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Electoral Participation and Local Democracy in French Rural Areas



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1992

In the 34000 rural French communes when it is time to choose the local council, people go to the polls en masse. The strong participation in local elections in rural communes has attracted more attention from American researchers than from French political scientists, probably because the Americans were surprised that people are so interested in local elections in a country that Tocqueville denounced so vigorously for its bureaucratic centralization and its absence of "esprit communal" (TOCQUEVILLE A, 1986 (1838)).

Lawrence Wylie noted the fact in the fifties in his very well-known study about Roussillon, a village in the Vaucluse (WYLIE L, 1957). But it was established for the first time in a large sample of communes by Mark Kesselman (KESSELMAN M, 1967). While it was admitted that abstentionism was higher in local elections than in national elections, Mark Kesselman showed that aggregated statistics at national level masked in fact large variations according to the size of cities. He noted that in the rural communes of his sample the rate of participation in municipal elections in 1959 was on average very high (83%) and even more remarkable, that it was higher than it has been in the preceding national level election. Alain Lancelot made the same observation based on results of the municipal elections in 1965 that showed a large difference between the abstention rate in cities with more than 30000 inhabitants (30%) and in other smaller communes where the rate of abstention was only 18% (LANCELOT A, 1968). A few years later, Sydney Tarrow confirmed these observations using a sample of 117 communes with less than 50000 inhabitants. The participation in municipal election of 1971 was 85% in communes with less than 3000 inhabitants and 75 % in communes with 10 to 50000 inhabitants (TARROW S, 1976).

Later, polls and official publications of electoral results by categories of communes largely confirmed these former observations. In the municipal elections of 1989, 82 % of the voters in communes less than 3500 inhabitants voted as against only 62% of eligible voters in the communes over than 30000 inhabitants (see table 1). Moreover, the stability of the participation (between 83% and 85% since 1953) shows that participation is much less dependent on the evolution of the current national

political situation than participation is in urban areas or in other types of election. In other words, **a strong electoral participation is a structural trait of rural local democracy.**

Table 1: **Rate of participation in French municipal elections**

	1989	1983	1959 (a)
Ensemble des communes	72.8	78.4	74.7
Rural communes (b)	82.5	85.4	82.6
Urban communes :			
3500-9000 inhabitants	74.5	80.5	
9000-30000 inhabitants	67.6	74.7	
over 30000 inhabitants	62	70.5	70

a) From Mark Kesselman, sample of 1810 communes in three "départements"; b) rural communes: less than 2000 inhabitants for 1959, less than 3500 inhabitants for 1983 and 1989.

How to explain this high participation?

Several factors can explain this high participation:

a) The type of ballot encourages strong participation. Local elections have a list of candidates with two rounds ballot well adapted to communities of a small size where people know each other well. People do not have to declare their candidacy, isolated candidates are allowed and incomplete lists are possible. In addition, voters can mix names from lists or write-in a candidate. In other words, they can vote for any one even he is not a candidate as long as he is eligible.

b) The small size of the local electorate is in itself an encouragement to the vote, because each voter can measure the "marginal utility" of his vote on local election results. This obviously can play an important role in the 15000 communes with less than 300 inhabitants and even more in the 4000 communes with less than 100 inhabitants.

c) Another direct effect of the small size of communes is that a large proportion of voters are involved in municipal elections either as a candidate or as a close relative of a candidate. The 12 million voters in local rural areas elect 415 000 communal councillors among more than 650 000 candidates: about one on twenty voters is a

candidate. But taking account of family ties and neighbours ties almost all of the electorate is involved with elections.

d) It was often noted that rural people give a particular interest to municipal elections. Many polls indicate that for them, local affairs are more important than national affairs and that the mayor is the most popular political leader to them. This specific interest reflects the importance of the stakes - material or symbolic - that are linked to the control of the municipalities.

e) Finally, there are strong socio-cultural factors that are tied to the nature of rural local government, to their forms of society, their form of social integration and social control. In the rural communities, where people know each other well, if abstention is not justified by exceptional circumstances (like illness...), it is perceived as a deviant behaviour, a demonstration of indifference or even of hostility with respect to the community. Inversely, participation in the vote is a conformist behaviour and a public manifestation of the belonging to community.

The effectiveness of the process of social control and community integration appears to negate the impact of certain other factors which are usually considered as unfavourable factors of electoral mobilization. For example, the stability of the individual choices and the permanence of the power balance reduce the uncertainty of the vote which usually increase rate of turnout. The characteristics of the electoral candidates offer a few options which are ideologically similar and unclear projects.

At the same time the frequent absence of competition as well as the low level of politicisation of the vote should cause more voters to abstain. Mark Kesselman observed that this hypothesis was not verified. He found no relationship between political competition and abstention in local elections. Jeanne Becquart-Leclercq reveals the same paradox in her study of 40 middle-sized communes (2000-20000 inhabitants) in the region of the North (BECQUART-LECLERCQ J, 1976). Jeanne Becquart-Leclercq noted at the same time and quite correctly, while criticize the index of competition Kesselman used, that the presence of a single list at the local election not signifies a local consensus or a lack of conflicts. In municipal election, local conflicts are in fact expressed with other means for instance, by selected voting in ballots with a single list (NEVERS JY, 1992).

Moreover, Jeanne Becquart-Leclercq found that in her sample, the rate of participation was linked to the socio-professional composition of the population: in areas with more workers, participation is lower; in areas with more farmers participation is higher. On this point however, it should be noted that in the kind of communes she studied, the percentage of farmers is too low (5% in average) to be able to connect variations in participation and variations in rate of farmers. The role of farmers is best considered as an indication of the "ruralness" (which is strongly correlated to the size of communes). In other words, the higher rate of participation of farmers that every opinion polls show, is not mainly explained by their professional occupation but by the type of commune they live in. An ecological effect of the same kind was identified in cantonal elections (QUANTIN P, 1989).

Determinants of variation in participation among rural communes

While it is true that participation in rural municipal elections is overall very high and in this way it clearly contrasts with that of urban areas, there are still variations between the communes (about cities see : HOFFMANN-MARTINOT V, 1992). In the rural communes of the South West of France, the rate of participation in the municipal poll of 1983 was in average 83% and varied from 70% to 98% : in a quarter of the communes it was lower than 83% and in a fifth of them it was higher than 92%. How can we explain these differences? Why do people vote more in one commune than in another? Do the factors that explain the difference between rural and urban areas also explain the variations between rural communes?

The analysis of data gathered in a survey of a sample of 280 rural communes (with less than 2500 inhabitants) in the South West of France allows at least a partial answer to these questions. We tried to determine the influence of three categories of factors:

a) The size and the social characteristics of the communes: independent variables included the number of inhabitants, the percentage of farmers in the working population and the localization of the communes with respect of metropolitan areas. These variables were used to test the hypothesis that smaller the population, the more rural and agricultural, the higher the rate of participation.

b) The issues of the municipal elections. Lacking other indicators, change in the mayor in 1983 was used as an indicator of the importance of the issue of the poll.

Choosing a new mayor indeed is an important event in the history of the villages and when it happens at the occasion of an election - which is not always the case - a higher electoral mobilization may be expected.

c) The configuration of the local competition. The following variables were used: number of lists in 1983, change in number of lists from 1977 to 1983, degree of conflict and level of politicisation in the last election. These two last indicators were constructed using closed ended questions asked to the mayors about the atmosphere of the campaign. Two other variables were added: political identification of the mayor and his involvement in a party. The proposition tested was that participation in rural municipal elections, as an expression of a local consensus, would be higher when competition, conflicts and politicisation will lower. Another statement of this proposition, closer of the Mark Kesselman conclusions is that turnout is independent of the degree of competition.

The indicator of participation used was the percentage of eligible voters who voted in the municipal election of March 1983. Figure 1 shows the main correlations between the variables in the model. Multiple regression analysis enlightens the most important factors in electoral participation in the following order:

- 1) The type of competition
- 2) The size of the commune or its localization relative to a metropolitan area or the percentage of farmers in the working population
- 3) The political involvement of the mayor
- 4) The degree of conflict
- 5) Whether or not the mayor changes.

These five variables in combination explain roughly one half of the variance in the rate of turnout (see figure 1).

Contrary to the proposition based on Mark Kesselman work, the rate of participation is dependent upon the configuration of local competition and upon the level of conflict (as it was determined by the mayor). Participation is strongest when the poll is competitive and conflictual. In those communes where the election involves two lists or even a single list - usually the list of the incumbent mayor - plus one or several independent candidates, the rate of participation is 3 or 4 percent points higher than the one observed in communes with only a single list (the average turnout rate in these communes is 86% as opposed in 90% in the communes with a two lists competition). Participation is also higher in those communes where there was a single list in 1977 and then a competitive election in 1983. The

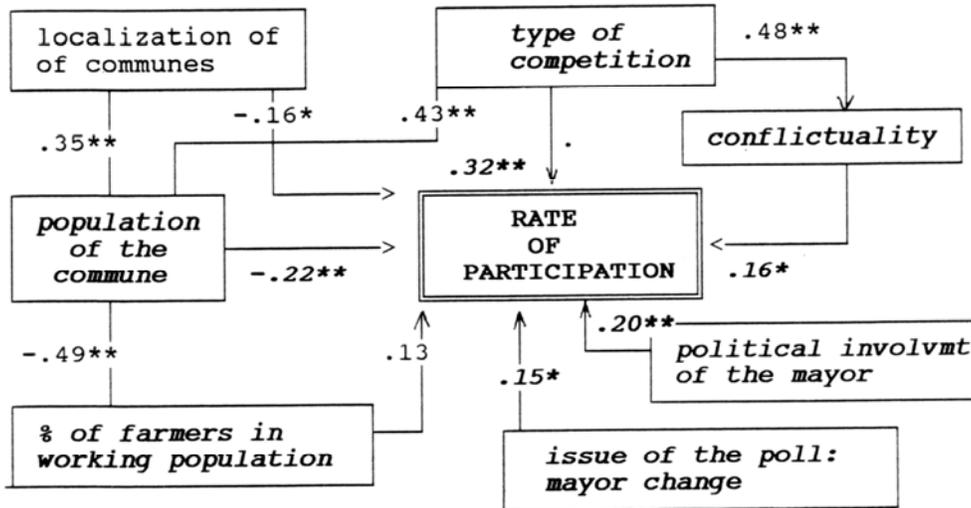
competition is the variable which explains the most variance in the rate of turnout. Thus, in rural municipal elections, no matter what the size of the communes is, **conflict mobilizes more than consensus.**

Even though the degree of politicisation of the election - as estimated by the mayor - is closely linked with competition and conflict and with the size of the commune, it seems to have no specific influence on participation. But I find that turnout is much lower in commune where the mayor is a member of a party and where he links to the left (these two variables are closely correlated). In other words, the less the mayor is politically marked the higher is the electoral participation. Inversely, the political involvement on the left seems to encourage abstention. The effect remains after controlling the size of the commune and the level of competition. It may be explained by voluntary abstention of a part of the mayor adversaries when there is no opposition list or when the opposition list does not correspond to their political preferences.

It is difficult to understand how and why our results are different of those of Kesselman. Our results seem to call in question his theory on local administration in France. According to him, France's uniqueness comes from the contrast between conflictual and politicised national politics and local politics that is characterized by a strong participation, a pragmatic and apolitical consensus. The difference in the results probably derives from the nature of the samples and the indicators of competition used. Mark Kesselman probably underestimated the importance of conflicts in part because his indicators were not well adapted to the type of competition existing in rural localities. However there is an alternative hypothesis which would be that an important change in the relationship between participation and competition has been occurred since the sixties. Probably there has been a certain diffusion of a more urban model of local democracy in some rural areas. This new model would coexist today with the traditional consensual model.

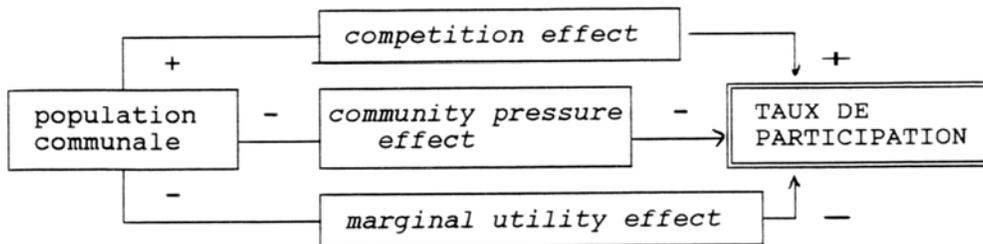
The hypothesis that electoral participation varies with the importance of the issue of the poll is verified. When it is a matter of electing a new mayor, participation rises in all communes with all level of competition. This increase mobilization is even more sensible in localities where elections are not competitive and not conflictual. In this type of communes average rate of turnout went from 84% to 90% when elections involve a change of mayor.

FIGURE 1 : *Determinants of participation rate in municipal elections in rural communes (n=280 communes with less than 2500 inhabitants)*



Note: This graphic shows the main results of a multiple regression analysis with the rate of participation as the dependent variable and with five independent variables (in italic) : number of inhabitants, percentage of farmers in working population, change of the mayor, political involvmt of the mayor, number of lists (or independent candidates), degree of conflict in municipal campaign. Coefficients in italics are standard coefficients Betas. Multiple R = .498, R² = .248. Other coefficients are linear coefficients of Pearson.

FIGURE 2 : *effects of the size of the commune*



Contrary to expectation the rate of participation is not directly correlated with the size of the communes. It is however linked, but rather weakly, to the percentage of the farmers in the working population and with the localization of the commune relative to a metropolitan area. This preliminary observation would seem to disconfirm the proposition about the effect of the "marginal utility of the vote". In fact, the relationship between participation and the size of the commune is complicated and is neutralized by the contradictory effects of the sociological characteristics of the communes. If these variables are controlled, we can isolate a specific effect of the size of the commune. All other things being equal, people participate more in smallest communes. However, this relationship is not linear, there is a threshold, about 200 inhabitants, under which the relationship is reversed, probably due to the fact that much of the electorate in very small communes do not leave in the commune itself. In 26% of the communes with less than 150 inhabitants the number of people on the boarding list is higher than the whole population leaving in the commune!

Finally, as it is shown in *figure 2*, the effects of the size and sociological characteristics of the population become evident in two contradictory ways that neutralized each other. In one side, these variables are clearly correlated with the configuration of the competition and we have seen that the more competitive the election, the higher the rate of turnout. In another side, the larger the electorate, the more heterogeneous the community, the weaker the effects of the "marginal utility of the vote" and of the community social pressure.

To sum up, it appears that participation in municipal elections in rural areas is, all other things being equal, **higher when the localities is smaller, when the election involves several lists of candidates in a conflicted but non politicised race and when the change of the mayor becomes an issue.**

The size and social characteristics of the population exercise a complex influence on participation. It influences participation first, directly via what could be called the "marginal utility effect" and the "community pressure effect" and second, indirectly and in an opposite sense via the degree of competition and conflict in municipal race. Thus, the kind of rural communes that have the highest turnout rate (more than 92%) are those with population between 200 and 500 inhabitants where tight community ties do not exclude a conflictual competition on the municipal scene.

Change and continuity in electoral participation and local democracy

What is the significance of the strong participation in municipal elections in rural areas and what is its past and present role in French political life? There are two possible interpretations on this point.

a) Often the high rate of participation in municipal election was presented as a type of ritual and conformist participation associated with a kind of apathy among the citizens. The majority of serious and constant voters do so to choose with care their elected officials but after the elections their participation is limited to criticize the action of the municipal council and of the mayor who exercises his power in a very autocratic fashion. This relationship between strong participation in voting, popular apathy and the mayor autocracy constitutes the principal characteristic of the French model of local democracy as it was described by American researchers and later, by French researchers, particularly those of the school of Michel Crozier. For most of these authors, the "uniqueness" of this model comes from its comparison - mostly implicit - with the Anglo-Saxon model of local democracy and particularly with the American model. In this model, broad abstention, higher than in France, is associated with more direct forms of participation and more active forms of citizen engagement in public life. According to Jeanne Becquart-Leclercq, the French model, as opposed to American one, is characterized by a "democratic incapacity" and decentralization has done nothing but accentuate these characteristics (BECQUART-LECLERCQ J, 1988). In brief, since Tocqueville, local democracy did not involve very much in France despite the institution of the universal suffrage and the great decentralization reform at the beginning of the Third Republic!

b) There is another point of view much less pessimistic that was presented by historians who take more attention to change than sociologists influenced by a functionalist and cultural approach. According to this point of view, steady and high participation indicates that the model of local democracy that was progressively put in place during the nineteenth century (from 1789 to 1884) by building on the previous traditions of the Revolution revealed itself to be very well adapted to rural France, to the diversity of its cultural traditions and to its social relationship (AGULHON M and alii, 1986, GEORGE J, 1989). Since the institution of the universal (male) suffrage in 1848 and especially with the beginning of the Third Republic, this model provided an efficient framework for acculturation and political socialization of the rural masses by making them internalize the necessary norms and values for the functioning of the representative democracy. As with the

compulsory and free public education, local democracy progressively and peacefully transformed millions of "*Peasants into Frenchmen*" (WEBER E, 1976). Tocqueville had hoped the same would be the product of decentralization as it is clear in his celebrate phrase: "*communal institutions are to Liberty what primary schools are to Science: they make democracy accessible to people and they teach people how to peacefully use democracy*". This model of local democracy also permitted the rural population to free herself progressively from the hegemony of the Notables. In the nineteen-thirties at the high of one could call the "*Peasant local democracy*" about 21000 mayors was farmers. Today there are still more than 10000 ones (NEVERS JY, 1990)

Since the seventies the model of rural democracy has to face two great issues: demographic and social changes which affect the local environment on the one hand and the decentralize reform particularly the recent law to regroup communes on the other hand. Until about 1970, a large number of rural communes lost population; all the population grew older and become socially less heterogeneous. In many villages the only families remaining are those of farmers, few shopkeepers and artisans and retired people. In these conditions, local democracy could continue to function according to the same rules even if it functions in almost empty areas. Since the beginning of the 1980 the rural population has increased and has diversified. The main cause is the spreading of urbanization into larger and larger areas around cities and the specialization of some regions in activities such as leisure, tourism and residences for retired people. Roussillon, the village of Lawrence Wylie provides a good example of these dramatic changes (WYLIE L, 1987).

These changes have and will have important consequences on the functioning of local democracy. As far as participation in local elections is concerned, in the areas most affected by the social and demographic change the participation rate should logically go down. But this tendency could be contracted by the interest the new residencies have in participating in local elections: first because the local vote is a symbolic way to show a wish to be rooted in a community, second and more practically because it is a way to express once interests and to have an influence on local policy. On this point decentralization by giving more power to local government over planning (zoning plans) is a factor in the revitalization of the participation in municipal elections. It is also entirely possible that the former inhabitants could communicate to the new ones their traditional local political culture. All we know, the existence of many small communes has the advantage of permitting more efficient assimilation of suburban population.

One last remark about the possible consequences of the reforms that are in course and that aims to regroup communes in what are called "*Communautés de communes*". France is one of the few European countries that did not proceed with a formal regrouping of communes. However, despite the fact that this reform was considered very urgent and a top priority in the sixties the failure of several attempts of reform (notably those of 1971) lead the national government to adopt less radical and more pragmatic means to cooperation. The current reform imposes a very few constraints, its application is in the hands of a committee of elected officials and the "*Communautés de communes*" are hardly different from the means of cooperation that exist already in large number (there are 17 000 "*Syndicats de communes*"). The reform will not reduce the number of the communes and probably, it will reduce just a little the number of the "*Syndicats intercommunaux*". Communal councils and mayors power will not be affected.

As a result, the reform will probably not modify in the short term the electoral participation in municipal elections. But in the long term, the reform which is going to make local administration more complicated and more confused runs to risk of obscuring local issues, fragmenting the responsibilities and in the end, provoking disinterest among people and decreasing participation.

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