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## MUNICIPAL SOCIALISM AND THE IMPACT OF URBAN DECAY. THE CASE OF NEVERS, A MID-SIZED TOWN IN CENTRAL FRANCE (1971–2020)

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**Abstract:** Nevers, a medium-sized city of 33,000 inhabitants in the center of France, has long been regarded as a laboratory for municipal socialism as well as for the union of the left. The socialist party has dominated the local political scene for more than four decades. In 2014, however, a list without any party label put an end to this hegemony by winning the election. The 2020 municipal election confirmed the changeover: the outgoing list won the election, this time in the first round. How to explain this lasting change in a city that has long been a socialist city, in favor of an "apolitical" list that does not benefit from partisan resources? If this change is part of a more general movement, characterized by the decline of the "Parti socialiste" (PS) and the "Parti communiste Français" (PCF), we will show that it is also rooted in the socio-demographic transformations that the city has undergone in recent decades. Such as many medium-sized French cities, Nevers is indeed confronted with a long-standing phenomenon of urban decline, particularly marked in the central districts. The departure of managers and middle-level professions and the arrival of precarious populations has contributed to the transformation of the electorate, while the theme of decline has become one of the main issues of the last elections. This article thus proposes to examine the evolution of the local political field in the light of the social, economic, and demographic transformations of the territory. To do so, several databases are used in order to quantify and map these transformations: the results of municipal elections since 1971 and census data at municipal level since 1968 and at the neighborhood level (Iris) since 1990. These data will be put into perspective with archives relating to municipal elections from 1971 to 2020 as well as interviews and observations conducted during the 2014 and 2020 campaigns. In conclusion, the urban decline, in the case of Nevers, has contributed to bring down municipal socialism in two ways: 1) by weakening its electoral base, 2) by imposing a political agenda that the socialist municipal team cannot keep, which will be blamed on them in 2014.

**Keywords:** municipal socialism, urban decay, medium-sized cities, urban entrepreneurialism, *petite bourgeoisie*, French municipal elections

### Introduction

Nevers, a mid-sized town of 33,000 inhabitants in central France and the prefecture of the Nièvre department (Figure 1), was long considered as a testing ground for 'municipal socialism' as well as the union of left-wing parties, namely the *Parti Socialiste* (PS) and the *Parti Communiste Français* (PCF). The PS came to power in the town in 1971, well before the 'pink wave' of 1977 (Grunberg et al., 1985). But the leadership of the municipality changed in 2014, when Denis Thuriot, an independent candidate supported in the second round by *Union pour un Mouvement Populaire* (UMP, right) and *Union des Démocrates and Indépendants* (UDI, centre-right) won the election through a campaign focused on the fight against urban decay

(Haase et al., 2014; Martinez-Fernandez et al., 2012) and on the inability of the incumbent party to resolve the issue (Guéraud, E. and Warnant, 2020). The political shift has proved durable, with Denis Thuriot winning the 2020 municipal election in the first round of voting, this time backed by *La République en Marche* (LREM, centre). In this long-standing socialist stronghold, where the figure of Pierre Bérégovoy, mayor of Nevers from 1983 to 1993 and prime minister from 1992 to 1993, remains resonant, the failure of the left has a considerable symbolic significance and raises questions concerning the conditions behind the lasting downfall of municipal socialism.



*Figure 1. Nevers, a medium-sized city in central France*

Yet the situation in Nevers is not the exception. The defeat of the Nevers socialists came in a context marked by an unprecedented nationwide contraction of the party (Nadeau et al., 2018; Rouban, 2015). Similarly, the victory by an independent list, presenting itself as ‘civic, republican (...) at the service of all Neversois’ and standing ‘beyond political divides’, was not specific to the town. It was part of a broader trend, confirmed in the 2020 municipal elections (Lefebvre, 2020), of the shrinking visibility of political parties, apparent depoliticization at the local level, and the growing dissociation between different levels of governance, running counter to a trend initiated nearly four decades earlier in the 1977 elections (Sawicki, 2013).

This political transition thus results from exogenous factors identified in the literature prevailing throughout France, including the weakening link between the left and the lower classes (Lefebvre and Sawicki, 2006), the erosion of the entrepreneurial agenda of the socialists, a consequence in particular of the austerity policies led since 2008 (Gourgues and Houser, 2019), and the rise of non-partisan lists, which may have played against the incumbent representatives in the municipal elections of 2014 and 2020 (Lefebvre, 2020). Yet these developments did not have the same effect across France as a whole. While left-coalition candidates maintained their positions or even extended them in large cities<sup>1</sup>, the socialists and their allies lost many medium-sized cities in 2014<sup>2</sup> and won almost no such cities back in 2020<sup>3</sup>.

What were the reasons for this territorial differentiation? First of all, it should be pointed out that these exogenous factors hinge on sociological and urban characteristics that boost or limit the effects (Sawicki and Briquet, 1989). While medium-sized French cities form a heterogeneous whole, a majority of those located in central and north-east France and far from large cities are today prey to urban decline (Guéraud Piguet, 2023). Arising in the 1970s as a result of deindustrialization and peri-urbanization (Cauchi-Duval et al., 2016), this trend gathered steam at the end of the 2000s (Chouraqui, 2021) against a backdrop of the ‘territorial withdrawal of the State’ (Artioli, 2017; Chouraqui, 2020). This phenomenon is evidenced in population decline, a deterioration in the value of space, and the pauperization of inhabitants, which serve to transform the electoral sociology of the medium-sized cities in question as well as local political agendas, to the detriment of the socialists, as part of processes on which this article aims to shed light.

Based on an analysis of the municipal elections of 2014 and 2020, the aim is to show how the transformations engendered by urban decline, among other local particularities, have accentuated the impacts of the exogenous factors of the weakening of the French socialist party in some French medium-sized cities. How did a political force with such strong local roots in Nevers collapse to the benefit of an “apolitical” list lacking a major following, albeit backed by the right? Seen in this context, the fall of municipal socialism appears to stem from the party’s national decline, and notably the gradual disconnect from the lower classes, and from the socio-territorial transformations of the town, which serve to heighten the impacts. To back up this hypothesis, we draw on the results of two field studies carried out in Nevers in recent years. The first, initiated in 2014, is based on geographical and political science resources. It explores the effects of urban decay and the responses of local elected representatives, seeking as a

majority to return to demographic and economic growth, in three French medium-sized cities<sup>4</sup>. The second study, launched in 2012, is ethnographic and sociological in nature. It examines the recomposition of local elites in various social spheres, notably political, and analyzes the issues engendered by urban decay (Guéraud, É., 2018)<sup>5</sup>.

To better understand the political, urban, and social trends involved, we begin with a review of the history of municipal socialism in Nevers from its victory in 1971 through to its defeat in 2014 (I). In Nevers, as in many other medium-sized cities in France, the socialists' rise to power in the 1970s came hand in hand with the initial effects of deindustrialization, including the emergence of mass unemployment and population decline. However, these phenomena remained limited as they were accompanied in the 1970s and 1980s by public policies having a positive impact on these cities, which they targeted directly. This was true of the *Contrats de villes moyennes* (Vadelorge, 2013) policy implemented to improve life in medium-sized cities and, indirectly, the Lang cultural policies (1981-1993) and Act 1 of the decentralization laws (1982). These decades saw the ascension of certain social groups, and in particular a local cultural petite bourgeoisie, which contributed to creating and implementing municipal policies while establishing a residential and cultural presence in the town center. The defeat of the PS in 2014 seriously undermined this social group to the benefit of the local economic bourgeoisie, which was considerably more active in electoral terms than the lower classes hitherto acquired by the left. We then demonstrate how these structural and national causes behind the weakening of municipal socialism played out in Nevers, with the issue of urban decay (II). This phenomenon, which initially affected central and social-housing districts, has also directly impacted left-wing voters and contributed more than elsewhere, or so we posit, to demobilizing this population. Looking beyond the material and sociological transformations it generates, urban decay was also a key campaign topic in the 2014 and 2020 municipal elections and largely played against the socialists, who were held as responsible for the situation. The new guidelines on public action issued by the new leadership headed by Denis Thuriot, as well as public works and digital innovation (to the detriment of the social and cultural aspects that previously were priorities), were thus harnessed as part of a political program aimed at halting urban decay, an approach to which the socialists have proved powerless to respond.

## **I. A history of municipal socialism in Nevers (1971-2014)**

Conquered in 1971 by a list of socialists and communists, Nevers stood as a relatively early socialist bastion as well as a testing ground for the union of left-wing parties. The 1970s and 1980s saw the implementation of ambitious social and cultural policies and the considerable development of the employees of a decentralized ‘left hand of the State’ (A). These policy directions were strengthened by François Mitterrand’s election as president. A cultural petite bourgeoisie thus emerged in Nevers in the 1980s, establishing lasting presence in community life, politics, and the central districts of the town (B). But the defeat in 2014, attributable both to high voting rates among the middle and upper classes living in peripheral residential neighbourhoods and to low voting rates among the lower classes, tolled the bell for these municipal policies and the rise of the social groups having benefited from them, including the cultural petite bourgeoisie (C).

*A. A testing ground for municipal socialism and the union of left-wing parties (1971-1989)*

On 15 March 1971, Daniel Benoist, a candidate of a group of left-wing parties, was elected as mayor with 58% of the vote in the second round of the municipal elections. His campaign was based on the promise of a ‘Greater Nevers with 100,000 inhabitants’<sup>6</sup> and the priority given to a ‘bold social policy (...) in favour of young people, seniors, and independent tradespeople’<sup>7</sup>. For Doctor Benoist, surgeon by training, resistant, Mayor of Luzy from 1953 to 1971, senator then MP for the Nièvre department, the campaign was local but linked to broader issues. The idea was to send a message to a government seen as responsible for tax pressure, unemployment, and poverty. Fighting against the ‘seeming apoliticism’ of the previous mayor, backed by President Georges Pompidou’s UDR party, the socialist candidate, taking advantage of a period of strong re-politicization favourable to the left (Pinson, 2020), positioned himself as a ‘representative of workers (...) capable of taking the municipality away from the enemy’<sup>8</sup>. While manual workers and public-sector employees did effectively become members of the municipal council, the victory initially looked like that of the ‘new middle classes’ (Bidou, 1984) or the ‘new petite bourgeoisie’ (Bourdieu, 1979). The young economically active population working in educational, cultural, and social fields counted ten members on the municipal council (out of a total of 39), compared with just four in the previous mandate (Guéraud, É., 2018). The population of Nevers at the time was 45,000, for an ‘urban unity’<sup>9</sup> of nearly 70,000. The population, having been substantially renewed since the 1950s owing to

rural flight (Commerçon, 1990), continued to grow in the early 1970s, but more slowly than before, and some industrial sectors were struggling despite decentralization aid from the State.

The employment situation worsened with the 1973 oil crisis. In the 1970s and 1980s, several major establishments and secondary companies set up in or around Nevers, and generally dependent on capital from outside the town, closed down (Charrier, 1981). The initiatives taken to fight against these closures (including general strikes, demonstrations, a “dead town” campaign, and the efforts of local elected representatives) failed to curb the phenomenon. Despite the occupational retraining organized in the previous decades, including at Compagnie Electro-industrielle, Thomson, and Alfa-Laval, and the arrival of new companies, such as Look, the new business sites were no longer able to offset the job cuts. Business take-up struggled at the Saint-Eloi and Varennes-Vauzelles industrial parks, set up in 1964 and 1971 on an initiative of the UDR-governed municipality (Narquin, 2000), and the businesses setting up shop there were modest in size (Charrier, 1973). At the same time, changes in lifestyles contributed to urban sprawl. The development of suburbs and rural peripheral areas around Nevers weakened the town centre. Competition from supermarkets ‘led to the closure of numerous local shops, particularly on housing estates, which were already ill-favoured’, while the relocation of numerous households to peripheral areas eroded the tax income of the municipality. Between 1975 and 1982, for the first time in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the population of Nevers began to decrease, that of the municipality falling 5.4% and that of the urban unit 0.8%, invalidating the excessively optimistic forecasts of the 1971 White Paper<sup>10</sup>, which found it ‘reasonable’ that the population of the Nevers area could total between 100,000 and 130,000 by 2010. The initial symptoms of urban decline, population decline, rising unemployment and housing-unit vacancies in the city centre thus appeared in a moderate form.

Against this backdrop, Daniel Benoist, running for a second term in 1977, focused his campaign, even more than in 1971, on railing against the ‘failure of national leadership’<sup>11</sup>. With the economic crisis affecting the entire country, the union of the left advocated ‘local freedoms’, which was also ‘a way of opposing the ruling government’<sup>12</sup>. The socialists and their partners made the election a key step in the realization of the ‘Common Program’, according to which the initial symptoms of urban decay (plant closures, population decrease, vacant housing) were the consequence of national policies. The local left notably condemned the ‘loans granted to large groups’ in a crisis period, in which the latter were moving ahead with lay-offs, and the ‘paralysis of local finances’ stemming from austerity measures rolled out as part of the Barre

Plan of 1976. Ultimately, Daniel Benoist was elected in the first round with 62.5% of the votes, placing the left firmly in the driver's seat.

*B. The reign of a cultural petite bourgeoisie (1989-2014)*

François Mitterrand's victory in the 1981 presidential election shifted the paradigm at national level and reinforced the political directions of Nevers socially and culturally. In the 1980s, driven by the Lang cultural policies and the decentralization laws, the workforce of the cultural occupations (Urfalino, 2010), and, more broadly, those of the 'left hand of the State' (Bourdieu, 2012), increased substantially in France and the 'territorial deployment of the State' accelerated (Estèbe, 2018). The development of this new class of employees working in local and regional functions conferred by the State (in culture, teaching, and social action) served to limit population decline in Nevers and in many small and mid-sized towns beset by urban decay<sup>13</sup>.

As a result, a generation of young community activists having emerged in the early 1960s succeeded in less than a decade in securing a near monopoly on the creation and distribution of cultural goods, occupying the professions of artists, teachers, social workers and public officials responsible for cultural policies. They gained their initial foothold in local organizations by importing from the major cities (where they completed their higher education) symbolic goods from the 'lower end of cultural legitimacy' that was starting to gain recognition at the time (Coulangeon, 2010, pp. 9–10), with organizations holding contemporary art exhibitions in 1983, a short-film festival in 1984, a rock-music festival in 1986, a jazz festival in 1987, and a street-theatre festival in 1989. These organizations upped their professional standards and established themselves as institutions in the 1990s; by the 2000s, they had become true 'merchant organizations' (Hély, 2009, pp. 113–114) with consequential workforces, though still run by the same generation of activists.

Many of these young activists also engaged in an activist conversion focused on communities, while others focused on local politics under the socialist banner. One such community activist was elected as municipal delegate for cultural affairs from 1989 to 1995. His comrades quickly followed in his wake, two of them sitting on the municipal council following the municipal election of 1995, five after the election of 2001, and six after that of 2008. This cultural petite bourgeoisie reached its zenith in the early 2000s, with several of its members living exclusively on their mandates as elected representatives and/or holding senior



positions in local government and/or parapublic structures. The cultural organizations created 30 years earlier had come to assume a hegemonic local position and obtained record amounts of subsidies.

This successful incursion into organizations and then politics was accompanied in the 1980s and 1990s by a material and symbolic move to the town centre, where the cultural petite bourgeoisie gradually began to ‘set the tone’ (Chamboredon and Lemaire, 1970). The extensive research on gentrification dynamics in France (Collet, 2015) and elsewhere (Freeman, 2006) has largely demonstrated the way in which the cultural fractions of the middle and upper classes rearrange the public space to match their lifestyle. This ‘gentrification work’ (Bidou-Zachariassen and Poltorak, 2008) was reflected in Nevers by a transformation of the public space, consisting in taking control of cafés and shops, opening numerous offices for organizations, and organizing concerts and art exhibitions. But the phenomenon is perhaps best reflected in the everyday appropriation of the public space, through neighbourhood festivals with rock concerts, cultural events in town-centre squares, and meals shared by neighbours in building courtyards where people generally know each other.

The rise of this social group occurred against a backdrop marked by the emergence in the early 1980s of urban entrepreneurialism (Harvey, 1989) backed by the socialists and their communist allies. The latter ‘had no hesitation about breaking with a deeply-rooted tradition of caution and engaging in economic interventionism’ (Le Bart, 1992). This was particularly true after Pierre Bérégovoy was elected as mayor of Nevers in 1983. Bérégovoy, who would go on to serve as minister of social affairs, minister of the economy and prime minister, made economic development a priority. He worked to modernize the two industrial parks in northern and eastern Nevers and had a third one developed in Coulanges-lès-Nevers. He also drew on his personal relations to assist the recovery of the companies Look (acquired in 1983 by businessman Bernard Tapie), Thomson, and Alfa-Laval. To change the image of the city, he also contributed to the purchase, alongside the general council, of the Magny-Cours race track in 1986, which several years later would host the French Grand Prix.

The 1980s were also marked by the reclassification of the historic town centre, a policy decided on at the end of the 1970s. Seeking to prevent the town centre, which had lost a quarter of its inhabitants between 1968 and 1975, from becoming an ‘empty shell’, the socialist municipality under Daniel Benoist made urban renewal a priority. The ‘Nevers mid-sized town contract’ signed in 1979 placed the emphasis on developments in the historical centre. These

included a new public retirement home, the relocation of the conservatory and library to the former Ursulines convent, the refurbishment of several squares (Chaméane, Saint Nicolas, Carnot), the remediation of the banks of the Loire, and the renovation of historical monuments such as the Palais Ducal and Tour Goguin. These initiatives, carried out in the 1980s and 1990s, helped to boost the image of the town centre. But this trend was disrupted in the 2000s. First, the ‘gentrification work’ in the residential sphere was undermined by accelerating urban decay in the town centre, as we will demonstrate in the second part of this article. Second, over the course of the decade, major cuts in subsidies from the State and local government forced these cultural organizations to lay off part of their staff and even discontinue operations. Thus, after several decades of significant public investment in cultural policies (Dubois and Laborier, 2003) and in the local civil service, policies to reduce public spending, such as the General Review of Public Policies (RGPP) (Bezes and Lidec, 2011), are weakening the local cultural petty bourgeoisie. The period was also marked by increased vulnerability in local public employment, reflected, for the generation born in the 1970s and 1980s, by considerable difficulties in finding a lasting job position in local and regional government<sup>14</sup>. Nevers was also impacted by the dissolution of the 7th Artillery Regiment in 1999 and by the loss of 500 jobs at La Poste and EDF in the mid-2010s. Further, the funding allocated to Nevers by the State as part of the *Dotation globale de fonctionnement* (general operating grant) was reduced by 8.5% between 2008 and 2014 despite the worsening of social and economic problems in the city.

These nationwide structural factors thus explain the weakening of the Nevers cultural petite bourgeoisie, but the phenomenon was accelerated by the demise of municipal socialism in 2014.

### *C. The defeat of 2014: increased voting among peripheral middle-class neighbourhoods, decreased voting among lower-class neighbourhoods*

On 30 March 2014, the list of the union of left-wing parties, formed by the PS, PCF and the Europe Ecologie-Les Verts (EELV) green party, lost in the second round of the municipal election to a list of "no label" candidates, UMP and UDI. The latter was elected based on its promise to reduce local taxes at the expense of a ‘global cost-cutting policy’ (extract of the program of the ‘independent’ list) and its commitment to halt urban decay. The defeat was the first for the socialists since 1965 and led initially to a deep-seated transformation of the social

composition of the municipal council. Never company heads (4/39), private-sector higher-level occupations (9/39) and the liberal professions (5/39) been so strongly represented, while the number of direct and indirect employees of the left hand of the State was its lowest since 1983 (12, compared with 20 in 1989, 18 in 1995, 14 in 2001, and 21 in 2008). The winning list was led by a representative of the local economic bourgeoisie, Denis Thuriot, a lawyer and son of a lawyer, from a family of Nevers landowners, who said he intended to manage the town 'like a company head' (debate of the Nevers 2014 municipal election, broadcast by FR3 BFC on 15 February 2014). As such, consistent with Luc Rouban's broader observation of French towns and cities (2015), the 2014 municipal election resulted not just in a significant downturn for the PS and PCF to the benefit of the UMP, UDI and 'various right' lists, but also in a reversal in the balance of power between the economic and cultural segments of the local upper classes.

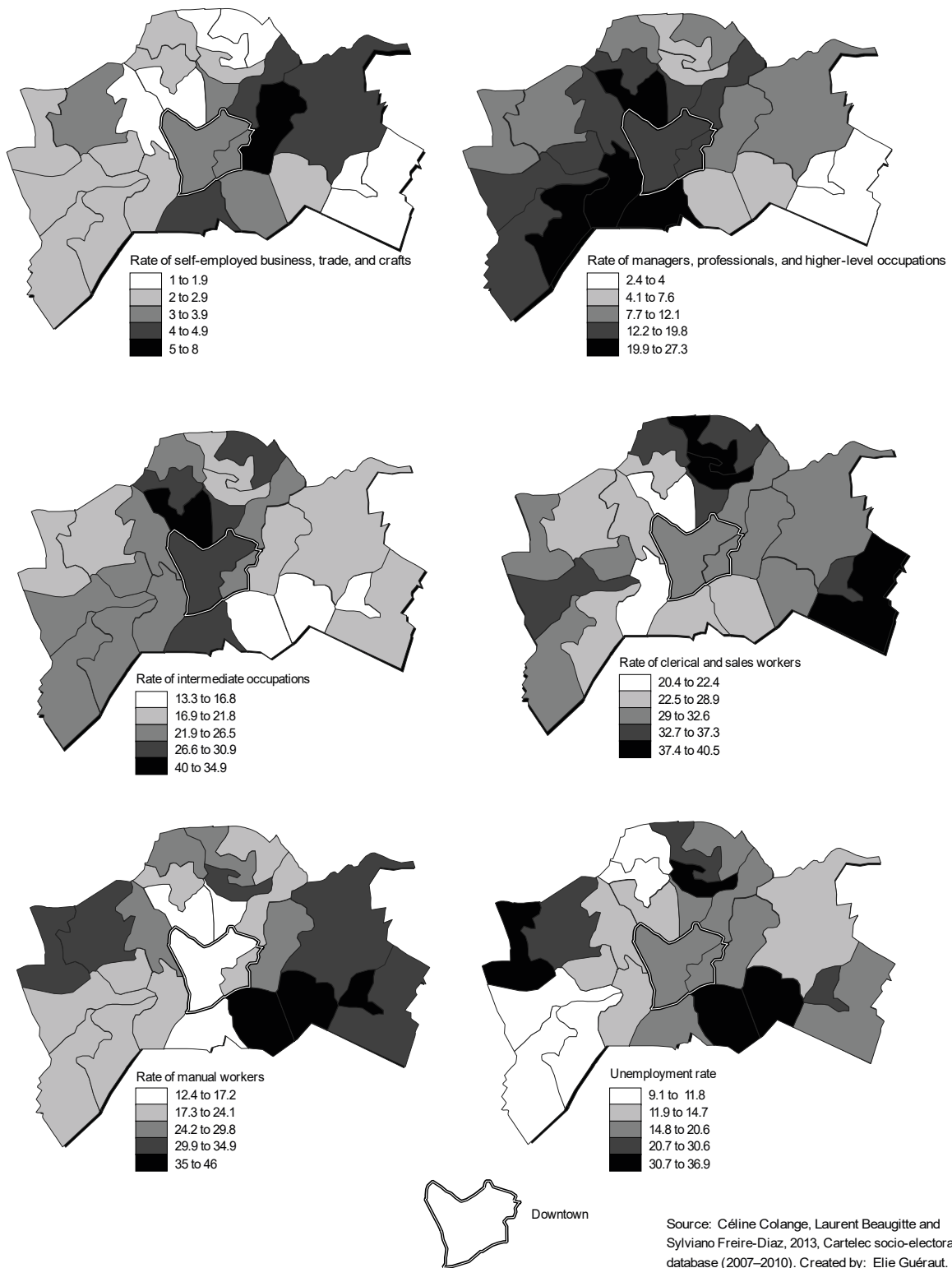


Figure 2. Social composition by polling station in Nevers (2007)

Two phenomena led to the accession to power of the economic bourgeoisie. First, an extremely high voting rate in peripheral residential neighbourhoods, particularly in the south-west and north-west of the town, home to a high percentage of self-employed tradespeople,

company heads and individuals with higher-level occupations (Figures 2 and 3). And second, a drop in the voting rate in lower-class social-housing areas, home to manual workers, employees, the unemployed and social-housing tenants, and in the town centre, characterized by a certain social and residential diversity and a large proportion of young economically active individuals.

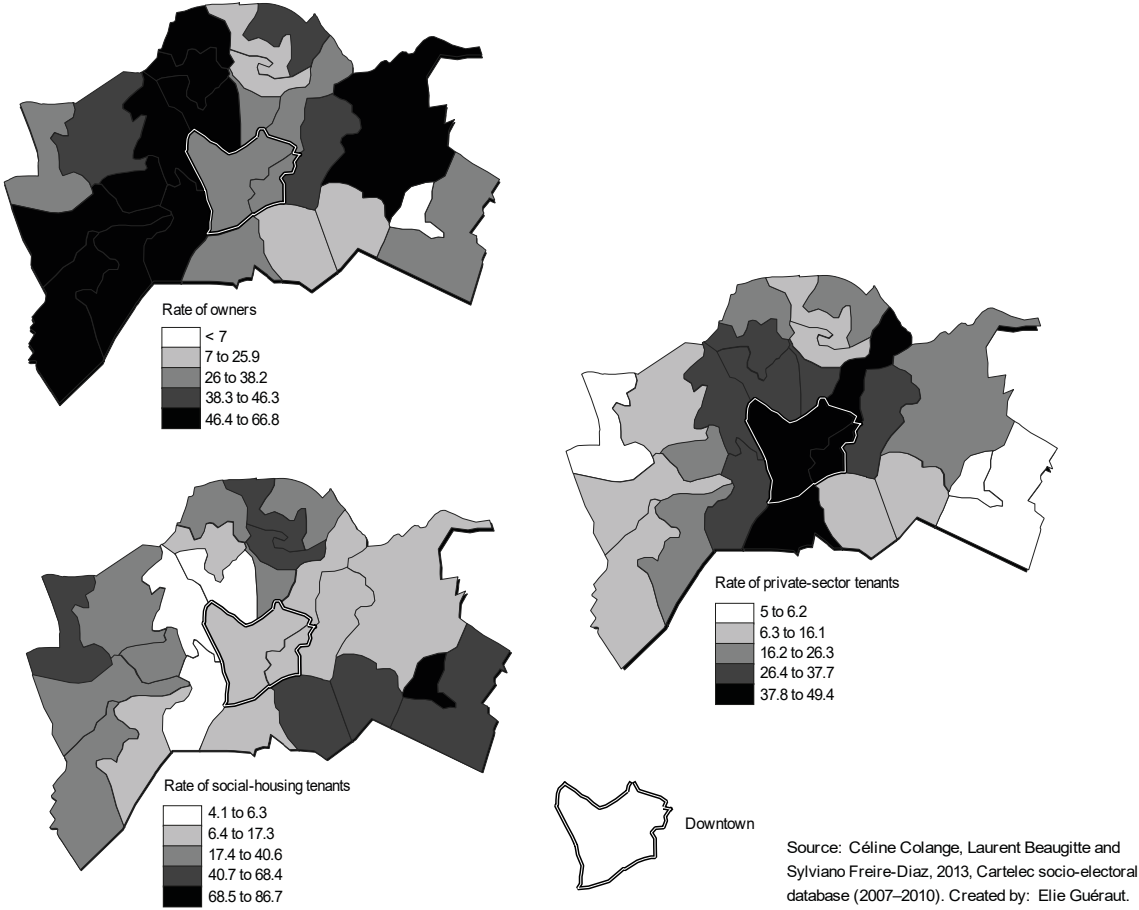


Figure 3. Housing status by polling station in Nevers (2007)

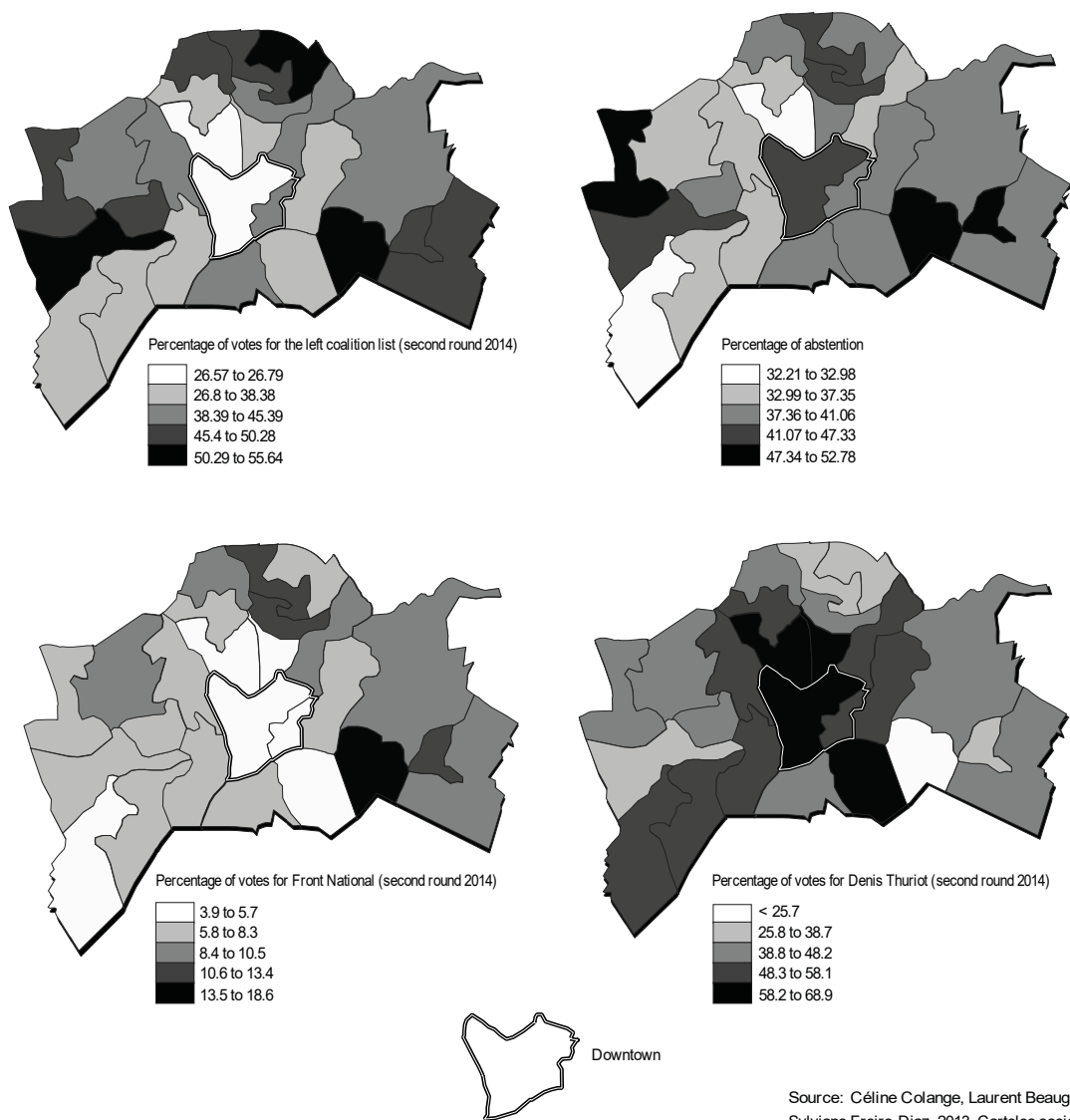


Figure 4. Percentage of votes (second round 2014)

An examination of the votes in the second round of the 2014 municipal election (Figure 3) shows that Thuriot’s best scores (over 48.3% of total votes) came in residential districts with a high proportion of homeowners and/or self-employed tradespeople and company heads, as well as individuals with higher-level occupations. In contrast, the coalition of left-wing parties obtained its best scores (over 50.28% of total votes) in the poor and mixed neighborhoods, with a higher concentration of young people, intermediate occupations, and private tenants, as well as a high percentage of vulnerable lower classes (manual workers, employees and the unemployed) and social-housing tenants. And it was in the last two types of districts that abstention rates (over 45%) and National Front votes (over 10%) were the highest.

The results can be objectivized and synthesized using a principal component analysis (PCA) (Figure 5)<sup>15</sup>. It appears that the polling areas voting the most (proportionately) for Thuriot in 2014 tended to be composed more of middle- and upper-class home-owning households, which was also the category with the lowest abstention rates. Naturally, these results are not specific to Nevers, as they echo the gradual decline in lower-class support for left-wing parties that began in the 1980s (Beaud and Pialoux, 2015). But these results do hinge on a trend characteristic of the town, namely urban decay, which we analyze in the next section.

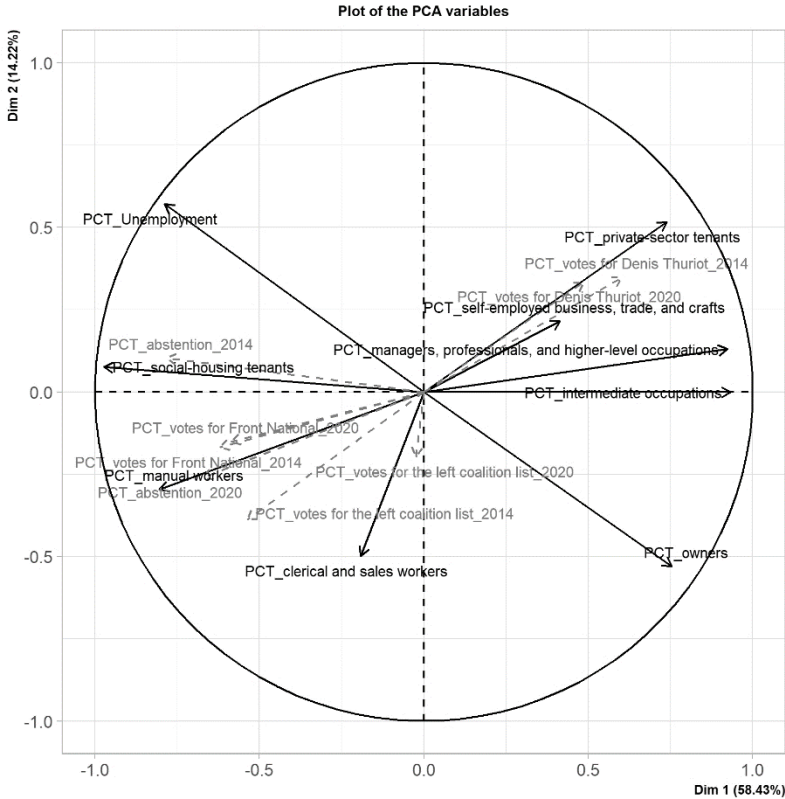


Figure 5. Coefficients of the correlation of the active variables (social composition) and illustrative variables (2014 and 2020 vote) of the PCA with synthetic areas

**II. Municipal socialism challenged by urban decay (2014-2020)**

The Nevers municipality and its urban unit have been subject to urban decay since the start of the 1970s, reflected in population decline, a decrease in the economic and symbolic value of space, and the pauperization of the population, particularly in the town centre. After two decades of slow development, limited by both the ‘territorial deployment of the State’ and the municipal policy on rehabilitating the town centre led by Pierre Bérégovoy (1983-1993)

(I.B), the trend accelerated in the 2000s in Nevers, as it did in many French medium-sized cities, a result notably of the reorganization of public services (Chouraqui, 2021). The phenomenon contributed to the downfall of municipal socialism in three ways. First, it weakened the electoral pool composed of social-housing districts, home to the strongest rates of population decline and abstentionism (II.A). Then, in the 1980s and 1990s, it sullied the showcase of municipal socialism, namely the town centre, where vacant housing reached record rates in the 2000s and poverty rates rose among inhabitants (II.B). Lastly, the phenomenon was instrumentalized by the opponents of the socialists in the electoral campaigns of 2014 and 2020, demonstrating their supposed political incompetence (II.C).

#### *A. Urban decay weakens the socialist electoral pool*

An analysis of voting and abstention in the second round of the 2014 municipal election demonstrates a substantial decline in the voting rate in social-housing districts, where loyalty to the left appears to have eroded. Our objective here is to establish a connection between this result and that of the contrasted distribution of population decline in the municipality of Nevers. But doing so involves a methodological problem. While votes are measured for each polling station determined by the prefecture, the trend and recomposition of local populations are measured using aggregated units for statistical information (abbreviated in French as IRIS) as defined by INSEE. As two different levels cannot be superposed in an identical manner, it is difficult to systematically compare the two phenomena (Rivière, 2017). However, the division of social-housing districts is, in both cases, sufficiently similar to establish a combined analysis of the two phenomena.



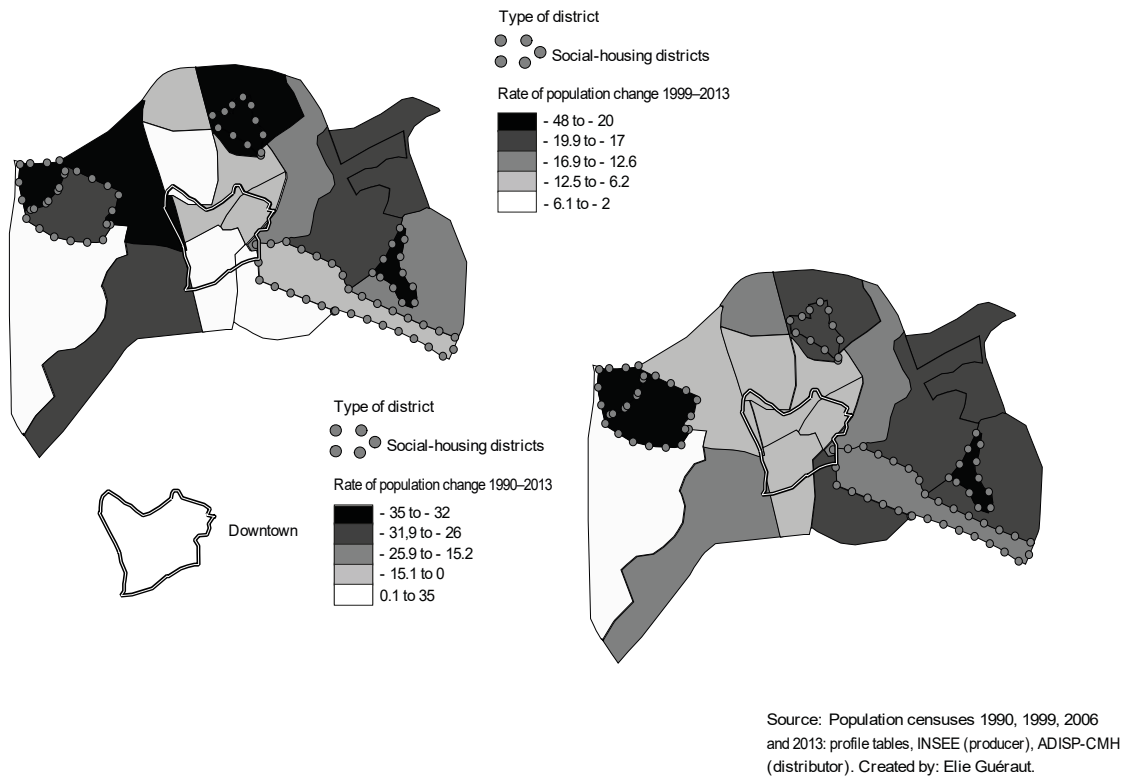
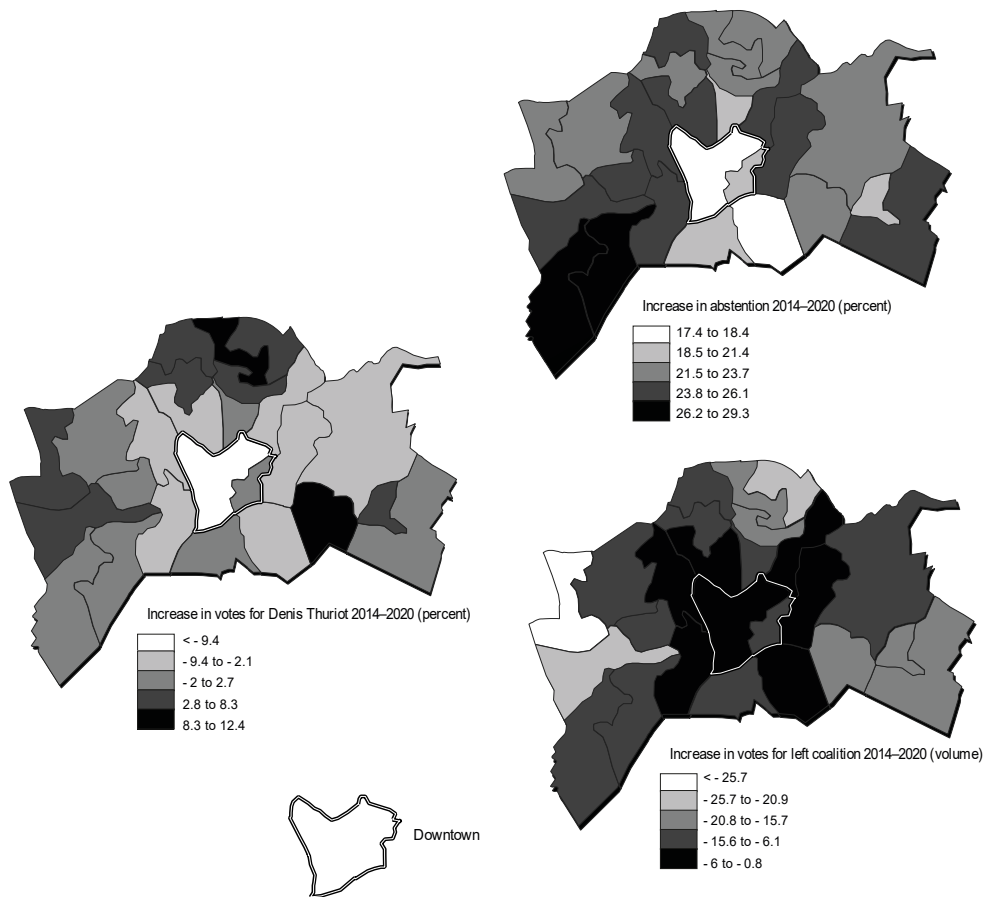


Figure 6. Rate of population change by IRIS in Nevers (1990–2013 and 1999–2013)



Source: Céline Colange, Laurent Beaugitte and Sylviano Freire-Diaz, 2013, Cartelec socio-electoral database (2007–2010). Created by: Elie Guéraud.

Figure 7. Trend in voting between 2014 and 2020 (percent)

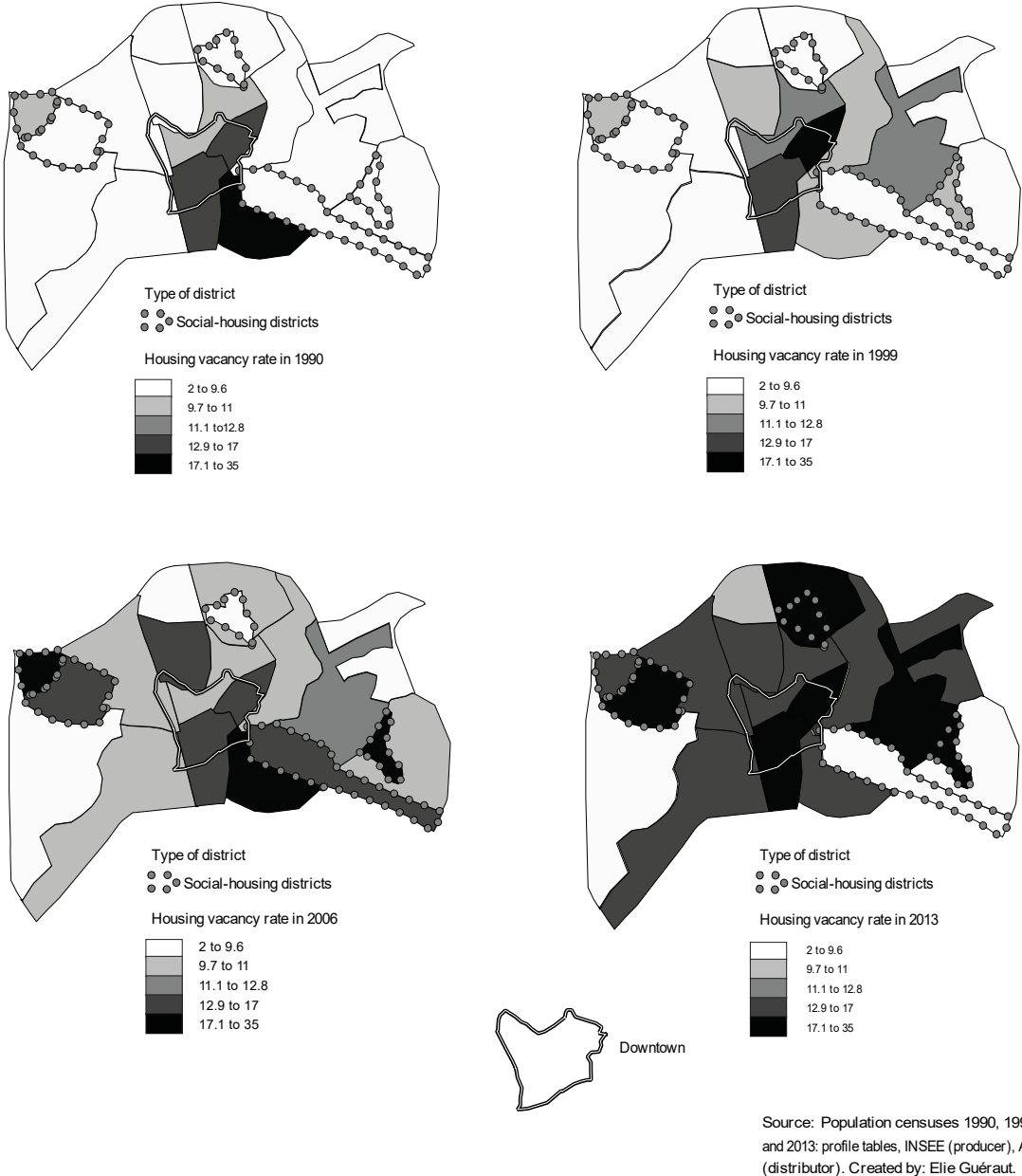
An examination of the rates of population changes between 1990 and 2013 shows that population decline applies to almost all the districts of Nevers. However, the scale of decline varies according to the IRIS unit. Central neighbourhoods were relatively unaffected by the phenomenon, while peripheral areas were more significantly impacted. The highest rates of population decline were observed in social-housing districts, with high levels of vulnerable lower-class inhabitants and social tenants, the population falling by between 32% and 35% in the space of 23 years. The rate peaked in the 1999–2013 period, once again in the same districts. For example, the population of the IRIS in the La Grande Pâtur district in north-east Nevers declined by nearly 48%. This stemmed from demolitions carried out as part of a program by the National Urban Renewal Agency (ANRU), involving the relocation of 135 households<sup>16</sup>, most of which moved to other social-housing districts<sup>17</sup>. These districts were home to the highest abstention rates in 2014, but also to the largest decrease in the number of inhabitants, and thus voters.

The combined effects of these two phenomena can be seen in the trend in the number of votes obtained by candidates between the second round of the 2014 election and the first round of the 2020 election (Figure 7). The highest increases in abstention rates (by volume) were observed in peripheral lower-class neighbourhoods. Most of these districts also saw the sharpest decreases in votes for the left-wing coalition in the 2020 election, as well as the strongest resilience in the number of votes obtained by Denis Thuriot. This growing disaffection of the lower classes in social-housing districts for left-wing parties can be seen clearly in Figure 5, which shows the factorial space of polling stations based on their social composition, onto which the voting results were projected in illustrative variables. Votes for a left-wing coalition in 2020 “shifted” from the left to the right of axis 1, which represents the social composition of polling stations. In other words, the decrease in votes for socialists and their allies at lower-class polling stations accelerated between 2014 and 2020. This can be attributed to the national factors mentioned earlier, long attested to by the political science literature (Lefebvre and Sawicki, 2006). But it can also be explained by local trends, and in particular the population decline in these areas generated by the lack of a (socially selective) renewal of the inhabitants of the territory. Rather than ranking the importance of these two sets of factors, we think it more appropriate to stress the relationships between them, as the socio-demographic changes of Nevers strengthen at local level the effects of the decline of socialism observed throughout France.

*B. Urban decay as a material, symbolic and sociological transformation of the town centre*

As seen in the first part of this article, the town centre has since the start of the 1970s been impacted by urban decline, to the extent that its renewal became a key component of a form of urban entrepreneurialism combining policies on economic development, the reclassification of the built environment, and social and cultural policies, supported by the left in the 1980s and 1990s. The major heritage initiatives undertaken by Pierre Bérégovoy in the 1980s, highlighted by the cultural events organized by the local petty bourgeoisie (I.B), served to restore the image of the town centre, which became a showcase for the socialist majority<sup>18</sup>, before gradually turning against it from the 2000s onwards owing to accelerating urban decay. Deindustrialization and peri-urbanization continue to affect Nevers, reflected in further plant shutdowns in recent years. The acceleration of urban decline is also a result of the austerity policies implemented

nationwide that weaken public and parapublic jobs, as seen in medium-sized cities located far from major urban agglomerations (Chouraqui, 2020; Guérait & Pigué, 2024).



Source: Population censuses 1990, 1999, 2006 and 2013: profile tables, INSEE (producer), ADISP-CMH (distributor). Created by: Elie Guérait.

Figure 8. Rate of unoccupied housing in 1990, 1999, 2006 and 2013

While town-centre districts were less impacted by population decline than lower-class districts, the former went through considerable change between 1990 and 2013, with a sharp rise in the rate of empty housing and an increase in the proportion of economically vulnerable lower classes. The transformation of the social make-up of these districts led to a metamorphosis in retail (with a growing number of fast-food restaurants) and rendered more visible certain public-

space behaviours of the lower classes, for example alcohol consumption and informal car repairs on the street. Given their visibility, these signs of decline gradually tarnished the showcase of municipal socialism constituted by the town centre since the 1980s.

The population of the three town-centre IRIS units declined moderately between 1990 and 2013, by 5% to 10%. But the rate of unoccupied housing rose substantially, in 2013 reaching record levels of nearly 30% (Figure 8). The acceleration of this phenomenon was directly linked to a considerable decrease in the value of housing units, both for sale and for rent<sup>19</sup>. It also appears that population decline in the town centre was accompanied by a transformation in social composition, resulting from the social selectivity at play in residential mobility that led the upper classes to leave the area (Rudolph and Cauchi-Duval, 2021). Figure 9, showing the rate of individuals with higher-level occupations per IRIS unit from 1990 to 2013, reveals a higher concentration of this category in the north-eastern districts of the town. After a period of relative stability, this concentration fell between 2006 and 2013 in Nevers while rising in some neighbouring municipalities, a consequence of peri-urbanization<sup>20</sup>, and in some residential districts of the town away from the town centre. Overall, in 2013, the highest concentrations (over 25% of higher-level occupations among the economically active) were no longer in the town centre but in a south-western district of Nevers, *Les Montapins*, known for its large, detached houses built on the top of a hill with panoramic views of the Loire below.

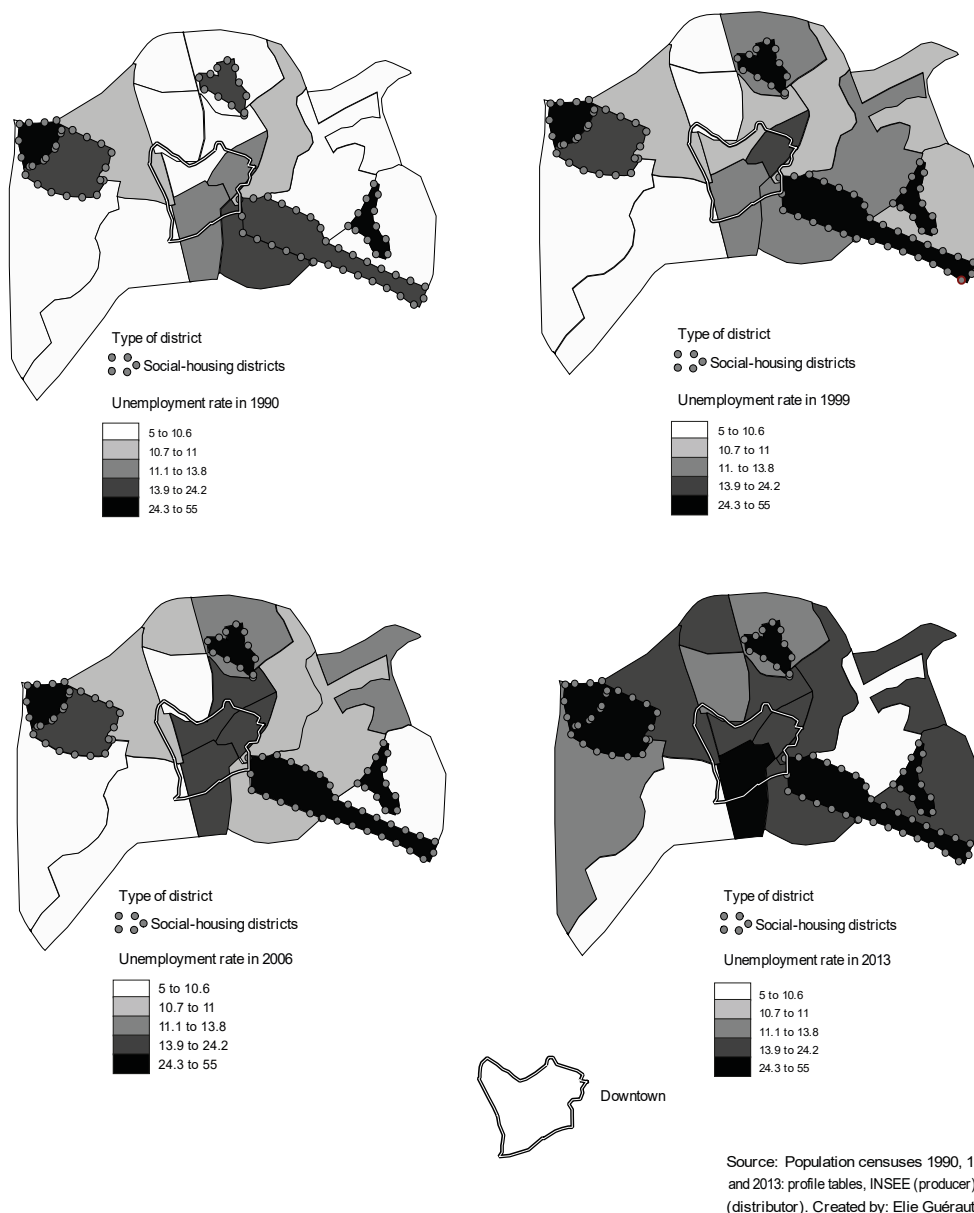


Figure 9. Unemployment rate in 1990, 1999, 2006 and 2013

A closer examination of the town centre suggests that the reduced proportion of individuals with higher-level occupations, which remained limited between 1990 and 2006 to the IRIS units corresponding to the residential town centre, concerns, in the last period, from 2006 to 2013, two of the three central districts of Nevers (from 21% to 19% individuals with higher-level occupations in the historical town centre and from 19% to 18% in the residential town centre IRISs). This decrease came hand in hand with an increase in the unemployment rate in town-centre districts, generally topping the 20% mark in 2013. While the phenomenon

took root and grew in scale, it remained less pronounced than in social-housing districts (Figure 10), where unemployment exceeded 50%.

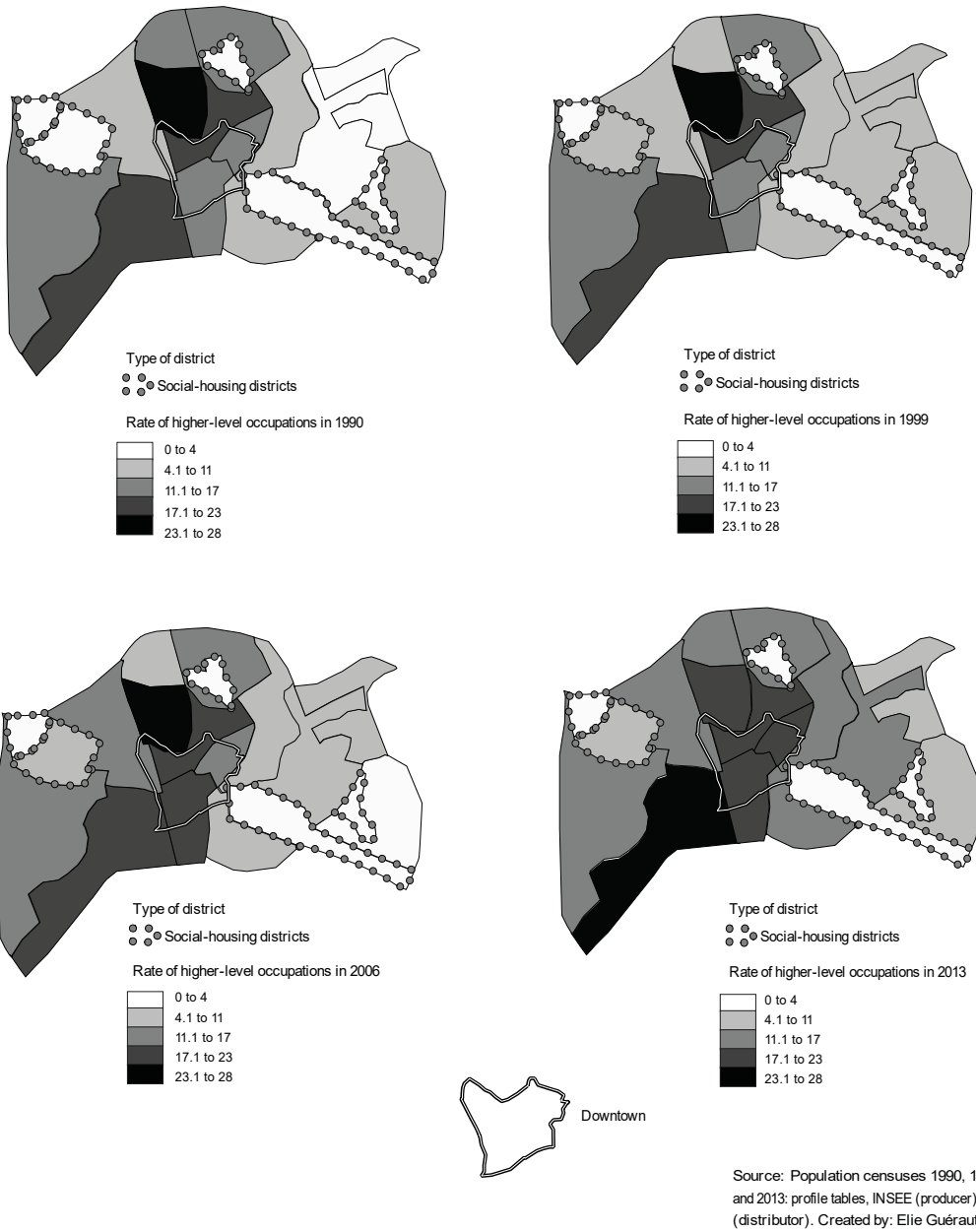


Figure 10. Rate of individuals with higher-level occupations in 1990, 1999, 2006 and 2013

In response to the decline of their residential area and/or the district of their workplace, several social groups, including tradespeople, elected representatives, and community activists, sought to redevelop the town-centre districts materially and symbolically. This gentrification effort, inspired by the ‘urban model’ implemented in large cities (Chabrol et al., 2016), was driven in particular by the cultural bourgeoisie of Nevers. In the 1990s and 2000s, the members

of this group harnessed the resources conferred by their social position to halt the decline of the town centre, for example by organizing music and street-theatre festivals on the town's main squares, creating a concert hall, opening cafés frequented by the local cultural professions and an independent bookshop, and holding art exhibitions in municipal buildings. This cultural and symbolic investment was accompanied by a material investment. In addition, most of the members of this cultural petite bourgeoisie had long been established in the town centre, where they owned old homes that they had restored and where they organized most of their social interactions. The decline of these spaces contributed as much to eroding the value of their heritage as to tarnishing the showcase of municipal socialism constituted by the town centre from the 1970s to the 2000s.

### *C. Urban decay as an issue in electoral campaigns*

In 2001, Philippe Morel, a candidate of the right in the municipal election in Nevers, decried 'the loss of the most economically active and youngest population, insecurity, the closing of shops and businesses, and hence jobs, the poor use of public money, and the deterioration of the town centre'<sup>21</sup>. But the campaign mainly focused, as it would in 2008, on criticisms of 'authoritarian power'<sup>22</sup>, the 'socialist system' and the alleged 'cronyism' of the majority<sup>23</sup> more than it did on the social, economic, and demographic difficulties faced by Nevers since the 1970s. In this respect, the 2014 election campaign was a turning point. Urban decay became one of the main topics of debate, the opposition accusing the incumbents of failing to sufficiently halt the trend. In a televised debate for the first round of voting<sup>24</sup>, the UDI candidate said that the incumbent mayor was responsible for 'true chaos' and that he had seen the town empty since his arrival in 2008 owing, in his opinion, to 'excessive' taxation<sup>25</sup>. The same view was held by Denis Thuriot, an independent candidate, whom he would join in the second round. Thuriot made the fight against urban decay the primary focus of his campaign:

'The situation is fairly disastrous. (...) This is not a fatality. In contrast, we need determination. Practically one shop in four has closed down, which sends out a regrettable image of the town to tourists and inhabitants. Above all, it does not suggest the economic vitality we absolutely need to regain' (Denis Thuriot speaking to the Young Economic Chamber (JCE) on 21 March 2014)

'I was dismayed to hear today that the priority of the PS is employment. Perhaps they should have tackled the issue before. Perhaps they should have tackled the issue in the last



20 years. Because the population of Nevers today is the same as in 1954 (...) Nevers is in a slump, and if the same team wins again things will be the same' (Denis Thuriot speaking at the debate between the first and second rounds, broadcast on FR3 BFC on 28 March 2014)

Several videos backing up this opinion were posted in the social media to condemn the visible signs of urban decay<sup>26</sup>. Rejecting the idea that Nevers was 'impacted by globalization'<sup>27</sup>, Thuriot focused his program on requalifying existing construction and supporting businesses<sup>28</sup>. He stressed his ability to 'shift the paradigm' despite limited regulatory, human, and financial resources (Delpech and Navarre, 2020; Wichowska, 2019). Based on the quest for 'attractiveness' and 'competitiveness' (Miot, 2012; Bouba-Olga and Grossetti, 2015), this urban entrepreneurialism (Harvey, 1989; Rousseau, 2008), well documented in the United States and Europe (Beauregard, 2009; Pallagst, 2009; Hartt and Warkentin, 2017), aims to return to growth at all costs (Molotch, 1976; Schatz, 2017). And this approach paid dividends, as it earned Thuriot his victory in the second round of the 2014 municipal election with over 49.8% of the vote, as well as his re-election in the first round of the 2020 election with 51.2% of the vote, following a campaign based on the results of his initiatives<sup>29</sup>. Struggling to convince the population of its ability to affect change after claiming for several decades that the town was a victim of non-local trends<sup>30</sup>, the main opposition list of the left trailed far behind with 22.4%. Though the population continued to shrink during his term, the mayor asked for time, saying, 'Remember that Nevers' nickname is "sleeping beauty". Today, I allow myself to believe, because many people say so, that it has awakened. (...) This will take time, so, naturally, we will continue'<sup>31</sup>.

## **Conclusion**

The lengthy rule of municipal socialism in Nevers, starting in 1971, was accompanied by the growing power of a local cultural petite bourgeoisie, particularly after Francois Mitterrand's victory in 1981. Benefiting from the Lang cultural policies and decentralization laws, this group contributed to limiting the population decline having affected the territory since 1975 by establishing strong presence in the town centre. Some of the members of this group joined the municipal council alongside the socialists, while others acceded to positions of responsibility in artistic organizations or local government. But the situation reversed in the 2000s with the reduction of public budgets, serving to accelerate urban decay in Nevers, limit

the cronyist resources of the municipality, and thereby weaken the local cultural petty bourgeoisie. Against this backdrop, the defeat of the left in 2014, a result both of higher voting rates in peripheral and centre middle-class districts and lower voting rates in lower-class neighborhoods, reminds us that the political change in favour of members of the local economic petty bourgeoisie results from exogenous factors but just as much from the specific local characteristics of Nevers and, more broadly, those of medium-sized cities in France subject to urban decline.

Based on the rise and fall of municipal socialism in Nevers, this article aimed to show how the national factors behind the weakening of the Parti Socialiste combine with local characteristics to limit or boost the impacts. While the weakening of the link between socialism and the lower classes, the erosion of the entrepreneurial agenda of the PS, and partisan discretion are at play across France, these phenomena find their fullest expression in French medium-sized cities subject to urban decline. The point, then, is not to contrast or rank local and national factors but to demonstrate how their interplay generates a specific configuration in certain medium-sized cities, one that proved propitious to the victory of the PS and its allies in 1971 and 1977 and their defeat in 2014 and 2020, contrary to the trend observed in major urban agglomerations over the same periods.

While the fall of municipal socialism is generally seen in the light of the plunging popularity of the party in France as a whole, owing notably to its gradual disconnect with the lower classes (Lefebvre and Sawicki, 2007; Beaud and Pialoux, 2015), this article thus insists on the need to take better account of local specificities and on the need to cross the scales of analysis in order to shed light on electoral dynamics (Sawicki and Briquet, 1989). In this way, we have shown how urban decline in Nevers 1) eroded the electoral pool of the socialists, 2) tarnished the showcase that the town centre had once constituted for the party and 3) supplied abundant grist for the mill of opposition candidates, who criticized the complacency of the incumbents and claimed that they had the ability to ‘change the game’. Instead of fuelling the development of alternative urban policies, this situation contributes to the promotion of policies focused on attractiveness, inspired by the metropolitan paradigm centred on supply, with little regard for the characteristics of the territory. Although these policies are not very effective at this point, they provide the new executive with an entrepreneurial rhetoric to justify the actions carried out locally. The defeat of the left in the 2014 municipal elections in Nevers thus logically

led to a redefinition of local public action which, in turn, seems to strengthen the position of the new executive.

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<sup>11</sup> The socialists and the ecologists won the 2020 elections in 16 of the 22 municipalities/centres of institutional metropolitan areas, compared with 13 in 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Out of 140 medium-sized cities, with a population of 20,000 to 100,000 for the entire urban agglomeration and located outside a metropolitan area, the socialists, communists and their allies held just 28 municipalities following the elections in 2014, down 57.6% from 66 in 2008.

<sup>3</sup> The socialists, communists and their allies won 29 municipalities in 2020, compared with 28 in 2014. But this trend conceals defections between 2017 and 2020 to the presidential majority.

<sup>4</sup> This research is based on numerous interviews with local elected officials, community workers, community activists, and local entrepreneurs, as well as on the use of data on the transformation of municipal political power in medium-sized cities from 1971 to 2020 (source: French Ministry of the Interior).

<sup>5</sup> This research is based on interviews with representatives of the cultural and economic (petty) bourgeoisie as well as on the analysis of the social recomposition of the city of Nevers using population census data (source: Insee, 1968-2018).

<sup>6</sup> Carpen P., 'Objectifs du docteur Benoist : Nevers à 100 000 habitants en 1985', *Le Journal du Centre*, 9 February 1971.

<sup>7</sup> Kraemer A., 'Déclaration du Dr Benoist', *Le Journal du Centre*, 15 March 1971.

<sup>8</sup> Guin M., 'Libre opinion : Réponse à Me Ramey', *Le Journal du Centre*, 9 March 1971.

<sup>9</sup> 'Urban unity', a concept introduced by INSEE, provides a definition of the city based on the continuity of the built environment.

<sup>10</sup> Drafted by the municipal services, this document reviewed the needs of the urban agglomeration and put forward a series of proposals for developing the territory.

<sup>11</sup> Benoist D., 'Libre opinion. Les élections municipales, coup d'envoi', *Le Journal du Centre*, 25 February 1977.

<sup>12</sup> Périnaud A., 'Libre opinion. Le PCF poursuit son combat pour l'union', *Le Journal du Centre*, 28 February 1977.

<sup>13</sup> For the municipality, urban unit, and urban area, annual population change was relatively stable from 1982 to 1990 and from 1990 to 1999, at 0.1% to -0.3%.

<sup>14</sup> In the three main communities of the employment area, the rate of non-tenured employees stands at 10% for individuals born in the 1960s, 21% for those born in the 1970s, and 58.2% for those born in the 1980s (sources: 2014 database of local authority officials in the employment area, compiled by Elie Guéraud using HR department data).

<sup>15</sup> The active variables used for the PCA were the percentages of votes for each of the three candidates in the second round of the 2014 municipal election, the rates of the various socio-occupational categories and occupations in the economically active population (excluding farmers, owing to their low headcount), and housing occupation status.

<sup>16</sup> Figures from *Contrat de Ville de Nevers Agglomération 2015-2020*.

<sup>17</sup> While we do not know exactly where these households relocated, the data provided as part of *Contrat de Ville de Nevers Agglomération 2015-2020* support this hypothesis. Out of 191 households, 141 remained in Nièvre Habitat properties, nine left these properties for those of another social landlord, 29 moved to private housing, and 6 bought their own home.

<sup>18</sup> In 1983, in an article in *Le Journal du Centre*, Mayor Daniel Benoist wrote about his various achievements and ensured that he wanted to continue the transformation initiated. In 1989, in *Le Journal du Centre*, Pierre Bérégovoy expressed similar thoughts, saying he was proud of 'the town improvement program', which he wanted to reinforce.

<sup>19</sup> Based on data recorded by notary firms, the Meilleursagents.fr website estimates that the value of residential assets fell 15% between 1999 and 2017 to €920/m<sup>2</sup> (<https://www.meilleursagents.com/prix-immobilier/nevers-58000/> viewed on 08/04/2018).

<sup>20</sup> The departure of individuals with higher-level occupations to rural and peri-urban towns around Nevers can notably be attributed to substantial differences in taxation.

<sup>21</sup> Policy statement of the candidate.

<sup>22</sup> Policy statement of the candidate.

<sup>23</sup> Policy statement of Jean-Luc Martinat, candidate of the right in 2008.

<sup>24</sup> Debate on FR3 BFC, 15 February 2014.

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<sup>25</sup> Tax rates are higher in Nevers than in neighbouring municipalities because Nevers maintains infrastructure and services not available in the neighbouring towns. In 2014 for example, council tax and property tax in Nevers were 20.2% and 27.5%, respectively, compared with 12.7% and 12.8% in Marzy, a neighbouring peri-urban municipality. France's system for funding local authorities thus favours peri-urbanization to the detriment of the centres of medium-sized cities.

<sup>26</sup> See the "Nevers à Venir" YouTube channel: [youtube.com/user/neversavenir/vidéos](https://www.youtube.com/user/neversavenir/vidéos).

<sup>27</sup> Debate on FR3 BFC, 15 February 2014.

<sup>28</sup> Anne Wozniak, environment and town planning deputy since 2014. Interviewed on 2 April 2021.

<sup>29</sup> Inaugurating his campaign office on 7 December 2019, the incumbent mayor said, 'Six years ago, our list embodied the refusal of fatality and resignation. None of us, certainly myself, wanted to resign ourselves to what some saw as the inevitable decline of our town'.

<sup>30</sup> For example, Florent Saint-Far-Garnot, PS mayor of the town from 2010 to 2014, said, 'Nevers has had problems, but this has been the case for many towns in the same category. Nevers is not attached to a regional metropolitan centre and is thus excluded from flows.' Interviewed on 17 November 2020.

<sup>31</sup> Denis Thuriot, inaugurating his campaign office on 7 December 2019.

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