale.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic began to spread more significantly in France in February 2020. In its most severe forms, this disease transmitted by droplets, by indirect contact from contaminated surfaces, or by airborne particles in indoor and outdoor environments results in death (Ministry of the Interior, 2020a). The French government implemented solutions involving graduated social distancing in order to reduce the number of cases of contamination and to better protect its population (Ministry of the Interior, 2020b). This preventive measure quickly proved imperative in the lead-up to a strategic election campaign for the government in place and in search of a real geographical base in the French cities. Within this context of uncertainty related to the health crisis, President Emmanuel Macron decided to maintain this main event of the country's political life after consulting the government majority, the opposition, as well as a health crisis monitoring committee composed of scientists. This decision, followed by television addresses by the President and the Prime Minister, had a real impact on the conditions under which the elections were organized (Ministry of the Interior, 2020b) as highlighted by Goar (2020). According to this author, 25% of non-voters decided not to go to the polling stations after Emmanuel Macron's first television address and the announcement of school closures. Some 32% of potential voters made their decision after the Prime Minister's speech of 14 March. It is this historic moment in French democratic life that we want to address in this article through the prism of political geography (Rosière, 2017). We intend to show how the abstention dynamic of March 2020 is part of a more serious and more general trend of decreasing voter turnout (Muxel, 2008). From a theoretical and methodological perspective, we use the concepts and tools of an electoral geography open to other multidisciplinary approaches (Gombin, 2014). We estimate the impact of abstention and its evolution between 2014 and 2020 using spatial analysis in the urban area of Le Mans. The comparative approach (urban communities of Caen, Tours and Angers) allows us to quantify the trends in decreasing voter turnout at the local level. With regard to the Le Mans Métropole urban community, two scales will be examined. We will look at the evolution of abstention rates in the towns of the urban community, and focus on the perimeters of the polling stations in the cities of Le Mans, Allonnes, Arnage and Coulaines. This will mainly serve to corroborate the hypothesis of a low legitimacy of the elected lists at the end of the first round of the 2020 municipal elections. We will test the fact that a cumulative effect of fear linked to government announcements concerning the health crisis had an impact on local voter turnout in these cities.

A TREND TOWARDS INCREASED ABSTENTION

In terms of voter turnout, many multidisciplinary studies have highlighted the trends observed over more than a decade. Indeed, the constant increase in abstention rates reveals a tangible political crisis in the representativeness of candidates, whatever the elections. In this regard, the works by Muxel (2007, 2008, 2017) and by Braconnier (2014) clearly show lower voter turnout for the legislative and European elections. This phenomenon now also applies to municipal elections (Foucault, 2019). Thus, in cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants, the drop in voter turnout reflects an average decline of 53.8% of the electoral base of political representatives. This decline primarily concerns disadvantaged young people in working-class neighbourhoods, while senior citizens continue to vote.

Before presenting our field of study, we will make some comparisons to better illustrate this trend. The use of spatial analysis is in line here with many works in electoral geography (Bussi et al., 2004; Lévy, 2003; Ravenel et al., 2003; Giraut, 2004). These approaches highlight an electoral geography at different scales. Western France has often represented a field of study conducive to the practice of an electoral geography since Siegfried, as noted by Bussi (2016). Our field of analysis is smaller, covering the perimeters of the urban communities of Angers, Caen and Tours. These urban communities were selected because of their geographical proximity to Le Mans Métropole. We chose the variable of the number of inhabitants, a choice that was also linked to our data collection capability. After numerous requests to the heads of departments of the relevant local authorities, we were able to collect usable data on these four inter-municipalities. Moreover, we decided on the smallest scale of analysis (the polling station) in order to reduce any risk of ecological fallacy. We thus proceeded to reconstruct the polling stations according to the methodology determined by Beauguitte and Colange (2013).

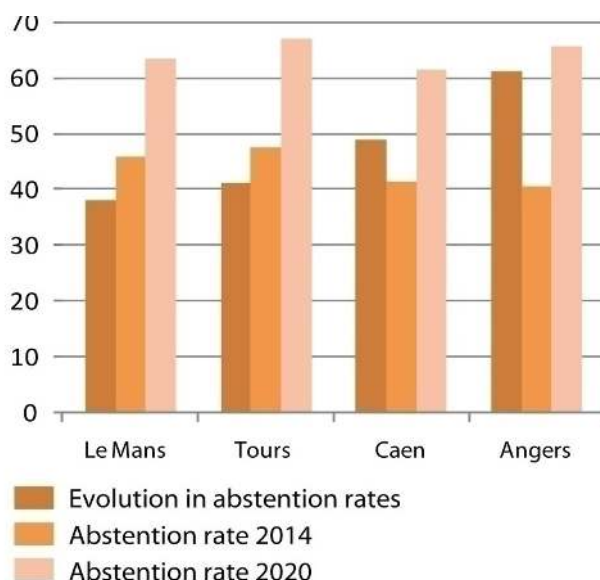


Figure 1- Evolution in abstention rates between 2014 and 2020, urban communities of Tours, Caen, Angers and Le Mans. Source: Local authorities, 2020.

Figure 1 shows a dramatic evolution in abstention rates between the 2014 and 2020 municipal elections in the observed cities. The lowest score is related to the Public Establishment for Intercommunal Cooperation (Établissement Public de Coopération Intercommunale, EPCI) of Le Mans with a value of 38.26%, while Angers Loire Métropole shows a 61.27% increase in the abstention rate.

It is also interesting to superimpose on the abstention data the delimitations of the priority city districts (Quartiers Prioritaires de la Politique de la Ville, QPPV) (Figure 2).

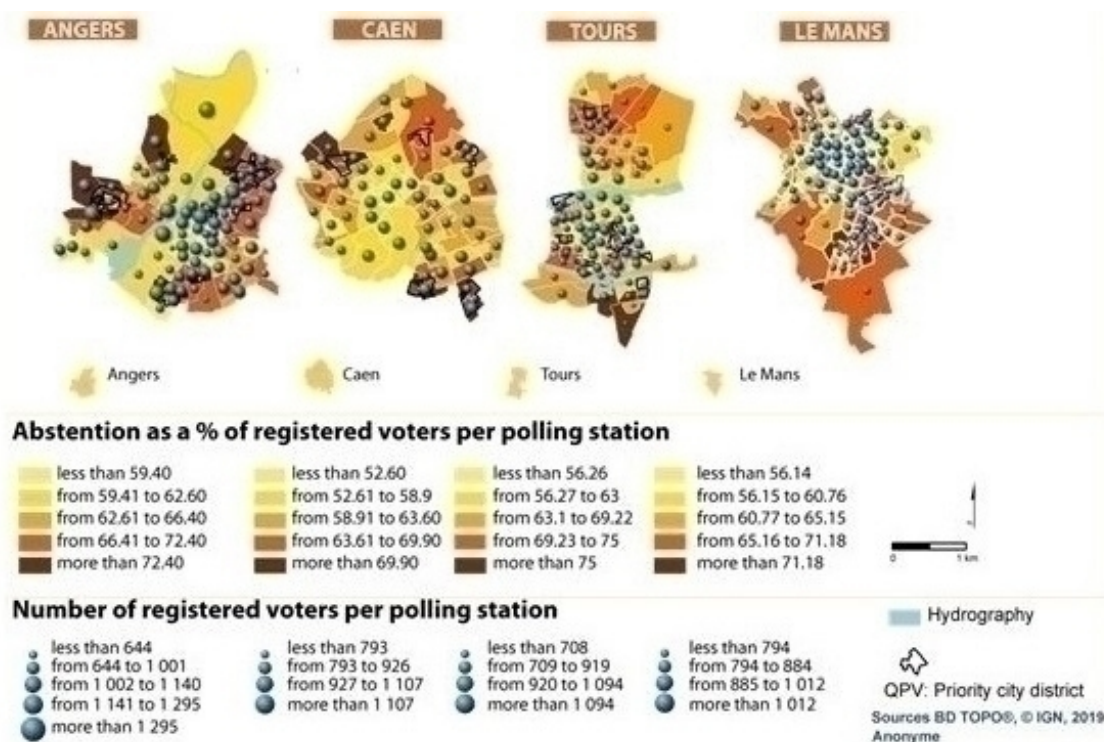


Figure 2- High abstention rates in the priority city districts

In these priority city districts, non-voting rates are strongly correlated with the existence of pockets of poverty (Bailly and Louche, 2018). These different districts are characterized by populations with a median income that is some 60% lower than the national average, confirming the national trends observed.

The Le Mans Métropole urban community, located in the Pays de la Loire region, approximately an hour's drive from Paris, Rennes, Angers and Caen, comprises 20 municipalities of very different sizes and population densities. The statistical distribution of the number of inhabitants in this EPCI shows that the smallest village (Fay) has 643 inhabitants, compared with 142,991 for the central city. A brief foray into the past is necessary here to understand how the urbanization process of the study area took place. This urban history, as described in detail by Bertrand, Chevalier, Dodier and Gasnier (2000), highlights the social characteristics of the populations studied, whose voting patterns we are attempting to understand. These authors show that from the 1930s onwards, urban sprawl took place in Le Mans, mainly to the south of the city. The railway station very logically led to the establishment of companies and workers' housing. This phenomenon increased in the 1950s with the arrival of the Renault factory. By settling a majority of industrial and blue-collar workers as well as clerical, sales and services employees from the neighbouring Sarthe countryside in Allonnes and Ronceray-Glonnière, the car industry reinforced the industrial and working-class connotation of the city of Le Mans. The rivers (the Huisne and the Sarthe) and the railway infrastructures thus became physical and symbolic barriers between the city centre and its periphery. A relatively well-off population settled to the north of this boundary, while a population with a more modest income lived and worked to the south. To the north of this physical boundary, the city model was structured around market towns that gradually formed an urban area of neighbourhoods with unique identities. This part of the city was perceived in its entirety as a large town. To the south of this urban divide, the morphology of the buildings also bore witness to this socio-spatial division of the population (working-class housing estates, rows of identical housing). The policy of large housing estates was especially marked in the south and east of Le Mans by the creation of the Sablons district and the Glonnières estate. In the early 1980s, the political vision of a humanist and culturalist city gradually took hold under Mayor Robert Jarry (1977-2020). The city of Le Mans became a stronghold of the left-wing political spectrum and notably of the Parti Socialiste (Socialist Party, PS) during the terms of office of Jean-Claude Boulard (2001-2018) followed by Stéphane Le Foll (2018 to present).

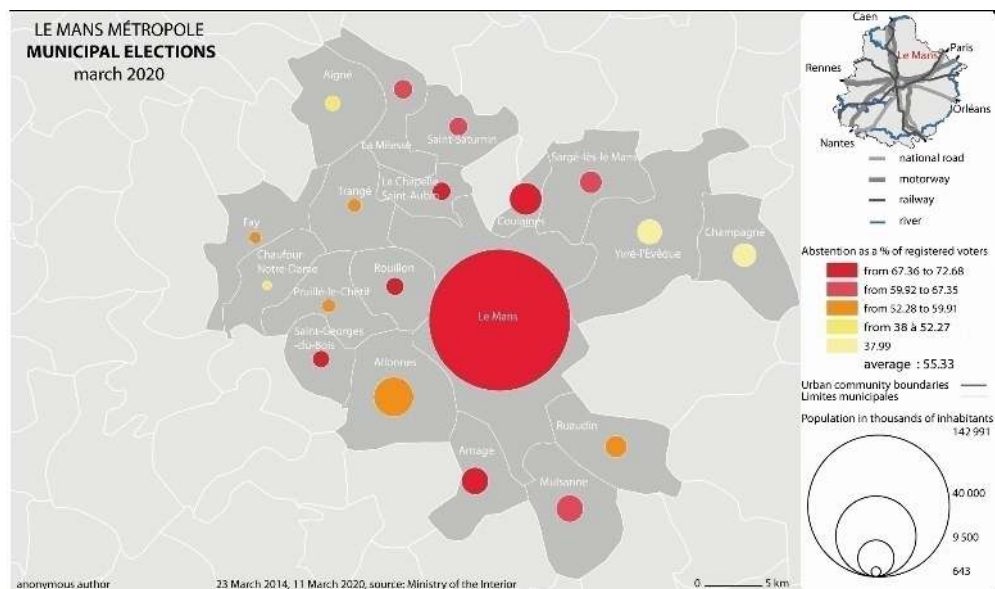


Figure 3 - Abstention rates in Le Mans Métropole, 15 March 2020, anonymous author, source: Ministry of the Interior, 2020e.

The most populated municipalities of the urban area (Allonnes, Coulaines and Arnage) have also been characterized by this anchoring of left-wing politics over the past decade. The inhabitants of Allonnes have voted for representatives of the Parti Communiste Français (French Communist Party, PCF) since the 1970s, first with the election of Yvon Luby (1977-2008) and then Gilles Leproust (2008 to present). In Coulaines, Christophe Rouillon has represented the PS since 2001. Previously, the municipality had been a historic stronghold of right-wing political parties, governed by Georges Bollengier-Stragier (1959-2001). In Arnage, the PS has also been present since 2001, first under André Langevin (2001-2014) and then Thierry Cozic (2014 to present).

The analysis of Figure 3 shows a delimitation of abstention rates along a north/south axis in four sectors. The centre of the study area is characterized by rates ranging from 59.92% to 67.35% (Le Mans, Coulaines, Arnage, La Chapelle-Saint-Aubin and Rouillon). To the north and south of this group, the abstention rate for the first round of the municipal elections varied between 67.36% and 72.68%. This was the case for the municipalities of Saint-Saturnin, La Milesse, Sargé-lès-le-Mans and Mulsanne. The last two sectors are located to the west and east of the city area. They are characterized by particularly high abstention rates (Aigné, Chaufour-Notre-Dame, Yvré-l'Évêque and Champagné), ranging from 37.99% (one point above the 2014 average, which was already a record for this type of election) to 59.91%.

In terms of dynamics, at the municipal level, a net increase in abstention rates can thus be observed. This has notably been the case for the northern municipalities of the Le Mans Métropole urban community between 2014 and 2020. In Trangé, La Chapelle-Saint-Aubin and Saint-Saturnin, the evolution in the abstention rates is largely above average, ranging from 107.90% to 129% (Figure 4).

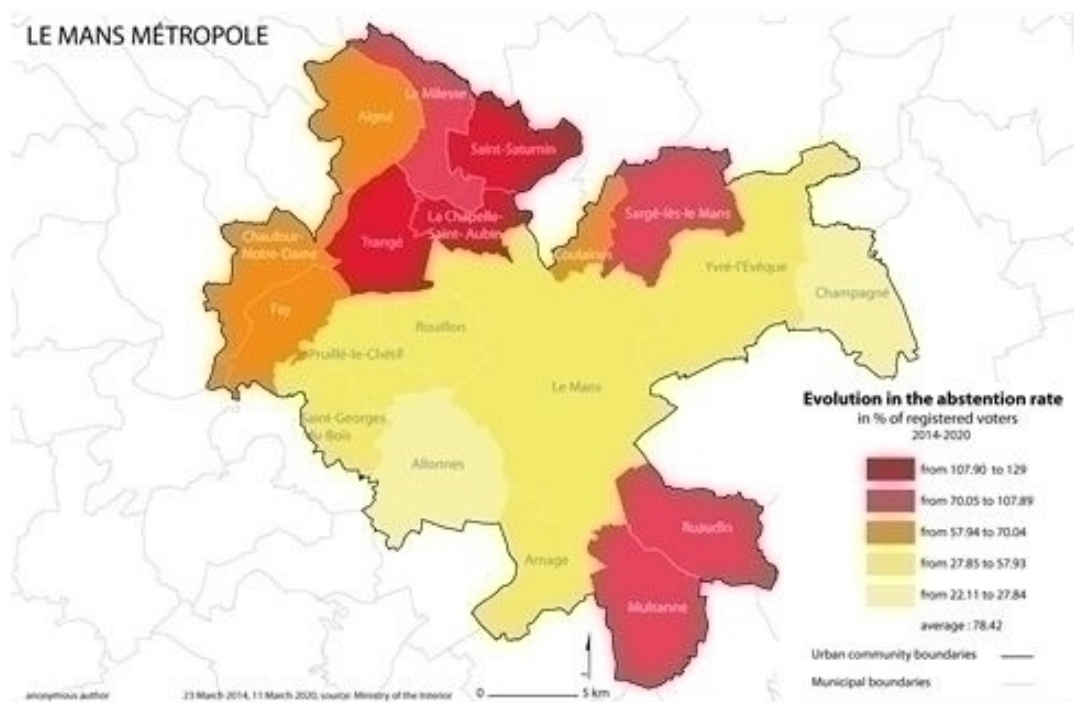


Figure 4 - Progression of abstention rates in the municipalities of Le Mans Métropole (2014-2020), anonymous author (Ministry of the Interior, 2020e).

A MULTIVARIATE ANALYSIS OF ABSTENTION RATES AND VOTER TURNOUT IN LE MANS MÉTROPOLE

Our aim was to understand the mechanisms of this abstention logic through an electoral geography based on the integration of the socio-economic characteristics of the populations in our study area. To do this, we used multivariate spatial analysis which shows convincing results, as evidenced by the work of Gana et al. (2012). After acquiring the topographic base of the cities concerned by our study from OpenStreetMap (OSM, 2019), we performed attribute table joins on the georeferenced layer. We integrated into this topographic base data from INSEE's localised disposable income system (FiLoSoFi database 2015) as well as the Ministry of the Interior's database (2020) on the results of the first round of the March 2020 elections. We initially selected some twenty indicators grouped into major themes (Table 2) and transformed the absolute quantitative data into percentages.

PERCENTAGE OF THE TARGET POPULATION CATEGORY	THEME
ABSTENTION	ABSTENTION
TOTAL POPULATION	POPULATION
POPULATION AGES 20-30	
POPULATION AGES 30-44	
POPULATION AGES 45-59	
POPULATION AGES 60 AND OVER	
POPULATION AGES 65 AND OVER	
PERSONS LIVING ALONE	HOUSING
FAMILY HOUSEHOLDS	
HOUSES	
APARTMENTS	
HOMEOWNERS	
TENANTS	
POPULATION WITHOUT QUALIFICATIONS	EDUCATION
POPULATION WITH VOCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS	
POPULATION WITH QUALIFICATIONS BEYOND HIGH-SCHOOL LEVEL	
POPULATION WITH VOCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS	
LOW INCOME	INCOME
WELFARE BENEFIT	
FARMERS	STATUS
CRAFTSPEOPLE, SHOPKEEPERS, COMPANY MANAGERS	
MANAGERS, HIGHER INTELLECTUAL PROFESSIONALS	
MIDDLE-LEVEL OCCUPATIONS	
CLERICAL, SALES AND SERVICES EMPLOYEES	
INDUSTRIAL AND BLUE-COLLAR WORKERS	
RETIRES	

Table 1 - Spatial analysis of abstention rates, municipalities of the Le Mans Métropole urban community, anonymous author, March 2020, source: INSEE, 2015; Ministry of the Interior, 2020.

We subsequently performed a principal component analysis (PCA) to identify the correlations between selected variables. The principal component analysis groups 82.74% of the data into four factorial axes. In the absence of exhaustive data for all of the indicators, we removed five municipalities from the field of observation. These were all located to the west of the Le Mans Métropole urban community. Finally, with a view to proposing a summary typology of the different municipalities studied, we carried out agglomerative hierarchical clustering (AHC) on the four factorial axes of the PCA.

Figure 5 reveals the existence of several types of similar socio-economic profiles with a fairly marked geography of abstention rates.

We distinguished a first spatial grouping (Category 1) composed of the municipalities of Le Mans, Allonnes and Coulaines, whose number of inhabitants is among the highest in the Le Mans Métropole urban community. Voter turnout was relatively high in these municipalities. It should be noted that there was a strong positive correlation in these areas between the two profiles considered – namely industrial and blue-collar workers, and clerical, sales and services employees (20-40 years of age), mainly tenants and with few qualifications – and effective voter turnout.

In the second group, composed of the municipalities of Arnage, Mulsanne and Ruaudin to the south of Le Mans as well as Champagné to the east, voter turnout was also greater than in the other municipalities of the study area. The profile of the inhabitants here was similar to that of the first group, except in terms of homeownership. The inhabitants of these municipalities who voted in the elections were relatively young, and for the most part homeowners. This relative voter turnout can be explained on the ground by mayors inclined to deploy proactive door-to-door strategies. For some outgoing mayors, it was a question of mobilizing their electoral base. This was notably the case in Allonnes.

The profiles of Categories 1 and 2, however, contrasted sharply with those of Categories 3 and 4. These groups included municipalities in the inner suburbs, mostly less populated, and where the standard of living was significantly higher than in the rest of the study area. Indeed, Category 3 mainly comprised retired people over 60 years of age, farmers and tenants who did not turn out in great numbers to vote. This was the case of the inhabitants of the municipalities of Rouillon, Yvré-l'Évêque, Sargé-lès-le-Mans and La Chapelle-Saint-Aubin. Finally, Category 4 was different from the previous group. This group included a majority of managers, middle-level occupations, craftspeople and homeowners with a higher standard of living than the rest of the citizens in the study area (Saint-Saturnin, La Milesse, Saint-Georges-du-Bois).

Analysis of the results of the 2017 French presidential election also showed that in the north-western group of municipalities with their relatively low voter turnout for the 2020 municipal elections, the vote for François Fillon of the Les Républicains party (The Republicans, LR) in the first round shifted in the second round to the La République En Marche (The Republic On The Move, LREM) and the Front National (National Front, today the Rassemblement National or National Rally, RN) parties. Clearly, we cannot state that the low turnout of voters with high economic and cultural capital was linked to fears related to the COVID-19 health crisis.

We then decided to further refine our approach by looking at all the polling stations of the four most populated municipalities of the Le Mans Métropole urban community. We thus added to the abstention data the socio-economic indicators from INSEE's IRIS infra-municipal data (Ilots Regroupés pour l'Information Statistique, aggregated units for statistical information), broken down by polling station. We were not able to collect data from the Coulaines polling station, the context under the current health crisis making it difficult to reach the relevant administrative services. We reconstructed the perimeter of the polling stations using georeferenced paper maps. We then digitized these topographic bases.

We also retrieved the shapefiles from the local authorities to integrate them into our geographic information system. At the same time, we acquired IRIS infra-municipal data (data.gouv.fr). Five infra-municipal data files were needed to produce our indicators: INSEE's databases on resident employment, couples-family-household, population, education, and housing (2016). We refocused our multivariate analysis on 23 indicators grouped into four main themes (status, housing, population and education), as shown in Table 1. We also performed a principal component analysis of these indicators, followed by agglomerative hierarchical clustering. We took into account the first four factorial axes, which represented 63.23% of the information assembled.

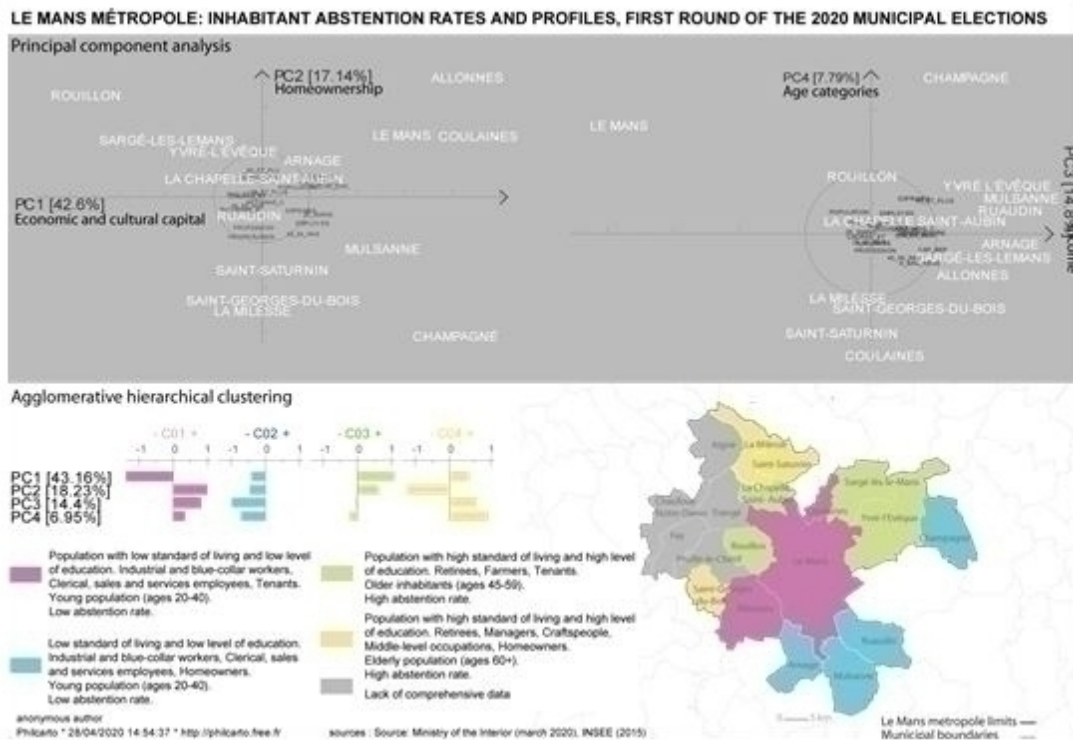


Figure 5 - Le Mans Métropole, multivariate analysis of abstention rates among the inhabitants of the urban community, first round of the municipal elections, anonymous author, source: INSEE, 2015; Ministry of the Interior, 2020e.

PERCENTAGE OF THE TARGET POPULATION CATEGORY	THEME
ABSTENTION	ABSTENTION
TOTAL POPULATION	POPULATION
POPULATION AGES 20-30	
POPULATION AGES 30-44	
POPULATION AGES 45-59	
POPULATION AGES 60 AND OVER	
POPULATION AGES 65 AND OVER	
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APARTMENTS	
HOMEOWNERS	
TENANTS	
POPULATION WITHOUT QUALIFICATIONS	EDUCATION
POPULATION WITH VOCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS	
POPULATION WITH QUALIFICATIONS BEYOND HIGH-SCHOOL LEVEL	
POPULATION WITH VOCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS	
LOW INCOME	INCOME
WELFARE BENEFIT	
FARMERS	STATUS
CRAFTSPEOPLE, SHOPKEEPERS, COMPANY MANAGERS	
MANAGERS, HIGHER INTELLECTUAL PROFESSIONALS	
MIDDLE-LEVEL OCCUPATIONS	
CLERICAL, SALES AND SERVICES EMPLOYEES	
INDUSTRIAL AND BLUE-COLLAR WORKERS	
RETIREEES	

Table 2 - Spatial analysis, polling stations of the most populated municipalities of the Le Mans Métropole urban community (Le Mans, Allonnes, Arnage), first round of the March 2020 municipal elections, anonymous author, source: INSEE, 2016; Ministry of the Interior, 2020e.

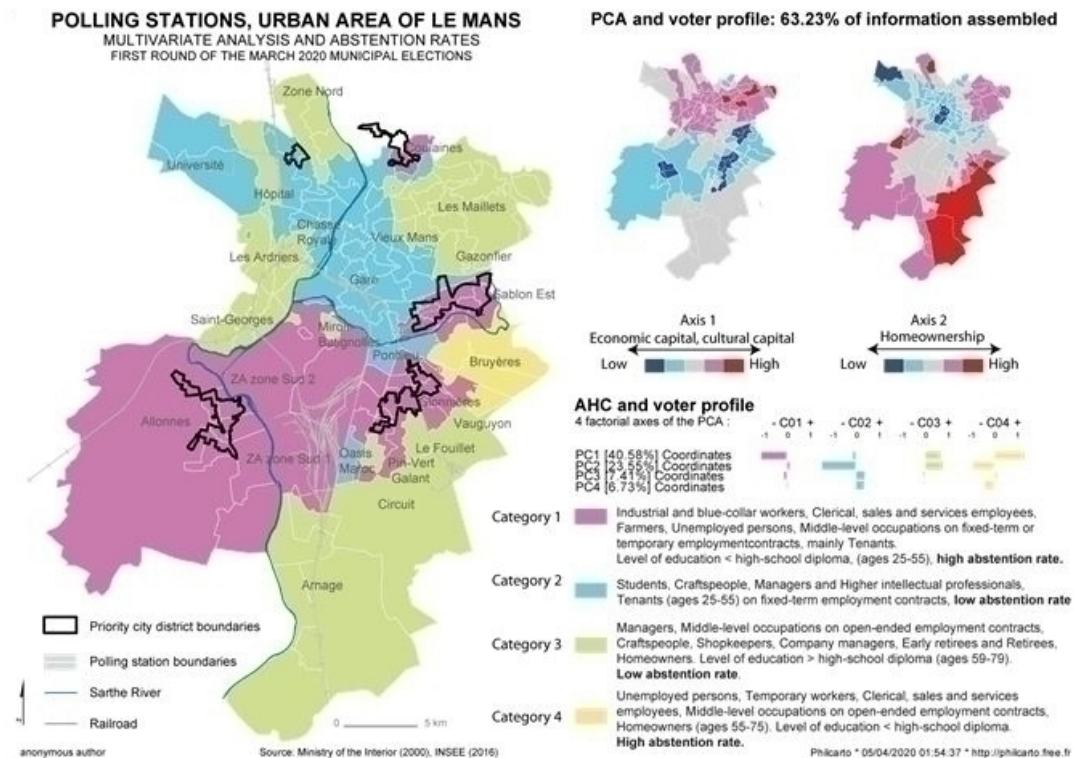


Figure 6 - Polling stations, urban area of Le Mans (Le Mans, Arnage, Allonnes), multivariate analysis of abstention rates, anonymous author, source: Ministry of the Interior, 2020e; INSEE, 2016.

The mapping of axes 1 and 2 of the PCA highlights in an extremely salient way the sociological delimitation resulting from the history of the urbanization of the city (Garnier, 1942).

Figure 6 shows four sectors strongly marked by the social and economic determinants of the inhabitants. The spatial distribution of Category 1 is mainly south of the railway line and the Sarthe River. This geographical distribution follows a west-east axis that runs from the municipality of Allonnes to the Sablons Est district of the city of Le Mans. All the priority city districts belong to this category, which should also include Coulaïnes (our knowledge of the field confirming this trend despite the absence of data related to the reconstitution of the electorate). This first category included industrial and blue-collar workers, clerical, sales and services employees, farmers, and middle-level occupations. With regard to their employment status, they held fixed-term or temporary work contracts. Their income was significantly lower than the average of the inhabitants of the study area, and many had no qualifications or at the very most vocational qualifications. Voter turnout was low among this resident profile (25-55 age group), most of whom were tenants.

The second category of our typology was mainly located in the town centre of Le Mans and in the north-western districts of the city (university, hospital). This part of the city is characterized by the significant presence of students, craftspeople, managers and higher intellectual professionals, who were tenants. Most of this population held fixed-term jobs and had a level of education above high-school level. Their average age was between 25 and 55 years old. Their abstention levels were mostly lower than the rest of the population for this first round of the municipal elections.

Category 3 included people living on the northern and southern fringes of Le Mans, in the districts of Saint-Georges, Les Ardriers, Les Maillets, Miroir, Batignolles, Le Fouillet and Vauguyon. This category included managers and middle-level occupations on open-ended employment contracts. It also included craftspeople, shopkeepers, company managers, as well as early retirees and retirees. Most were homeowners, and their level of education was at least equivalent to high-school level. This relatively older population (59-79 years of age) was more likely to vote than the other groups identified. The population in Category 4 was located exclusively in the east of Le Mans, in the Bruyères

neighbourhood. The inhabitants of this group were owners of small houses. They were mostly clerical, sales and services employees, middle-level occupations, temporary workers, and unemployed persons with a low level of education. Voter turnout among this rather impoverished population was very low.

It is interesting to take a look at the abstention dynamics of our study areas (Le Mans, Allonnes, Arnage, Coulaines) over the period 2014-2020 (Figure 1). While the pandemic context is exceptional, it proves first and foremost to be a revelation of a growing and lasting disinterest on the part of the populations with regard to the local political offer.

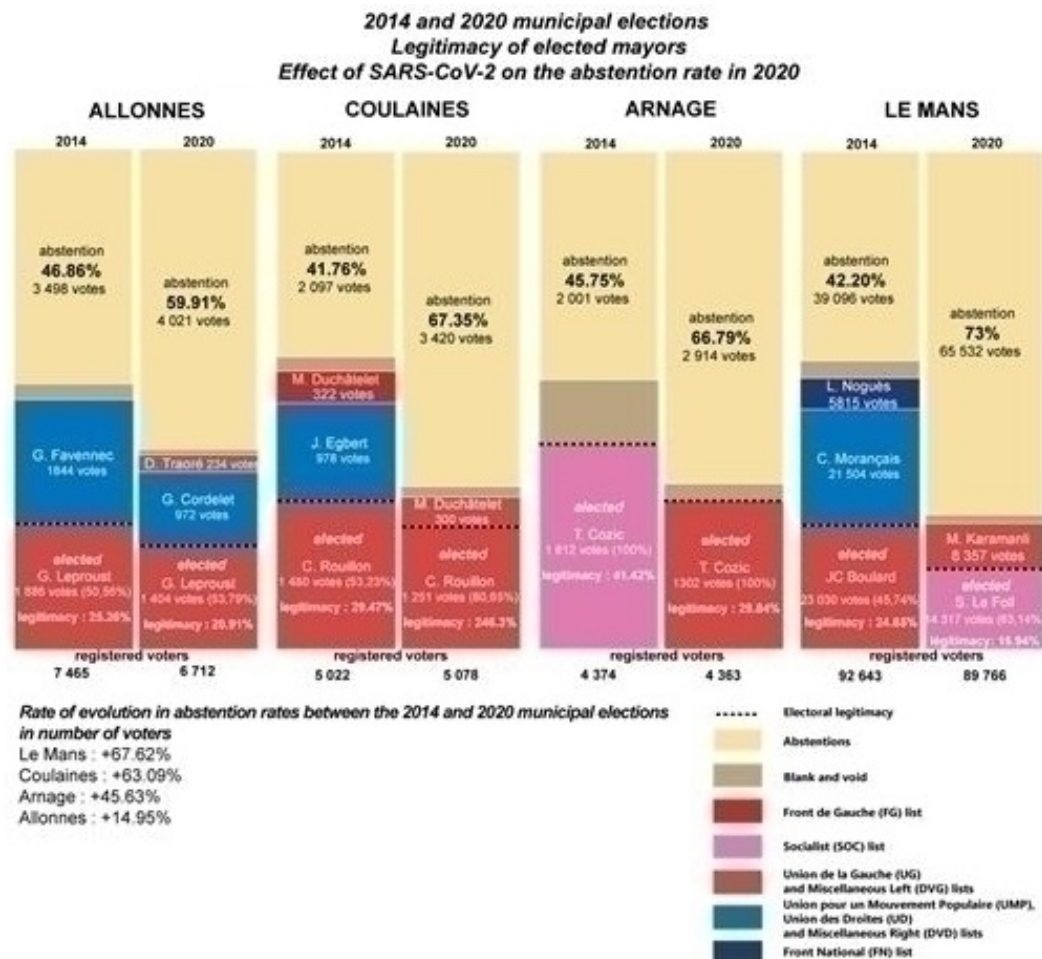


Figure 7 - Trends in abstention rates in the four most populous municipalities of the Le Mans Métropole urban community, anonymous author, source: Ministry of the Interior, 2014, 2020e.

In Le Mans, the results observed over the period are noteworthy. Between 2014 and 2020, the abstention rate experienced a significant increase of 67.62%. While the power relationship between the Left and the Right was very even in 2014, this equal footing had disappeared in the 2020 elections with the Centre and Right votes spread over several lists. The PS list finally won 63.14% of the votes, with these results actually being based on only 15.95% of registered voters. The clearest progression concerned the list of the Union de la Gauche (Union of the Left) and Miscellaneous Left candidates with 8,357 votes. As we can observe on Figure 8, the analysis of the votes highlights quite clear logics of fiefdoms superimposed on the spatial analysis of the socio-economic profiles of the voters of the study area.

Voters for the “Vers Le Mans en Commun” Miscellaneous Left (DVG) list and the Lutte Ouvrière (Workers’ Struggle, LO) list were concentrated in the south-west of the city (historical blue-collar districts) and in the “working-class” neighbourhoods (Glonnieres-Vauguyon, L’Épine, Bellevue and Sablons-Bords-de-l’Huisne). Voters for the “Pour Le Mans avec Marietta Karamanli” list were almost

all located in the south-eastern districts of Le Mans (Vauguyon, Sablons Est). Support for the PS was quite heterogeneous. The electoral base of the RN was also concentrated in the south-eastern districts of the city near the large housing estates (Glonnières, Sablons Est). For the other parties present, the Ecologists' voters were distributed in the northern part of the city, while the right-wing parties and the LREM were characterized by a distribution of their voters in the neighbourhoods of the city centre.

FIRST ROUND OF THE 2020 MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS IN LE MANS votes by list and polling station in % of registered voters

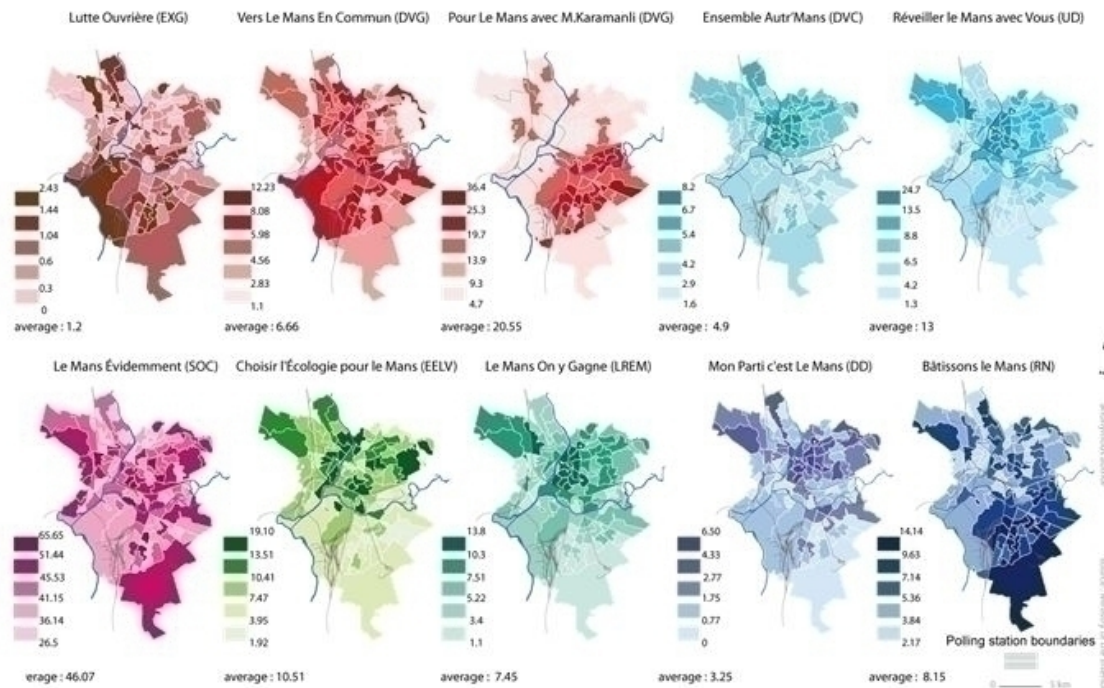


Figure 8 - Le Mans, scores by electoral lists at the polling stations, March 2020, anonymous author, source: Ministry of the Interior, 2020e.

In Allonnes, Coulaines and Arnage, the results also illustrate a clear decline in the legitimacy of the outgoing mayors. In Arnage, the only list was elected with 100% of votes. However, the legitimacy of the outgoing mayor was based on 29.84% of voters. Here, the political offer was exclusively based on left-wing parties. Between two terms of office, the PS mayor had opened up his electoral base to the leftist Front de Gauche (Left Front, FG). Despite that, the abstention rate progressed by 45.63%.

In Allonnes, the abstention rate in 2014 concerned 46.86% of voters for a legitimacy of 25.26% of votes compared with 20.91% in 2020. The electoral race was close in this stronghold of the PCF, and the victory of the outgoing mayor was based on a proactive door-to-door strategy. We note that the abstention rate rose by 14.95% with fewer votes for the opposition parties as their candidates were represented in a number of lists. In Coulaines, the result of this first round showed that the outgoing mayor was elected with 80.66% of the votes.

Here again, the mayor's legitimacy was based on 24.63% of registered voters. Between 2014 and 2020, the increase in the abstention rate reached 63.09%, unopposed since the Right is absent from the political arena here. The Front de Gauche maintained its base by a small margin.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic clearly undermined French democratic organization during the 2020 municipal elections. A sharp increase in the abstention rate was noted between the municipal elections of 2014 and 2020 in Le Mans and its urban area. The comparative approach that we conducted in the

urban communities of Angers, Caen and Tours highlights this clear trend, particularly in the priority city districts. Moreover, while the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the normal running of the elections, the spread of the virus was not enough in itself to overshadow the growing disenchantment of a majority of inhabitants with regard to the local political offer. Our second hypothesis concerning the cumulative effect of fear linked to the government announcements would also need to be fully corroborated by comparing the results of the abstention rates with the declarations of the populations who decided not to vote. This would allow us to better identify ex post the reasons for their absence from the democratic process. The analysis of abstention rates in the polling stations of the most populated municipalities of the Le Mans Métropole urban community confirms the continuing increase in abstention rates between two local elections. Given the reduction of the electoral base, the legitimacy of the local authorities at this level can be called into question. In Le Mans, the PS was the winner of this event in local politics, the city being one of the rare strongholds, on a national level, of this historical political party that has greatly suffered from the creation of the new LREM party by the current French president. However, the legitimacy of the elected list concerned only 15.95% of voters, with fewer votes for the Centre and the Right parties as they were represented by a number of lists. We also note the spectacular breakthrough of the Union de la Gauche and Miscellaneous Left list. The outgoing mayors of Coulaines and Arnage were easily re-elected, with no real opposition but with a notable increase in abstention rates between 2014 and 2020 (45.63% and 63.9%). The victory of the outgoing mayor of Allonnes was due to a proactive field campaign, which had immediately preceded the governmental decisions concerning the reorganization of the electoral protocol at the beginning of the health crisis shortly before the number of people contaminated skyrocketed.

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