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When comparing the heads of local government across Europe, it is customary to classify French mayors as representative of the strong mayor type, by opposition to the weak mayors of the northern European countries[i]. This classification rests on the strong influence French mayors wield, not on account of their actual powers, but in relation to their degree of discretion in using these powers, along with their personal access to central government where they can negotiate specific measures and aid for their commune. The changes brought about by the Decentralization Acts of 1982-83 have not altered this classification, although they have contributed to some significant changes in the style adopted by French mayors[ii]. More recently, the "intermunicipal revolution" which has swept across the country and seen the multiplication of institutions of cooperation between communes, has apparently reinforced the status of the mayors in the largest cities[iii]; but it could actually preview a significant change in the role of French mayors[iv].

To assess the depth and meaning of such a change, we must look back on the history of French mayors. We will limit our historical analysis to the period that opens with the Municipal Act of 1884, on the ground that this Act signals the birth of modern local government in France. A general competence clause is granted to the communes which, although mostly symbolic since in reality most powers rest within central government, influences nonetheless the day-to-day activity of local government. The Act also provides for

the mayor to be elected by the municipal council (itself elected by universal suffrage) and not chosen by State representatives anymore. In other words, communes are given political autonomy, an important decision in a centralized country whose authorities have been engaged since the Revolution in extending the realm of the State to all parts of the Nation and clearly battling against the emergence of any intermediary body.

When studying French local government, observers have often taken for granted the central role of the mayor, without always providing sufficient data to uphold his pre-eminence. Undoubtedly, the mayor is an important figure, and through his multiple office-holding he has the opportunity to wield an influence far beyond his formal powers. Furthermore, there are numerous examples of French mayors who have played a determinant role in the development of their commune. Finally, the mayor remains the most popular figure in the French political system, one to whom the population easily looks to for an answer to its problems. Yet, all this only highlights what is already most visible in the position of French mayors; too rarely do analyses go beyond this first impression to actually describe the way mayors have established a power base and exercised their influence since the end of the 19th century. Moreover, numerous other aspects of local government are simply not addressed: French municipal government is based on a complex system of representation often overlooked by observers, all to eager to focus on the position of the mayor as an easy explanatory variable.

Reinterpreting the role and power of the mayor does not imply a reassessment of his influence, but rather the description of a position more complex than is often acknowledged.

In recent years, a new generation of scholars has produced analyses which offer new perspectives on French local government. In particular, they highlight the conditions under which mayors were able to build a position of authority and exercise influence within the national political system. These conditions can best be addressed by considering that local government, as a political institution, is built around two sets of objectives: gaining political support; wielding political influence. We will be using these two sets of objectives to describe the role and position of the mayors, since they play a decisive role on both accounts.

Building political support encompasses three types of activities: providing services to the population; integrating political parties and groups; aggregating the urban population. The first refers to the mayor and council's capacities to ensure internal coherence within the local administration in order to provide collective goods and amenities. The second implies the mayor's capacity to build political alliances and win the elections. The third is concerned with local government's capacity to represent urban society in the diversity of its social and interests groups.

Wielding influence refers to two processes: centre-periphery relations; policy-making. The first process is linked to the mayor's status as an agent of the State, along with the close ties established over the years with local representatives of the State, and his privileged access to central government through multiple office-holding. The second process refers to the capacity of local government to establish partnerships in order to produce and implement public policies. Apart from the State, which remains a major player at the local level, this

capacity extends to business, local chambers, voluntary associations and other levels of government[v].

These two sets of objectives are present throughout the history of modern local government. It is through their achievement that mayors have gained the necessary resources to exercise authority at the local level. Furthermore, these objectives are intimately related in the day-to-day exercise of local leadership. Building partnerships with the State or private interests can result in greater political support; aggregating urban society can provide the necessary resources to influence other levels of government. Nonetheless, local government must at all time find an equilibrium between building support and wielding influence. A mayor intent on gaining the support of his population, without engaging in policy partnerships, would rapidly see his position weakened. But were he to negotiate with other partners the necessary resources to engage local policies, yet show carelessness in the representation of the interests of the local population, he would run the same risk. Interestingly enough, the adjustment between these objectives is often achieved through symbolic postures, measures and policies: these are characteristic of the mayor's authority in France.

The equilibrium found between the two sets of objectives, although specific to each local situation, presents nonetheless some general features which vary across time. Three periods can be observed. Between the end of the 19th century and the 2nd World War, the major characteristics of local government are established around the figure of the mayor as a local leader influential within the State. During the next period, which runs from the

beginning of the 4th Republic to the end of the 20th century, local government comes under great pressure but stabilizes the preceding characteristics into an entrepreneurial model which achieves official recognition through the Decentralization Act of 1982. In the last years of the 20th century, the emergence of a new level of local government exerts strong pressure on communal authorities and their capacity to produce policies, whilst the conditions under which political support is achieved change with a growing electoral and social fragmentation. These changes produce a shift in power, in favour of the president of the new intermunicipal bodies.

We will limit our analysis to the large and medium-sized communes. Given the large number of communes (more than 36 500) and the fact that the vast majority have very few inhabitants (75% have a population under 1 000, 98% under 10 000), local government in the small and very small communes has a very limited role. Today, there are roughly 250 communes with a population over 30 000: this represents one third of the French population. The fact that the total number of communes has hardly changed over the last hundred years, even though reforms have attempted to reduce their number, is already a clear indication of local officials' capacity to protect their interests within a centralized State.

I – Learning to govern (1884-1939)

In 1884, the 3rd Republic is still under construction, both as a political regime and as an institutional framework promoting a Republican model within a centralized Nation-State. This context of institutional building is favourable to the development of municipal

government: the national regulatory framework within which urban authorities organize themselves and tackle issues is still incomplete, leaving important manoeuvring space for a politicised mayoral leadership. More surprisingly, the influence of mayors in the building of a new political regime at the national level also appears to have been very important: not only did they manage to negotiate laws and decrees favourable to local government, but they actually contributed to the consolidation of the regime[vi].

I – 1 : Building political support through politicisation

Politics played a decisive role in the formation of a municipal government. The 1884 Municipal Act provided a legal framework which was rapidly seized by emerging political parties[vii]. In this process of institutionalisation, the mayor gained a prominent role, on account of his being simultaneously head of the municipal council and administration and local representative of the State. But more decisive, perhaps, was his capacity to bring together and manage an electoral coalition.

The politicisation of local government is a result of the coincidence between the implementation of the Municipal Act and the emergence of political parties. This emergence is, in turn, a consequence of a late industrial revolution combined with the growth of an urban population. The emergence of a working class, authorised by law in 1884 to found trade unions, and the consolidation of a petty-bourgeoisie, with its own organizations and forms of sociability, fostered the creation of a variety of political groupings, struggling to aggregate a maximum number of followers in order to gain control of municipal governments[viii]. This in turn encouraged the upper classes in forming their own parties. This had a series of effects.

First, political pluralism: for the first time, different ideas, representations and values co-existed over the management of urban affairs. Second, polarisation: the political spectrum came to represent conflicting social classes: in the more industrialized cities, parties mirrored the opposition between labour and capitalists; in the more commercial or administrative centres, the conflict opposed the petty-bourgeoisie to the aristocracy. Third, after a period of intense political fragmentation between socialists (themselves initially composed of different small parties), radicals, republicans, opportunists and conservatives, the dynamics of electoral competition every 4 years progressively saw the consolidation of strong political parties on both sides of the political spectrum.

The emergence of political parties and of electoral competition marked, in turn, a process of differentiation between urban society and a political sphere progressively gaining autonomy as a distinct field, with its own rules and agenda. This can be observed on three accounts.

First, the mayor was not chosen anymore by the State among individuals with the highest social status. He was elected among candidates who personified contrasting political programs. In other words, the mayor came to represent something more abstract than a social status: ideas and values, issues and commitments.

Second, the mayor's success depended on his capacity to bring together different political groupings, representing different social and interest groups, into a winning coalition and later to keep this coalition working during the term of office.

Third, if local officials were previously embedded in social activities and networks which defined their position (clubs, freemasonry or religious movements, local press), the new elites, in particular on the left, undertook to organize urban society according to their needs. Thus, the socialist municipalities encouraged and often financed trade unions, voluntary associations and cooperatives. Through these they hoped to attract resources and support for their action and re-election.

Thus, the political sphere began imposing its own representation of social classes and conflict, and defining its own agenda. Politics was no longer an extension of local society; it aspired to organize urban society within municipal government. The mayor was a key figure in this process and acquired visibility on this occasion.

The mayor also undertook to organize an administration fit to answer the multiple issues and demands addressed to him. During the last decades of the 19th century, mayors often sought to build a political clientele by recruiting in large numbers their followers. But as the socialists abandoned their dreams of revolution for more reformist policies after the failure of the 1905 strikes, they felt the need to recruit qualified personnel in order to provide more efficiently services and amenities. After the 1st World War, municipal governments engaged into a process of bureaucratisation, albeit with limited means compared to State administration[ix]. This evolution is highly significant, since it marks the introduction of professional recruitment practices into what remains a political organisation, in line with the depoliticised attitude adopted by mayors regarding the management of urban affairs starting in the 1920s.

I – 2 : Gaining influence through depoliticisation

Given the relative weakness of the initial regulatory framework within which municipal governments managed urban affairs, local authorities undertook a series of policies related to urban planning, transportation, lighting, water, hygiene, housing and welfare. These interventionist policies were not specific to the French case: they could be observed throughout Europe and were often promoted by socialist municipalities. They concerned public utilities and services addressed to the working classes and the poor. Municipalism became a trademark of left-wing cities; but more moderate or even right-wing cities also undertook similar action.

After the 1st World War, these policies came under severe criticism from the *Conseil d'Etat* (the highest administrative court), careful to limit the expansion of municipal intervention in order to protect State prerogatives, on the one hand, the freedom of commerce and industry, on the other. During the same period, central government undertook to codify the organization, prerogatives and resources of local government, for example personnel (1919) and utilities (1926). Authors often consider that this marked a process of re-centralisation. Yet, the State often regulated urban affairs on the basis of existing rules and practices: in other words, the State basically extended to all communes rules and practices already in use in some cities. Meanwhile, mayors played an active role in this process of codification. Through three distinct channels (parliament, government and professional associations), they took a direct part in the production of laws and decrees that concerned local government[x].

To understand the nature of the "Republican compromise" passed between local and national elites, two traits of the French system must be explained: multiple office-holding[xi] and the need to strengthen a centralized Republican regime.

French mayors have the possibility to hold several political mandates, amongst which those of deputy or senator are the most prized on account of the professional status that accompanies these mandates, the salary (a mayor receives no salary), the political resources useful to uphold their position locally and direct access to central government. Such a position is all the more valuable in a regime where power lies for the most part in parliament. From this period lies the preference of French mayors for parliamentary rather than presidential systems, given the influence the first bequeaths them over the second. Furthermore, mayors were sometimes able to hold positions within government. This gave them the opportunity, not only to help their commune, but more significantly to defend the interests of mayors – for example, in extending the term of office from 4 to 6 years in 1926[xii].

The second trait is complementary. Given the necessity for central authorities to consolidate a State which had not yet affirmed its hold on the entire Nation, mayors were important allies. Working with the mayors, rather than against their interests, offered central authorities the possibility to affirm the State's authority nation-wide, to preserve the public order and to achieve national unity. The mayors accepted to recognize these objectives and promote their acceptance within their constituency, but in exchange for a series of advantages and the possibility to negotiate the implementation of national regulation. More generally, they achieved a clear appraisal by central government of their political influence.

As a consequence of these two traits, mayors came to depoliticise their behaviour. Not only did they accept to work together at a national level, whatever their political engagements, in order to defend their collective interests, but they also developed locally a consensual rhetoric, casting aside partisan engagements to work for "the common good". This rhetoric, which lasted until late into the 5th Republic, made it easier to work with representatives of the State who embodied the general interest, but also served to stifle local opposition[xiii]. One noteworthy exception to this were the communes conquered by the Communist Party in the Paris suburbs, which were transformed into local strongholds and showcases for communist policies.

Thus, the construction of a modern centralized State came about with the participation of local authorities actively promoting a polity in which they could gain and preserve a high level of autonomy. All the complexity of centre-periphery relations during the better part of the 20th century finds its source during this first period. The result of this process is the strong position acquired by the mayor, both locally and within the political system as a whole.

I – 3 : The mayor between centre and periphery

The processes by which the mayor emerged as a key political figure, both locally and within the State, are closely linked. Too often, these processes have been seen as self-evident, based on the mayor's position and status. We suggest that, notwithstanding the regulatory specifications, these processes were the result of a sum of strategies adopted by the mayors, given the necessities of local politics (bringing together a winning coalition) and the need to defend their interests (and those of local government). Through their capacity to build

political support, they were able to wield influence and obtain from the State decisions and aid for their commune which reinforced their political base.

It is during this first period that the position of mayor acquired its resources and symbolic attributes. Many town halls were built at the turn of the century: they were designed to demonstrate, through their imposing size and style, the power of municipal government. Inside, a bust of Marianne, symbol of the Republic, conveyed the municipality's attachment to the Republican State. As for the mayor, he wore a tricolour sash to distinguish him from the other local elected officials and personify the Republic. More generally, all the apparel, in particular during national holidays, was designed to show the attachment of local officials to the Republic and to mobilise the population in a show of unity. The mayor played an important role in bringing his constituency to adhere to the Republic and accept the authority of the State. In exchange for their participation, the mayors were granted the possibility to uphold their position and status.

II – The consecration of the mayor (1945-1992)

During the 4th (1945-1958) and 5th Republics (1958-), the mayors achieved a clear recognition of their power. Not only did they play an active part in the writing of two constitutions, negotiating their support to the new regimes against a defence of their interests, but they resisted central government's attempts in the 1960s to reduce their influence and contributed to de Gaulle's defeat in 1969. Thirteen years later, the Decentralization Acts

officially granted them the autonomy within a presidential system they had been striving for since 1958.

II – 1 : From strongholds to fiefs

To build and maintain political support during the second half of the 20th century, mayors undertook to bureaucratise their administration, to diversify their representation of local interests, and to establish networks and clienteles within urban society. Their success on all three accounts contributed to their stability during several terms of office.

A status for municipal personnel (fixing conditions of recruitment and career) was adopted in 1952 – many years after a similar status was granted to State personnel. This officially ended a period marked by recruitment practices more often based on a personal rather than a professional basis. But this implied that mayors find new ways of establishing their authority over administrative personnel. Not only was this necessary if they wished to manage effectively their commune, but the municipality often was one of the most important employers in town. Until the 1970s, mayors encouraged internal promotion in order to establish staff loyalty and continued, when possible, to recruit locally for less qualified jobs. Starting in the 1970s, they began to recruit more qualified personnel and after the left-wing parties conquered a large number of cities in 1977, they favoured personnel with political affiliations[xiv]. This practice came rapidly to a halt, given the many conflicts it raised. But mayors have since retained the habit of choosing their closest collaborators, if not on a political basis, at least on a combination of professionalism and personal sympathy. Thus, when the political majority changes, it is usual for the new mayor to recruit a new staff and

dismiss the previous team, even though civil servants are protected by their status[xv]. Starting in the 1980s, mayors and CEOs have adopted managerial techniques to obtain more results from their personnel, and simultaneously delegated to the private sector a whole range of utilities[xvi].

Mayors also sought to strengthen political support by using the municipal council to represent urban society in its diversity. Deputy mayors play in this respect a special role, that has long gone unnoticed behind the central figure of the mayor[xvii]. They act as spokespersons or mediators between the mayor and different groups and interests, thereby building legitimacy for the mayor and municipal government. They also have specific responsibilities within local government since they act on behalf of the mayor to promote policies and answer requests and in so doing work with a variety of professionals and local groups. In this way, the deputy mayors are at the centre of a largely informal system of functional representation that reflects local policy networks. This is not contradictory with a strong personalization of power and the fact that the mayor has always enjoyed a high visibility and remains the most popular political figure. Mayoral leadership is, in fact, all the more powerful since it rests, behind the positive image of authority the mayor personifies, on a collective logic of representation through the municipal council and the deputy mayors[xviii].

The third means of extending political support was through local social and political networks. Mayors adopted two sorts of strategies in relation to these. The first concerned the interests they represented, in particular when their political orientation corresponded to clearly identified social groups. Thus, left-wing officials worked closely with party federations, trade

unions and voluntary associations[xix], while their right-wing counterparts relied more often on employers' associations, social clubs, notability networks, the Catholic church, and chambers of commerce and industry[xx]. These two modes of representation illustrated a certain type of social and political aggregation: the "stronghold"[xxi]. The second sort of strategies concerned interest groups that were not at the core of their traditional electorate, but which the mayor needed to neutralise or enrol if he wished to gain an advantage over his opponents. These strategies blurred the usual correspondence between political affiliation and social structure and resulted in the emergence of a second model: the 'fief'[xxii]. Starting in the 1970s, this last movement tended to dominate over the more traditional logic of strongholds.

These three modes of acquiring and enlarging political support progressed in the same direction, that of a de-politicisation of local government in order to achieve greater effectiveness, to extend the power base and to incorporate as many groups as possible in a common project. This de-politicisation, which contrasted with the way political support was built during the first period of local government, was compensated by a re-politicisation of local government in its relation to the State.

II – 2 : Bringing politics back in

Following the first period, during which mayors "colonised" central government to promote regulation favourable to their position and the interests of local government, the 4th Republic brought little change. As a parliamentary system, it continued to provide mayors with the necessary resources to uphold their interests and weigh on the production of laws and decrees. It is only with the advent of the 5th Republic that a change occurred, in particular

after the 1962 referendum which introduced the direct election of the President. Within a (semi-) presidential system, the mayors lost their influence since access to the parliament did not suffice anymore[xxiii]. This signalled a period of conflict, which can be observed on two accounts.

First, a political hiatus between national and local politics: while the Gaullist and Communist parties dominated at the national level, the greater majority of local governments were headed by centre-right and left coalitions. It is only in the 1970s that an alignment was achieved between local and national politics, but this resulted in a confrontation between left-wing municipal governments and right-wing national governments.

Second, under the de Gaulle presidency (1958-69), a series of reforms were launched with the clear objective of transforming local government against the interests of mayors. The idea was to modernize the political system and give more voice to the dynamic social groups in French society against the conservative forces embodied by local elected officials. These reforms failed and the upshot was the defeat in 1969 of de Gaulle in his attempt to reform the Senate (the chamber of parliament most representative of the interests of local government). These failures had two consequences. First, they revealed a system of close cooperation between local officials (the *notables*) and local State representatives, on which their respective legitimacy and autonomy were based[xxiv]. This cooperation served not only to adapt national regulation to specific local settings but it also served to promote the interest of local government. Notables and Prefects shared a common interest in preserving a system of relation which gave them the opportunity to defend the interests of a commune or department

within a centralized State. The second consequence is a clear understanding by central authorities that any voluntary reform of local government would fail if it went against the interests of local officials.

This understanding, along with the problems resulting from an ill-managed urban growth, encouraged central government to adopt more negotiated procedures[xxv]. Starting in the 1970s, the use of contracts – both with other levels of government and with private actors – became a common policy instrument for cooperation. Contractual policies rapidly spread to different domains and contributed to a modification in the symbolic hierarchy between State and local officials – even though the State retained important power resources when negotiating with the mayors.

Another distinct feature during this period is the capacity shown by local government in tackling different issues. Starting just after the 2nd World War, mayors and deputy-mayors displayed a capacity in innovating, i.e. inventing solutions to collective problems, often preceding the intervention of the State on issues related to housing, elderly persons and poverty. This in turn underscores a key characteristic of municipal government: a system which adjusts to the emergence of new issues by differentiating itself, i.e. by adding new elements to the existing structure[xxvi]. Deputy-mayors play an important role in this strategy: their number grows after every election, and the mayor is able to entrust them with a responsibility in different policy domains. The result is a system whose efficiency is based on redundancy and overlap, given the high number of deputy-mayors and services in charge of distinct issues and the low degree of coordination between them. A mayor has rarely an

interest in arbitrating between his deputies or seeking to introduce a higher degree of coherence between them: not only would he risk losing allies, but it would imply choosing between divergent interest groups and defining priorities, all of which could only weaken his power base. By maintaining a highly differentiated and weakly-integrated system, he is able, on the contrary, to preserve his institution's legitimacy and protect his own position.

With the turn of the 1970s, this capacity to tackle different issues took a radical turn. The growth of a large urban middle-class produced new political elites[xxvii]. Contrary to their predecessors, these elites showed a strong distrust toward State officials and traditional political parties. Active in trade unions, voluntary associations, smaller left-wing movements (and later the new Socialist Party), these *militants* gained control of a large number of cities in 1977[xxviii]. Their program was clearly political: to change society by the bottom. They undertook to politicise their action in a whole series of domains, amongst which fields under the responsibility of the State (economy, planning): this triggered conflicts with State representatives and clearly indicated the limits to local political autonomy. As these conflicts grew in number, they fostered contestation of centralization. With the victory of the Socialist Party in 1981 at the national level, in large part due to the above mentioned changes at the local level, mayors seized the opportunity to push forward a decentralization reform which gave them more autonomy and reduced the influence of the State.

Apart from the State, the mayors now had to find other partners among political, social and economic agents to engage in policy initiatives. This prompted them to establish partnerships across a wide range of areas. Simultaneously, they proceeded to the contracting-

out of a number of public utilities[xxix]. Furthermore, cities were now competing with each other but also with other levels of local government (departments and regions) to attract investors, infrastructures, middle-class households, tourists, … [xxx]. This called for marketing strategies in which mayors played an important role in personifying their city[xxxi]. Finally, mayors reversed once more to a more de-politicised rhetoric and style.

II – 3 : The mayor as an entrepreneur

Throughout this second period, the mayor acquired visibility, authority and legitimacy as an entrepreneur. This can be observed in the building of cities when the population swelled after the 2nd World War, the production of services and amenities during the 1960-70s, and later the design of policies addressed at specific parts of the population. The rhetoric employed by the mayors, either as city-builder, urban-developer and later manager of his city, partook in this role – as his capacity to mobilise resources, partners and capital to achieve his objectives.

It is during this period that political scientists have underscored the resemblance between the mayor and the French chief of State. Yet, this image does not help to understand his position. This position is both weak and strong. Weak, since the mayor is always dependant upon the different components of his coalition for his (re)election: he still owes his election to the municipal council. Strong, given his capacity to build majorities, to speak on behalf of his city and to forge partnerships with other actors. A governance approach to urban government helps to understand this contradictory situation[xxxii]: it stresses a mayor's capacity to aggregate local interest and social groups, along with actors outside the city, into a

common project which will promote the city on a wider scale (regional, national, European, international) and in return provide resources for local development. This capacity rests on the mayor's negotiating powers but also his mastery of symbolic action. To build political support and to wield influence, the mayor must develop collective action and long-term political goals for the urban area[xxxiii]. In cooperation with other local elites (business, unions, university), he must try to organize his city as a collective actor with a system of governance emerging in Europe[xxxiv]. These leadership capacities, or social skills, are what most clearly distinguish urban mayors in France at the turn of the millennium.

III. Turning mayors into presidents

Since the 2001 municipal elections, the decline in the mayors' power has become an issue open for debate. This can come as a surprise, given what we have just suggested, but can be understood by coming back to the dimensions of political support and influence we have been using to describe the mayor's status and position. On both of these, changes have occurred that entail new forms of leadership.

III-1 : Managing political uncertainty

As municipal governments have shifted into fiefdoms, so the conditions under which political support is achieved have changed. The competing coalitions all strive to enrol the different social and interest groups that compose the city. These groups are in a way much more available than they used to be, when they were clearly associated to the left or the right.

Thus, left-wing parties undertake to work with employers' associations or to build alliances with local business, to achieve greater credibility in their effort to attract investments and modernize the image of their city. Meanwhile, right-wing parties have conquered some of the more working-class cities by reaching toward the second or third generation immigrants abandoned by the left[xxxv], and by campaigning in the social-housing districts with engagements to provide a better environment. If it is too early to conclude that traditional political cleavages are definitely blurred, this situation has nonetheless important consequences since it raises the degree of uncertainty candidates face when running for election. And neither the mayor's efforts to increase his visibility nor his deputies' capacity to reach out and represent the different components of the population are able to reduce this fragmentation of the electorate.

Furthermore, the system is currently under pressure in terms of both electoral representation (due to a decline in voter turnout) and functional representation (due to multiple and fragmented local interests). Municipal elections in France have traditionally been characterized by high voter turnout, but the levels have been dropping steadily to an all-time low of 61% in 2001. Electoral participation among some groups (in terms of social class, ethnic origin, place of living) is particularly low. This implies a potential problem of representation: the needs and demands of such groups, individuals and areas may receive less attention and understanding from political officials. Another difficulty faced by these arises from an increasing variety of political parties competing during elections, from an average of two to three in the 1970s to four and sometimes five in the last elections[xxxvi]. And among these parties, the rise of marginal or non-governmental parties is the most noteworthy: the

National Front (a far-right party) since the mid-1980s, a series of far-left parties more recently. These have tended to draw away from the traditional political parties many voters, and in some cases contributed to right-wing strongholds falling to the left – or vice-versa[xxxvii]. Added to increasing electoral volatility, this makes it hard for mayors to consolidate their electoral base.

Hence, the plurality of urban political and social interests has become a problem for the mayor. He can always come back to the usual techniques, such as subsidizing groups or voluntary associations, to gain their allegiance[xxxviii]. He can also adopt more participatory procedures, such as various types of consultation, referendums and procedures designed to promote dialogue on highly controversial issues. But these procedures call for skills he must acquire and they often remain highly uncertain in their outcome. All in all, the mayor cannot count anymore on the stability his predecessors enjoyed and must constantly reaffirm his hold on his city and its government.

III-2 : Rescaling local government

The 1992 and more recently 1999 laws on intermunicipal cooperation have produced a deep impact on the form and content of local government. *Communautés* can be found in the largest urban areas (*communautés urbaines*), the large and medium sized cities (*communautés d'agglomération*), and the smaller communes (*communautés de commune*). Altogether, France now counts 2 175 intermunicipal bodies, with a specific and distinct tax base. These institution encompass 26 748 communes and over 75% of the French population[xxxix]. Their missions are often politically sensitive: urban planning, housing, economic development,

environmental protection. They have begun to put together professional administrations and work closely with privately-run utilities. Although the community council is elected by the municipal councils, and not directly by the citizens, these structures have acquired in a few years a decisive influence on a number of policy areas.

This transformation has had an impact on the position of the mayors. While they continue to gather political support for their action at the communal level, their influence is limited and they must work within an evermore integrated intermunicipal institution. Furthermore, they can only partially use the political support obtained within their commune to influence decisions at the intermunicipal level, since decisions are taken on a consensual basis. This in turn calls for a change in the mayors' repertoires: while a mayor in his city can easily impose decisions upon his council, as soon as he is at the next level, he must find other skills. This is visible in the case of the mayors of central cities who are simultaneously presidents of the wider *communauté*[xl]: they must learn to take decisions that achieve unanimous agreement, and this calls for skills radically different from those of a mayor. Finally, the president must learn to work with the mayors of the other communes without having any take on them, since each remains accountable to his own electorate.

While we could be led to conclude that mayors are slowly losing ground for the benefit of the *communauté* presidents, and that in a short time, they will be left with secondary tasks while the most important decisions are taken elsewhere, we must remain careful for two reasons[xli].

The first is related to strong disparities between intermunicipal institutions. The *communauté urbaine* in Brest is only composed of 7 communes while Lille Métropole has 87. In some cases, the new structure remains virtual and power still rests within the communes (Marseille). In other cases, it can concentrate a large array of missions and extend its influence further than the law provided for (Amiens). The dynamics of intermunicipal cooperation are diverse, and this makes it difficult to observe a convergence – and by way of consequence a general fading out of the mayor.

The second reason is that mayors, notably those of suburban communes, can actually exert influence within the executive council (formed by all the mayors), since decisions are always taken on a consensual basis. This gives them the opportunity to use a veto power, all mayors standing on equal terms whatever the population size of their commune. In other words, if mayors have lost some influence on key issues at the communal level, they have also gained influence in other domains and can weigh on collective decisions. This amounts to a trade-off rather than a simple decline.

Nonetheless, change is inevitable given that, with the growing importance of intermunicipal institutions, a separation is appearing between political support, on the one hand, and wielding influence, on the other.

III-3 : A decoupling of power ?

The preceding changes result in a form of decoupling: while partisan politics and building political support remain communal activities, decision-making and the exercise of influence move to the intermunicipal level. This creates tensions at both levels.

Within the commune, gaining and maintaining political support will become more difficult as fragmentation grows and as the mayor loses the capacity to uphold his position by exercising his authority in decisions and partnerships. At the level of the *communauté*, the absence of political support can weaken decisions and affect their legitimacy, while the consensual style of decision-making can create tensions within political parties. For the mayor or president to manage these different tensions is no easy task and calls for the acquisition of social skills, the definition of new objectives and the invention of symbols. At the communal level, he will be first and foremost concerned with the preservation of local identity and the capacity to foster cooperation between the different components of his city by acting on a proximity basis. A law on "democracy and proximity" passed in 2002 supports such a change, by promoting new forms of participation and stimulating political debate in what formally remains a representative system of government[xlii]. While on a *communauté* level, the president will try to introduce a sense of identity within an urban region through large economic policies, infrastructures, marketing strategies, sporting and cultural events. The 2004 Decentralization Act has given him some supplementary resources in order to facilitate cooperation between different institutional players locally. Nonetheless, the question remains of the coordination between the communal and intermunicipal levels and in particular the way to proceed with the inevitable conflicts which will arise between them.

Conclusion

Although French mayors are enjoying more autonomy, they must evolve within a system of constraints now defined by the EU, a restructured state and regions. This calls for

the invention of new styles of leadership, new processes of policy-making (notably through citizen participation) and new institutionalised procedures for collective action.

Mayors have always had an edge over other political and administrative actors when it came to protecting their interests. And they have always been rather successful in turning new rules and procedures to their advantage, manipulating these to eliminate political rivals and strengthen their political control of the territory without too much interest for democracy.

Yet, the intermunicipal revolution is gradually reorganizing French local government into a system wherein a few thousand intermunicipal governments play an increasingly important part within a more diverse and differentiated system. Furthermore, access to central government does not provide any longer the resources mayors needed to uphold their position. Finally, social and political fragmentation accentuates the degree of uncertainty they face in managing urban affairs.

These elements put together may not indicate a general decline in the role of the mayor, but they indubitably call for a transformation in his position and status. As some will set out to become *communauté* presidents with similar attributes to the strong mayors of the past, others will have to adapt to a complex institutional framework in which the commune may retain only symbolic attributes. And it may well be that in years to come, a highly differentiated pattern dominates with very different roles for the mayors according to their local situation.

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