



Do local politicians represent the people? A sociological portrait

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France's 500,000 local councillors are regularly presented as the most popular elected officials and those closest to the French public. However, access to the positions of municipal councillor and mayor are increasingly subject to sexual, generational, residential and, above all, social selectivity: more retirees, civil servants and executives, and fewer manual workers and self-employed people.

Municipal councillors are regularly presented as the most popular elected officials with the French public. Indeed, they themselves are so convinced of this that those of them who accumulate a local mandate and a national mandate often claim that if they had to keep only one they would choose their local one without hesitation. And yet we know very little about them: when, in the mid-2000s, I became interested in their social characteristics (age, sex, profession, etc.), I was surprised by how difficult it was to find academic works on the sociology of municipal councillors, despite the fact that they number some half a million in France. While it is true that the Direction Générale des Collectivités Locales (Department of Local Authorities) publishes some key figures in its annual work *Les collectivités locales en chiffres* ("Local Authorities in Figures"), the information provided is very limited. As a sociologist looking to analyse the local political arena, I was able to gain access to data at the French interior ministry that had hitherto been unexplored. More specifically, I was granted access to the national directory of elected officials, which contains information compiled from the nomination papers that electoral candidates submit to the prefecture, and from the "municipal tables" that must be sent by every *commune* (municipality)¹ following municipal elections and which "theoretically" can be consulted by any citizen.

With each successive election, these data have become increasingly accurate and interesting; indeed, the last file available (following the 2008 municipal elections) is more detailed than previous ones. It includes almost 500,000 individuals, or 96% of all municipal councillors in France. However, it also includes some coding errors relating to councillors' occupations, mostly due to the declarative nature of the file (no checks are performed, and it is typically the candidates themselves that choose one of the 69 categories on the declaration): some candidates prefer to underestimate their socio-professional category so as to appear "closer" to the electorate, while others overestimate or mask their true category if they believe doing so might improve their image. Often, their profession is indicated on election leaflets and thus forms part of candidates' public image strategies. Despite these shortcomings, analysis of these data show a direct correlation between the importance of the political role and the degree of social selection involved in accessing this role.

The rise of middle and upper income groups among mayors

The data available makes it possible to analyse the changing characteristics of mayors for past five elections from 1983 to 2008.² Given the size of rural *communes* (55% of France's 36,700 *communes* currently have fewer than 500 inhabitants, while 86% have populations of under

¹ France is divided into some 36,700 *communes*, which cover the whole country and form the lowest tier of local government. They range in population from a handful of residents to over 2.2 million (Paris).

2,000), mayors from the farming community remain over-represented. However, farmers – along with tradesmen, shopkeepers and entrepreneurs – are one of the professional groups that has lost the most elected representatives. By contrast, there has been a sharp increase in the number of clerical workers and, to a lesser extent, executives and members of the intellectual professions. The number of manual workers increased slightly while remaining at a very low level, even though they represent more than a quarter of the total workforce nationally. Finally, the number of retired mayors has increased massively, almost doubling in the space of 25 years.

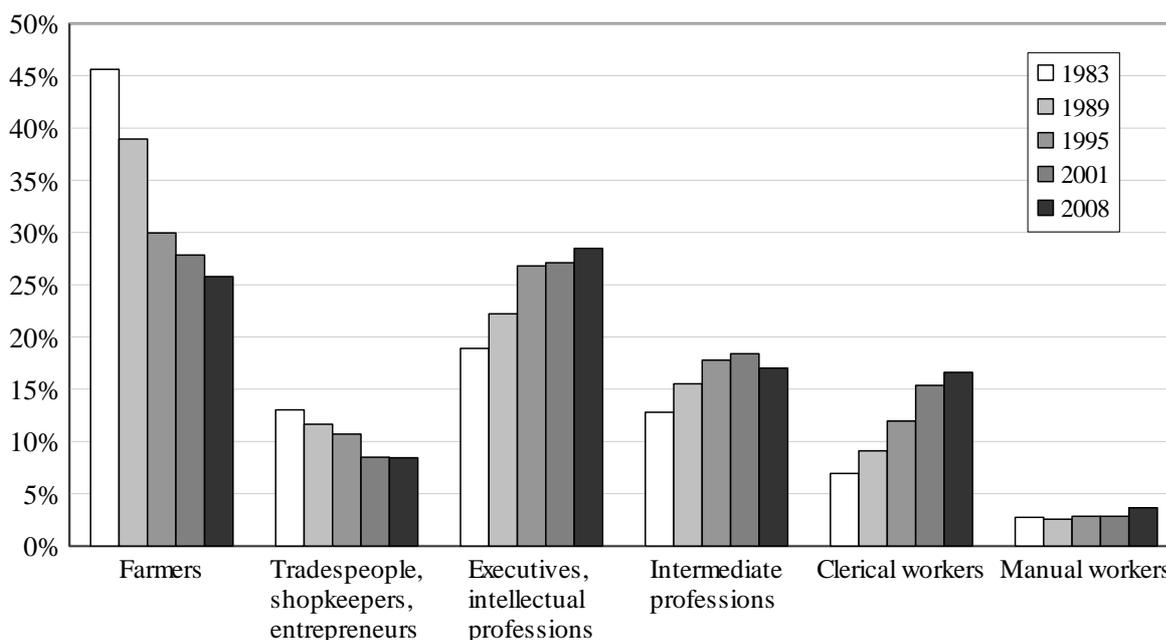
Table 1: Change in the number of mayors belonging to certain professions and socio-professional categories between 1983 and 2008

	1983	2008	Variation
Farmers	13,260	5,648	– 57.40%
Shopkeepers and entrepreneurs	3,782	1,846	– 51.2%
Clerical workers	2,020	3,639	+ 80.1%
Retired	6,288	11,528	+ 83.3%
Manual workers	797	803	+ 0.8%
Solicitors	151	59	– 60.9%
Doctors (and other medical professions)	1,042	619	– 40.6%
Executives and intellectual professions	5,493	6,241	+ 13.6%

The information available in the national directory of elected officials is more detailed and provides more refined data on professions, particularly those traditionally considered providers of community leaders, such as doctors and lawyers, which are shown to be in sharp decline. Conversely, among the higher professional classes, numbers of private-sector executives and, in particular, senior civil servants have risen sharply. This is also the case for clerical workers, especially in the public sector.

² In France, mayors and municipal councillors are elected for six-year terms (or very occasionally seven-year terms, if there is a risk of overloading the electoral calendar in a given year, as was the case in 2007), using a list system: in the 2,700 or so *communes* with at least 3,500 inhabitants, electors vote for a whole (closed) list and the candidates at the top of each list are elected proportionally to the municipal council, which then elects the mayor (and, where applicable, assistant mayor(s)) from among its members. In the remaining 34,000 small *communes*, electors are free to pick and choose candidates from the various lists (or even propose names of residents of the *commune* not on any list) to form the council, which then elects the mayor (and, where applicable, assistant mayor(s)).

Graph 1: Socio-professional categories of mayors between 1983 and 2008

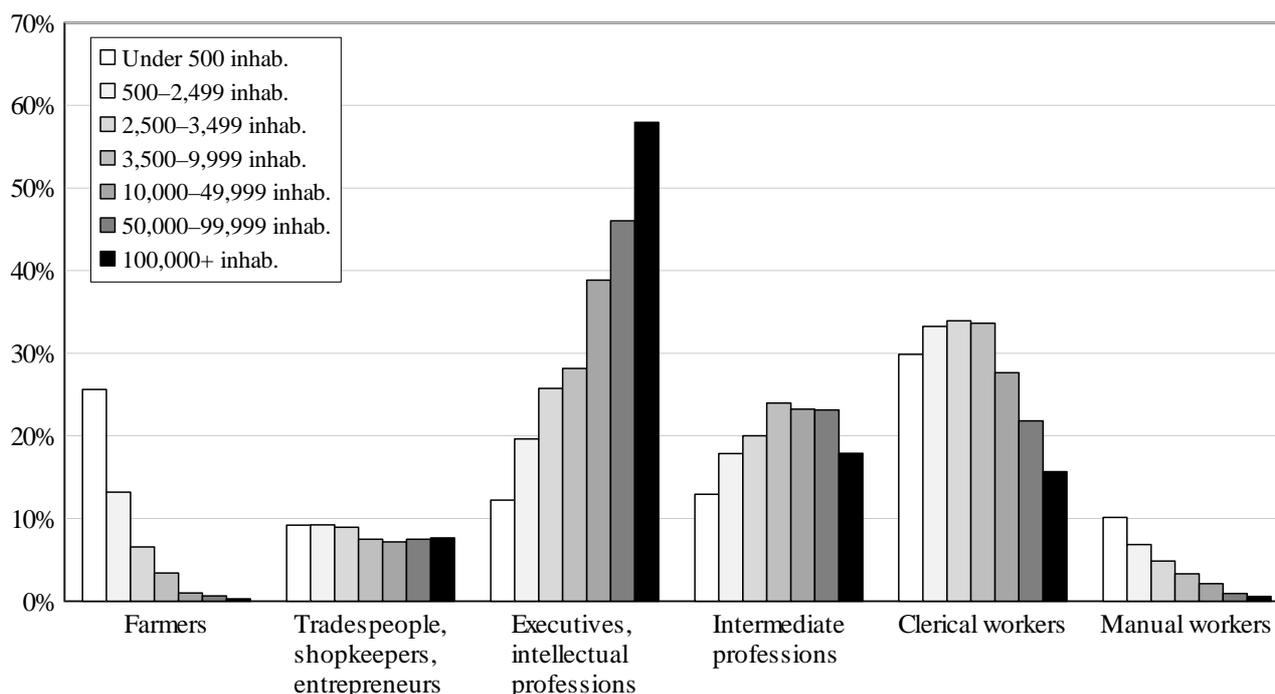


Note: The proportions for each socio-professional category (excluding those who are retired or without a profession) are expressed as percentages for each election year. Example: 45% of mayors elected in 1983 were farmers.

Social selectivity confirmed

More generally, the process for becoming a municipal councillor is highly selective. Furthermore, the degree of selectivity increases as the size of the *commune* – which determines the level of remuneration for mayors and councillors – increases. It must not be forgotten that indemnities are significantly higher for larger towns and cities: “standard” municipal councillors are only remunerated in *communes* with at least 100,000 inhabitants; the mayor and assistant mayors receive respectively €646 and €250 per month in villages of under 500 inhabitants; €2,090 and €836 for towns with more than 3,500 inhabitants; €3,421 and €1,254 for a town of 20,000 inhabitants, and so on. Graph 2 clearly reflects the gradually hegemony of executives and the intellectual professions in *communes* of over 10,000 inhabitants, to the detriment of manual workers, clerical workers and farmers. This dominance is even more pronounced among municipal “cabinet” members (i.e. the mayor and assistant mayors): for every category of *commune*, the level of social selectivity for these officials is consistently higher. The percentage of mayors occupying senior management posts professionally is greatest in *communes* of over 10,000 inhabitants, where the proportions stand at between 70% and 93% (excluding those mayors who are retired or otherwise without a profession). This trend can also be observed through differences in access to cabinet posts between men and women, where the former dominate in all age groups and occupational categories, without exception.

Graph 2: Socio-professional categories of councillors by size of *commune* in 2008



Note: The proportions for each socio-professional category (excluding those who are retired or without a profession) are expressed as percentages by size of *commune*. Example: in 2008, 26% of councillors in *communes* with fewer than 500 inhabitants were farmers; 58% of councillors in *communes* with more than 100,000 inhabitants were executives or worked in intellectual professions.

All sorts of explanations for this discrimination in access to local power can be put forward: the more advanced skills now required to hold an elected office, especially as a cabinet member, and the increased complexity of these skills for larger *communes*; the male domination that cuts across all sectors of society; a lack of candidates in the least-represented categories (due to feelings of incompetence that are often internalised and then expressed as a lack of interest), etc. These observations call the very meaning of the word “democracy” into question: does power still belong to the people? Elections are not, of course, supposed to result in a perfect representation of society; but politicians are supposed to represent society in all its diversity. However, this goal is largely impossible to achieve because categories of thought and action are strongly influenced by individuals’ lives and living conditions, and therefore their age, sex, socio-professional category, income, neighbourhood and type of housing, etc. Political parties that had set out to represent the working classes and their interests have either abandoned the idea (e.g. the French Socialist Party) or have declined considerably in importance in the political landscape, including at municipal level (e.g. the French Communist Party), although attempts to revive this notion do exist (e.g. the Front de Gauche³).

The golden age of power

This selectivity does not just operate by profession: age also plays an important role in gaining access to power. It is younger people that have the greatest difficulty accessing municipal councils (Table 1). The older you are, the more likely you are to be elected – a phenomenon that is especially prevalent among male candidates. As with professional category, this is related to several factors

³ The Front de Gauche (“Left Front”) is an electoral coalition between several left-wing parties (notably the French Communist Party and the Parti de Gauche (“Left Party”).

combined: a feeling of incompetence (although it is not expressed as such, and typically is explained as a lack of interest in public affairs), often accentuated by the judgements of older people; but also the fact that younger candidates are not sought out to head closed lists (i.e. where picking and choosing is not allowed) in *communes* with at least 3,500 inhabitants: while the inclusion of a few “young people” on lists is desirable, their role remains very limited and often symbolic, especially when they are placed low down the list (and thus unlikely to be elected).

Table 2: Number of municipal councillors by age group per 10,000 inhabitants

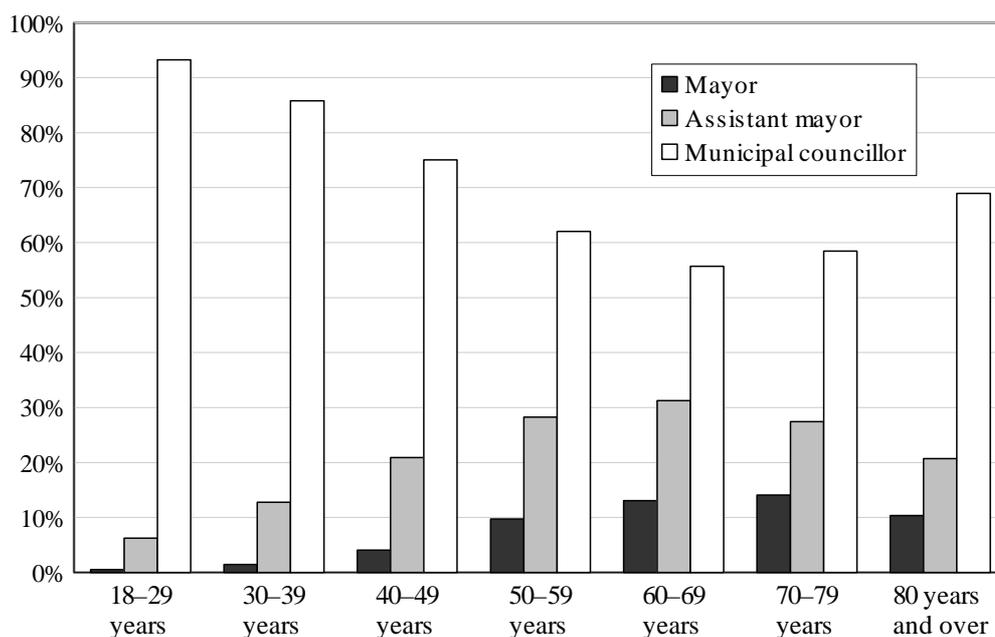
Age	Men	Women	Overall
18–24 years	12.8	8.1	10.5
25–29 years	42.0	28.0	34.9
30–34 years	88.8	60.2	74.3
35–39 years	144.8	96.2	120.3
40–44 years	175.6	109.3	142.0
45–49 years	207.6	116.8	161.4
50–54 years	222.7	114.3	167.1
55–59 years	246.2	104.7	173.5
60–64 years	256.9	102.3	177.5
65–69 years	174.3	60.3	114.3
70–74 years	88.3	23.1	52.3
75–79 years	32.3	6.4	17.2
80–84 years	9.6	1.7	4.6
85–89 years	3.5	0.5	1.5
90 + years	0.4	0.1	0.2
Total	104.3	52.2	77.4

Sources: 2009 census (Insee⁴), *Répertoire national des élus* (national directory of elected officials) for the 2008 elections.

This profound inequality of access to local decision-making according to age is even more pronounced if we consider the position held within the council: the more important the role, the fewer young people occupy it. Moreover, there is also a significant difference between the posts of assistant mayor (peak age: 60–69) and mayor (peak age: 70–79) (Graph 3). Only 3.7% of mayors in France and 10.3% of assistant mayors are under 40. The golden age of local power is between the ages of 50 and 80.

⁴ Insee: Institut National des Statistiques et des Études Économiques (French National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies).

Graph 3: Age of elected officials according to their role within the municipal council (2008)



Note: Roles within the municipal council are expressed as percentages by age group. Example: 93% of officials elected in 2008 aged 18–29 were “standard” municipal councillors and 0.5% were mayors.

Must we always unquestioningly accept the argument that younger people are inexperienced? Should we not instead ask the opposite question: can we afford to ignore their advice and expertise in determining policy decisions? The argument of inexperience does not hold water: in what professional field do people have to wait until they are 50 before taking responsibility? In list-based ballots, it is up to the person at the head of the list – i.e. potential mayors and outgoing mayors – to include young people on their lists and to agree to delegate council tasks by sharing power with the other municipal councillors, who often play only a minor role.

But, more generally, it is the feeling of incompetence among young people, women and people from lower social categories that is the greatest obstacle to be overcome. One solution might be, first of all, to provide lessons in schools that give all pupils a grounding in the exercise of political functions (as was the case in the former social and economic sciences stream of the *baccalauréat*) and, secondly, to open state-funded centres that train and prepare candidates for political office and which are free of charge, politically independent and open to anyone wishing to stand for election.

More power for women?

With regard to women’s representation in politics, there were high expectations of the recent parity law, which, in the case of list-based elections, requires lists to contain an equal number of male and female candidates in each complete group of six candidates. In the case of municipal elections, the first application of the law was for the 2001 ballot. Despite a certain number of “cheaters” (some parties preferred to pay fines instead of including the requisite number of women on their lists), the municipal councils of *communes* with at least 3,500 inhabitants (the only *communes* covered by the law) became much more female, with the proportion of women rising from 25.7% to 47.5% between 1995 and 2001. However, municipal cabinets were still dominated by men. Even more significantly, the proportion of women mayors was almost twice as high in small *communes*, where the parity law does not actually apply: 11.2% compared with 6.7%. The 2007 law has successfully attempted to correct this injustice by enforcing parity in the election of

assistant mayors. In 2008, 48% of assistant mayors were women in *communes* with at least 3,500 inhabitants, but the proportion of women mayors was still extremely low (just over 10%). Indeed, parity can only apply when there is a collective nature to the election, which is why single-member elections always lead to very low numbers of women. (If proposals to merge regional and departmental councils into a single territorial council, with a single member per electoral division, go ahead as planned, a sharp decline in the number of women elected to these councils can be expected.)

The 2010 local government reform bill, passed under the previous government, was supposed to improve the situation by lowering the municipal population threshold for closed-list ballots from 3,500 to 500. This would have brought nearly 30,000 new women into municipal councils. The current government are thinking of setting this threshold at 1,500 inhabitants (thus concerning 8,500 more councillors than at present). But what lies behind this reform is far more serious: by enforcing closed-list elections in these *communes* (by lowering the application threshold for the parity law), the “winner’s bonus” (whereby 50% of council seats automatically go to the winning party list) will also apply in these *communes*. The effects will be disastrous for democracy: by preventing electors from “picking and choosing” from the various lists, all the power is concentrated on the person at the top of the winning list, thus accentuating the “majority vs opposition” effect – with oppositions so weak, because of the bonus, that they will have no chance of influencing the decisions taken by majorities that are “kept in line” by the mayors and their inner circles, as is the case in the overwhelming majority of *communes* that already apply this electoral procedure. Will women have much to gain by being part of these silent majorities, or by being junior assistant mayors, as is already so often the case in *communes* with 3,500+ inhabitants?

Conclusion

Decentralisation should, according to its proponents, bring elected officials closer to the people. However, all it has achieved is to distance these two groups socially. Increases in the level of local accountability and changes in electoral procedure have led to ever greater social selectivity over the last 30 years: the higher the position of local power, the more likely it is that this position will be held by someone male, older, and of a higher socio-professional status. And the rise of intermunicipal structures in France has only aggravated these inequalities, since their representatives have to go through a double filter: direct election by the people followed by indirect election by municipal councils.

In the absence of any policy to provide training that would allow each and every citizen that so desires to prepare for elected office, the usual social discriminations will continue to prevail and favour those who have – through their family context, through their education and training, or through their professional activities (or all three) – acquired the skills and motivation necessary for the exercise of power. With this in mind, are our elected representatives truly able to represent all their constituents? The field of sociology has long shown that social affiliations strongly determine representations, and therefore decisions. The transition from being elected to being a representative is not automatic: it is an ongoing task, which begins with becoming aware of the impact of social position on the standpoints one adopts, and continues by taking account of areas of interest that are different from one’s own or from those of one’s social group. Do elected officials have the ability, the time and, more importantly, the will to carry out such a task?

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