



Self-Determination and Electoral Geography in New Caledonia: Political Stasis or Independence?

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In June 2019 in Nouméa, the University of New Caledonia's LARJE (Research Centre for Law and Economics) and the Australian National University's Department of Pacific Affairs co-convened a PIPSA (Pacific Islands Political Studies Association) conference with the theme of 'Democracy, Sovereignty and Self-Determination in the Pacific Islands'. This Working Paper is part of a PIPSA special series building on that theme.

ABSTRACT

Only six months after the first referendum on self-determination on 4 November 2018, New Caledonians were invited to vote in provincial elections on 12 May 2019. In the wake of a historic first referendum, which anti-independence parties won with 56.7 per cent against independence,¹ and although the provincial electorate is not exactly the same as the referendum electorate, the provincial election constitutes the ultimate barometer before the final two referendums.

Pro-independence parties were buoyed by referendum results (43.3 per cent yes) that defied the opinion polls, all of which predicted a heavy defeat. For the provincial elections, the pro-independence side was hoping to ride this wave to upset the political equilibrium in the archipelago's institutions, such as government, congress and provincial assemblies. The result, however, proved the situation to be more complicated. The cumulative pro-independence score fell slightly (42.4 per cent) compared to the referendum results, but the number of pro-independence members of congress increased (26 out of 54 instead of 25). Despite these results, disproportionate congressional representation and the five per cent rule for parties (detailed later) continue to impact the balance of power

between the two political sensibilities. Regardless, one thing remains constant: the political landscape remains frozen, as it has for almost 30 years. This paper aims to reveal the electoral cartography of the provincial election in order to determine the probability of a change in the balance of power with the next two referendums, the first of which has been tentatively scheduled for 4 October 2020 after having been postponed due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

INTRODUCTION

The historic first referendum was won by anti-independence parties with a relatively comfortable lead of 18,535 votes (56.7 per cent). However, the newspaper headlines afterwards did not give the impression the anti-independence voters felt victorious: [‘A Victory without Joy for the Pro-France’](#), [‘A Defeat with a Taste of Victory for the Pro-Independence Parties’](#), [‘Weak Success for the NO Reshuffles the Cards’](#)). In fact, the feeling of victory lay with the pro-independence side, to whom this first referendum result felt like a promise of full sovereignty. Even if the electorates were not perfectly identical, nor the stakes, for that matter, the provincial election on 12 May appeared to be an indicator of a probable dynamic of change in political balance in New Caledonia.

So, what happened? Was the result of the first referendum a game changer for the provincial election, and possibly future referendums? Is the pro-independence wave witnessed at the referendum (if it can be called a wave) strong enough to garner the 18,535 votes necessary to achieve a majority? To answer these questions, which are paramount to the future of New Caledonia, this paper proposes an analysis based on a cartographic reading of the provincial election

results at a variety of levels, including the French overseas territorial, provincial, communal and local polling station levels.

Part I examines the voting patterns in the New Caledonian archipelago since it was split into three provinces 30 years ago in order to determine whether the much-discussed surprise results of the referendum were in fact surprising. The second part looks at the provincial election of 12 May to determine whether the referendum had a real impact on the political balance in New Caledonia. Finally, the conclusion discusses the use of electoral geography to analyse the New Caledonian electoral system.

PART I: WAS THERE REALLY A REFERENDUM REVOLUTION?

A surprising turnout

The first surprise from the 4 November referendum was the record-high turnout rate of 81 per cent. The 2018 referendum was undisputedly New Caledonia's most successful electoral event of the last 30 years in terms of voter turnout. It ranks far ahead of other elections, the turnout rates of which never exceeded 75 per cent. The only exception was the 2004 provincial election, for which participation reached 76 per cent. Since then, voting rates had gone down, though a high turnout was expected for the 2018 referendum.

Still, after 15 years of continuously decreasing voter turnout, notably in pro-independence strongholds, the

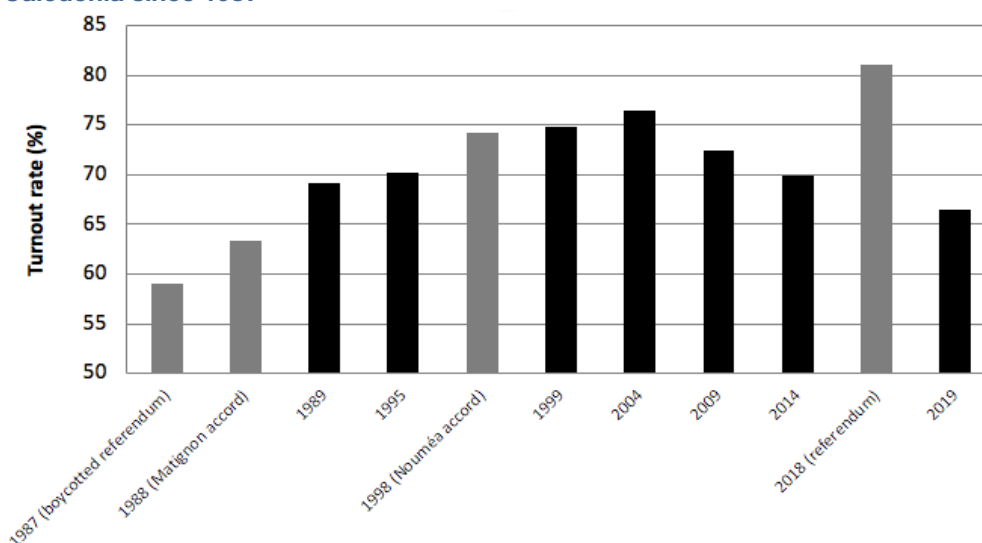
magnitude of the turnout increase came as a surprise, especially when the participation was geographically mapped. Proportionally, the Northern Province had the highest turnout rate with 86 per cent, followed by the Southern Province with 83 per cent and the Loyalty Islands Province with 61 per cent.

Confirmed: an electoral landscape centred around ethnicity

The real surprise came from the discrepancy between the figures predicted by opinion polls and the actual referendum results. No polls had anticipated such an increase in turnout, nor in pro-independence votes (43.3 per cent). Yet, over the last 30 years, the pro-independence vote had been slightly increasing, getting progressively closer to 40 per cent. In 2014, the various pro-independence parties together managed to reach 41.5 per cent, a figure consistent with the 2018 referendum results. The increase of the pro-independence score over 20 years stands at three points for the referendum and two points for provincial elections, suggesting a relative stability.²

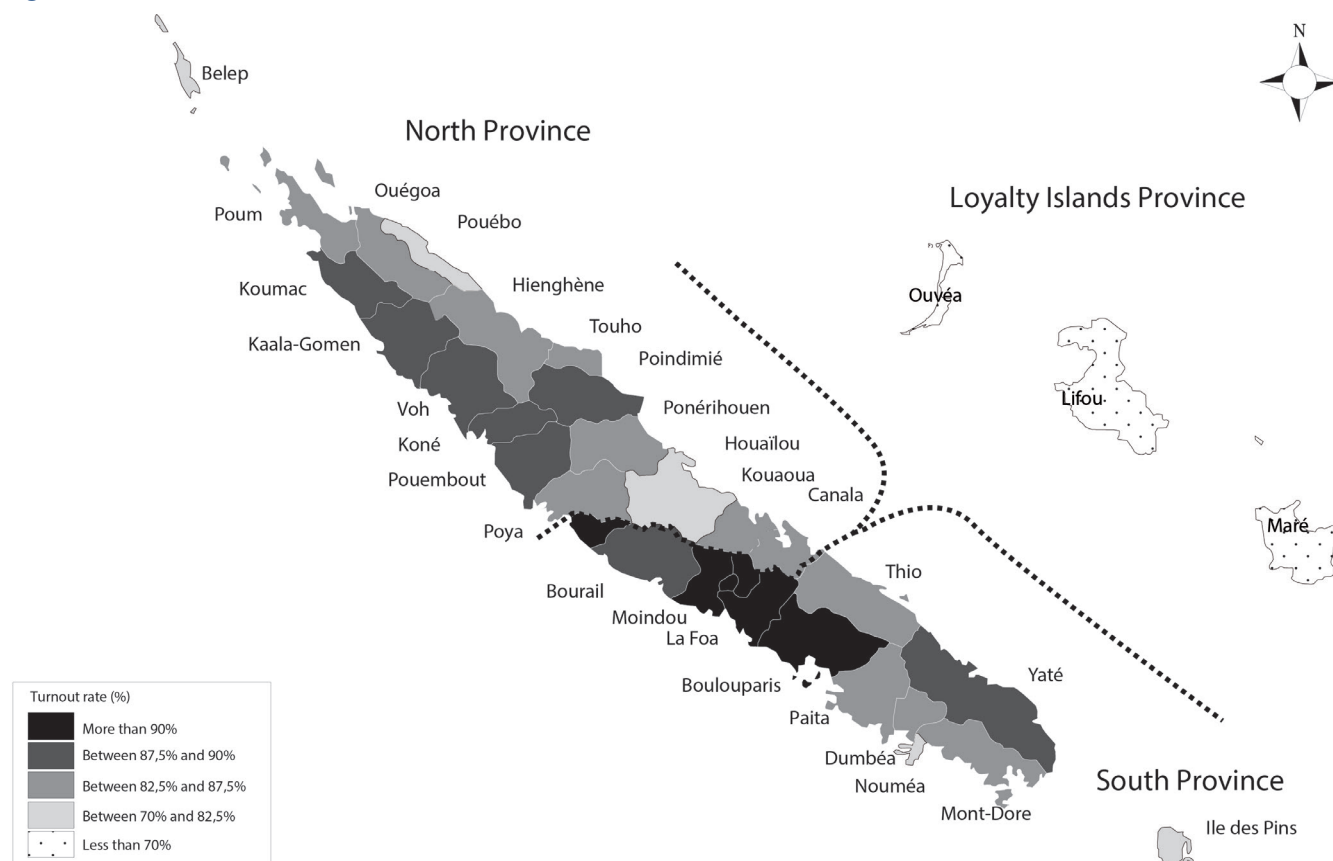
The opinion polls were clearly in contradiction with the stability of the political balance displayed at the provincial elections. Therefore, despite a few minor gaps, it seems provincial elections are a reliable barometer for the equilibrium of power between pro-independence and anti-independence forces. It is unsurprising then that the results of the referendum are in line with the provincial vote results, with a double electoral cleavage (ethnic and geographical), which can be verified at every level in the archipelago.

Figure 1. Trends in voter turnout in provincial elections and referendums in New Caledonia since 1987

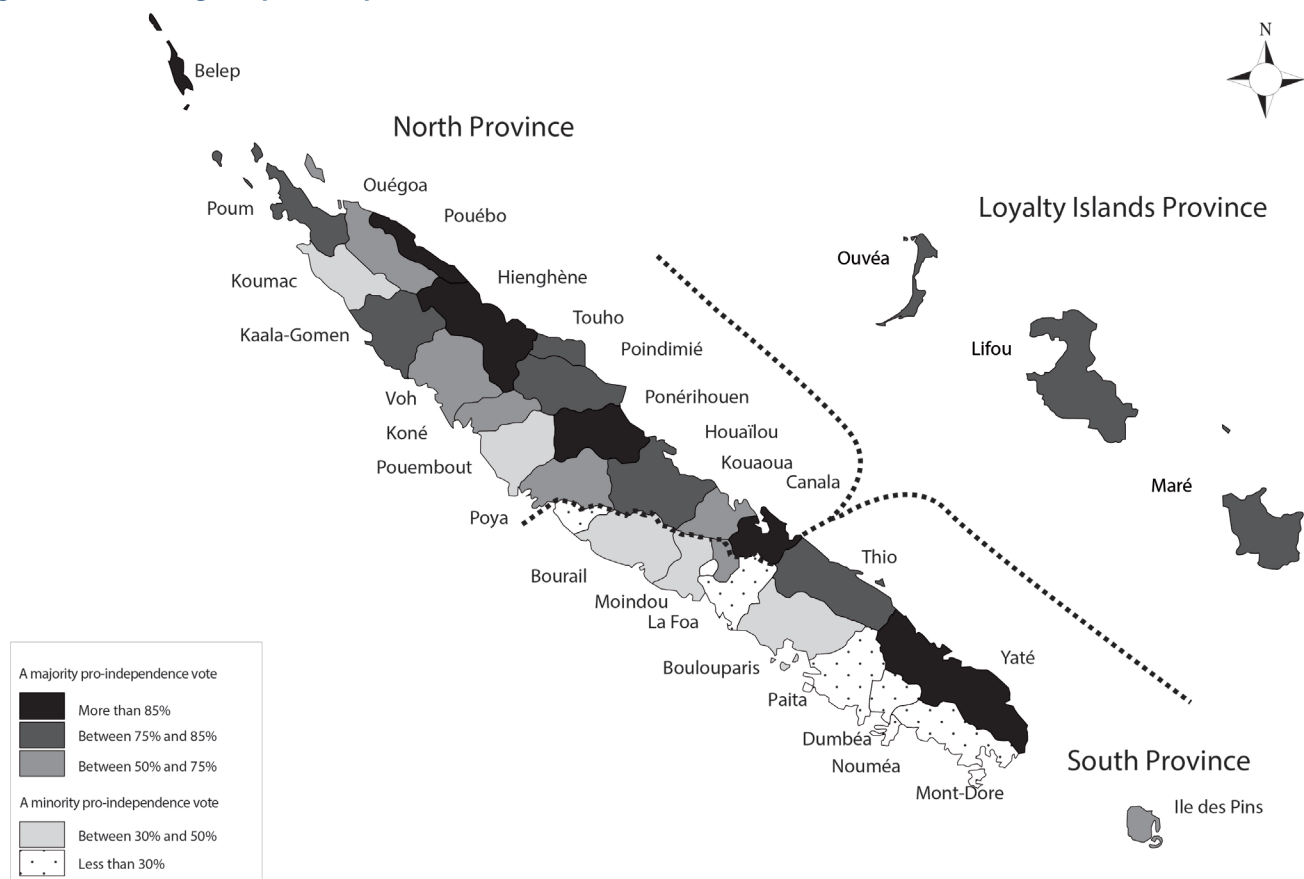


Source: Created by the author from the official results of provincial elections and referendums.

The referendum results showed that two in three provinces, and 22 in 33 towns, have a pro-independence majority. Such results seem stable enough compared to the provincial elections, though there has been a decline in the anti-independence score in both the Loyalty Islands and Northern Provinces over the last 20 years.³ What is of great interest is how the map of pro-independence areas can be superimposed on the map charting the Kanak population's spread.

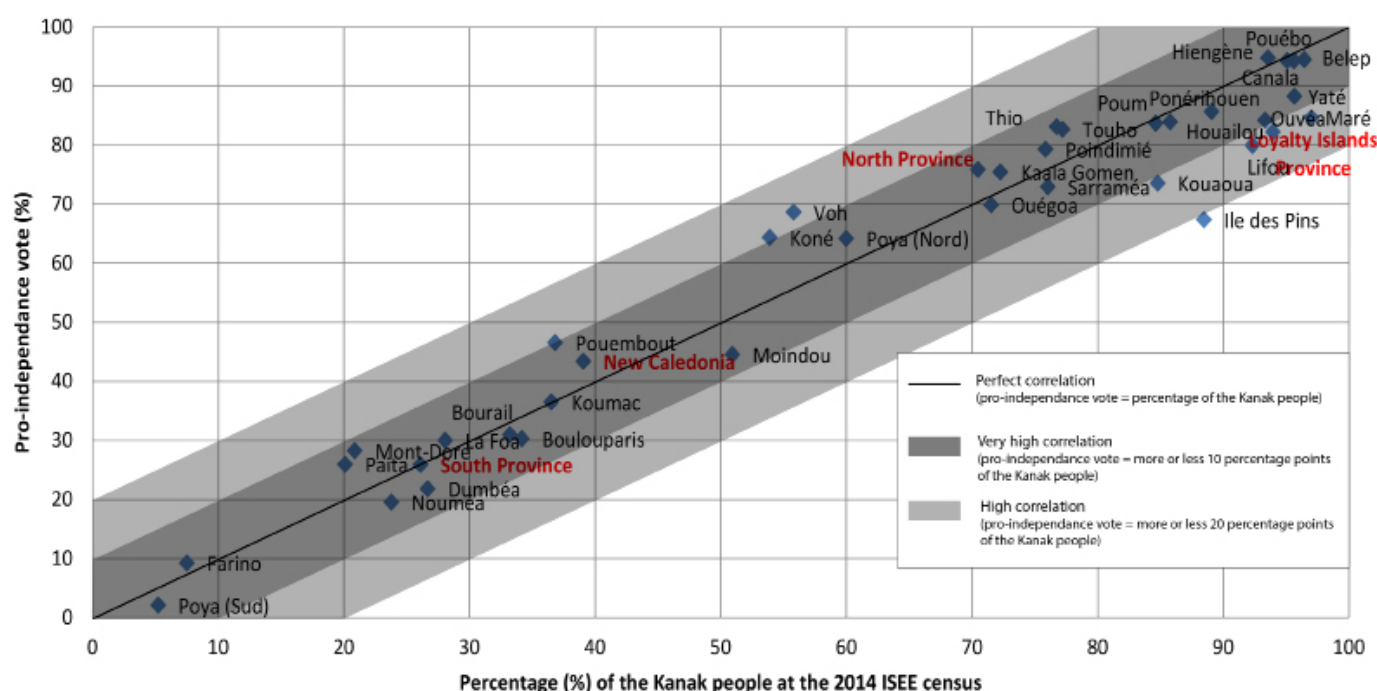
Figure 2. Voter turnout for the self-determination referendum on 4 November 2018

Source: Created by the author based on the official 2018 self-determination referendum results.

Figure 3. Percentage of pro-independence votes in 2018 self-determination referendum

Source: Created by the author based on the official 2018 self-determination referendum results.

Figure 4. Correlation between the distribution of the Kanak people and the electoral distribution of the pro-independence vote in the 2018 self-determination referendum



Source: Created by the author using data from ISEE (2014) and the official 2018 self-determination referendum results.

Cross-referencing the [ethnic census data](#) gathered by the New Caledonian Statistics and Economic Studies Institute (Institut de la statistique et des études économiques Nouvelle-Calédonie or ISEE) with the results of the provincial elections elucidates a strong relationship between the polarised spread of the population of New Caledonia and the electoral map of the pro-independence vote. Apart from a few exceptions, towns whose inhabitants are mostly Kanak (such as in the northeast, east and Loyalty Islands) are also those where pro-independence results have been strongest over the last 30 years. The electoral geography of the referendum results does not depart from that of preceding provincial elections: the pro-independence vote is essentially a Kanak vote.

Even more interesting is that this graph matches all of the provincial elections of the last 30 years. However, ethnic data should be used with extreme caution, as the picture is complicated when it comes to the voter rolls. Indeed, when comparing these figures with the election results, it is essential to consider that the 36,000 people who arrived in New Caledonia after 1994 are excluded from the referendum's special electoral roll, known as the *liste électorale spéciale pour la consultation* or LESC.⁴ In other words, the proportion of Kanak people on the LESC is higher than in the whole population. Considering that 46 per cent of the voters on the LESC

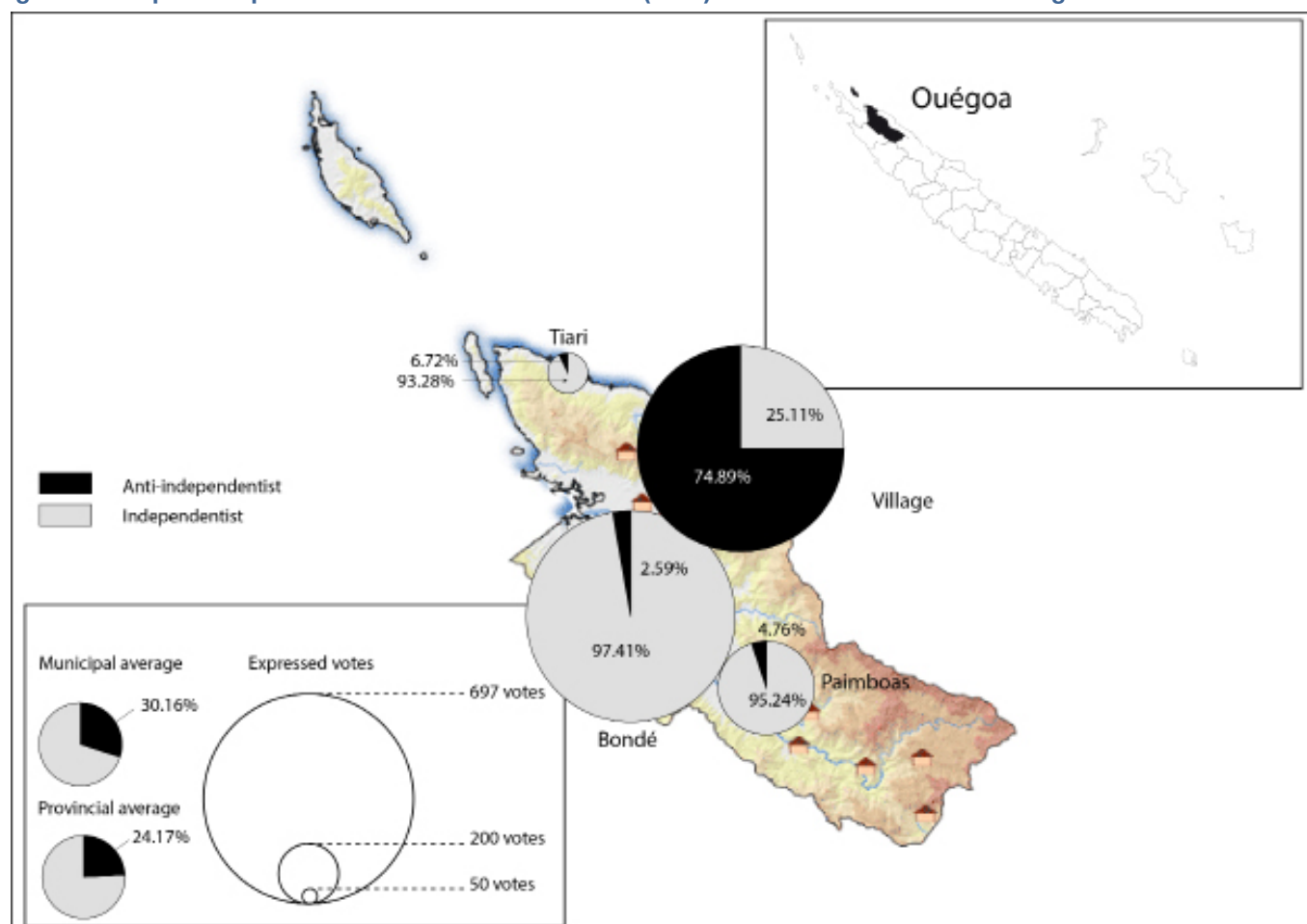
are people with a customary status — exclusively for Kanak — and assuming that there are an appreciable number of Kanak people with common status,⁵ it can be estimated that one in two voters on the referendum's special electoral roll is a member of the Kanak people.

Electoral cleavage at many levels

This cleavage is in fact greater than a Kanak/non-Kanak split at the territorial or constituency levels, since it can be observed at the community level as well. In rural towns, there are great differences in voting patterns between the populations of the town centres, which are mostly non-Kanak, and the outlying tribes. Indeed, there seems to be a difference in political sensitivity between villagers (usually non-Kanak) and members of tribes (mostly Kanak).

The most extreme example is in the far north town of Ouégoa, whose population is 72 per cent Kanak and 28 per cent non-Kanak. Here, three out of four voters living inside the village voted no to independence. However, this only accounted for 30 per cent of the whole town's population. This divide was all the more obvious in the three other polling stations where only tribe members were enrolled (Bondé, Paimbos and Tiari), with only 42 in 1148 voters (3.7 per cent) voting against independence.

Figure 5. The pro-independence vote in the referendum (2018) in the rural commune of Ouégoa



Source: Created by the author using data from ISEE (2014) and the official 2018 self-determination referendum results.

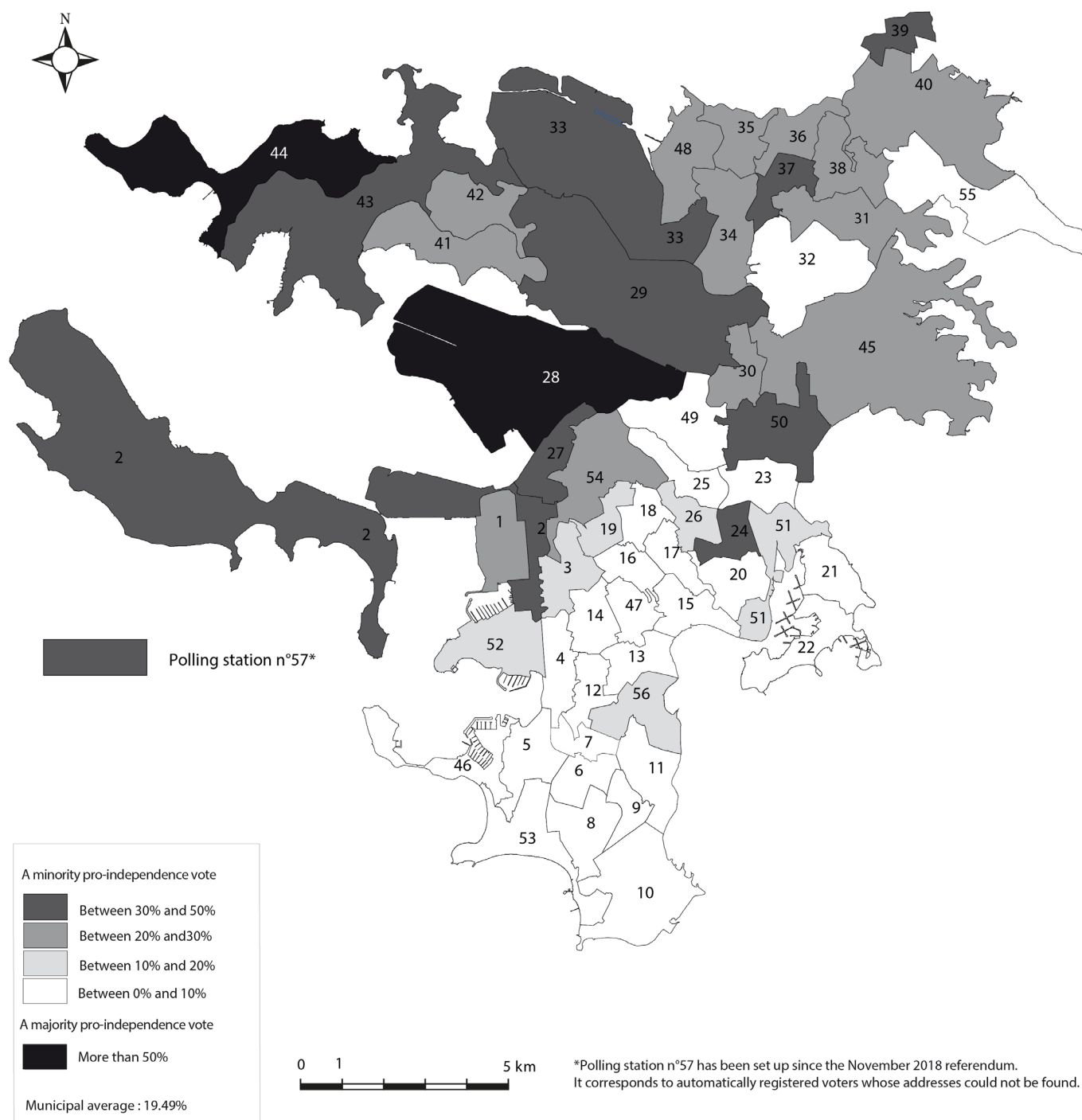
In Greater Nouméa's cluster of constituencies, the suburbs displayed great discrepancies among their polling stations. Inside Nouméa, the pro-independence vote reached 19.5 per cent, half of which came from the northwest area of the city.

This phenomenon is not specific to the referendum. The electoral divide between the northwest and southeast of Nouméa has been confirmed in every election. This electoral results map (Figure 6) has been repeated without interruption since the emergence of pro-independence parties in the 1970s. According to the ethnic data gathered with the 2009 census, this cleavage is consistent with the geographical spread of the population. Indeed, the polling stations with the highest pro-independence results form a cone-shaped area in the northwest of the city. This cone coincides with an underprivileged area where a high proportion of Kanak people reside (in the suburbs of Ducos, Montravel, Tindu, Nouville, Kaméré, Rivière Salée and Montagne Coupée). This seems to be confirmed in

the other three suburbs of the Greater Nouméa cluster, especially in tribal areas.

These rural and urban examples confirm the great ethnic and geographical cleavages in voting patterns in New Caledonia. This is unsurprising, as it has been the case since the beginning of the pro-independence movement in the 1970s. The examples also illustrate the imperviousness of both the pro-independence and anti-independence electorates to ethnic and geographic voting changes, which limits the possibility of a substantial change in the political balance for the next two referendums. Thus, it is necessary to determine whether the 2019 provincial elections that took place six months after the 2018 referendum have changed the political balance in New Caledonia.

Figure 6. Percentage of pro-independence vote in the 2018 referendum across Nouméa



Source: Created by the author using data from ISEE (2014) and the official 2018 self-determination referendum results.

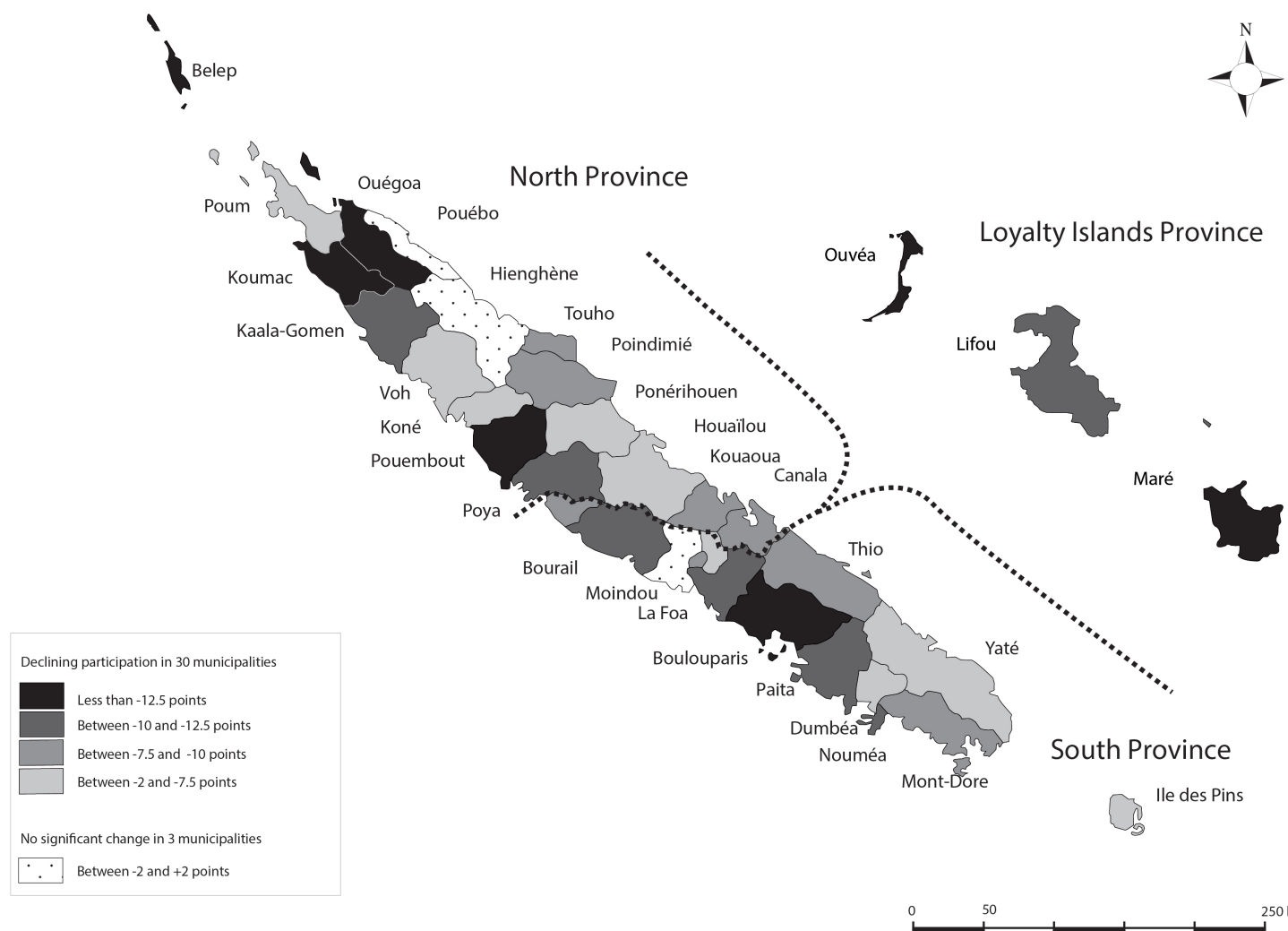
PART II: THE PROVINCIAL ELECTION — A RETURN TO NORMALITY?

Abstention still an issue

The decrease in participation seen in the 12 May 2019 provincial election seems almost logical considering that participation has decreased since 2004 (see Figure 1), despite the unforeseeable massive turnout for the referendum in the Northern Province (+20

points, an 86 per cent turnout rate) and Southern Province (+11 points, an 83 per cent turnout rate), or the worrisome decline in turnout in the Loyalty Islands Province (-6 points, a 61 per cent turnout rate). It may be that the Nouméa Accord process, having deferred the referendum for 20 years, has played a part in weakening political polarisation at the territorial level and, more particularly, decreasing the involvement of pro-independence voters. The decline in participation

Figure 7. Change (in points) in the participation rate between the 2004 and 2019 provincial elections



Source: Created by the author using 2004 and 2019 provincial election results.

in the provincial elections may have prevented the pro-independence score (42.4 per cent) from benefiting from the momentum gained in the referendum.

Among the possible explanations for the decreased voter turnout for the provincial election compared to the referendum is a decline in the population's commitment to the logic of political parties, versus the binary yes or no of independence, for which it is easier to mobilise voters. This could be interpreted in different ways: a lack of renewal of the political class, too many personal attacks during debates or the short time between the referendum and the election, which blurred the line between political content.⁶

Normalisation of proxy voting in the Loyalty Islands

Despite a lower voter turnout compared to previous provincial elections, the Loyalty Islands had a notable increase in proxy voting. For several years, the Loyalty Islander community in Greater Nouméa has been larger

than the population actually living on the islands, yet most of them have remained registered on the islands' electoral rolls. According to the 2019 population census, there are twice as many voters as people of voting age in the Loyalty Islands. In the last provincial elections, this translated into an increase in proxy votes and round trips to the Loyalty Islands by people living in Nouméa. Indeed, the abnormally high number of absentee votes and 'an accumulation of irregularities of particularly significant bearing' have already resulted in the cancellation of Loyalty Islands provincial elections on two occasions (1999 and 2000) by the State Council (Conseil d'Etat 16 October 2009). In order to thwart this voting pattern for the referendum, both the pro-independence and anti-independence sides agreed at the 2017 signatory committee to two specific conditions: the creation of decentralised polling stations for islander voters in Nouméa and the

obligation to provide justification for proxy voting (studies, work, a health issue, etc.).

Though the number of proxies established to vote in the referendum on the Loyalty Islands has not been issued publicly, it can be concluded that the new requirements to obtain a proxy have contributed to the ballooning of abstention, as shown in Figure 2. It is clear that the return to pre-referendum proxy conditions for the provincial election certainly helped increase the turnout rate in the Loyalty Islands, as justification is no longer required to obtain a standard proxy.

Does the congressional shift indicate a pro-independence rise?

The political balance of [26 pro-independence to 28 anti-independence congress members](#) after the 12 May election is the smallest gap since New Caledonia was divided into provinces. The position of l'Eveil Océanien (Oceania Awakening) political party will not be discussed in this paper,⁷ but it should be stressed that this pro-independence group is much stronger in the congress, as it holds the key positions of president, vice president, permanent committee and internal committees).

Does this prove that the pro-independence dynamic of the referendum was confirmed in the provincial elections? In fact, the reality is much more complex. The map of the pro-independence vote

remains unchanged. Having gained 42.2 per cent of the total votes cast, the pro-independence vote lost one point compared to the referendum, but increased by 0.7 points compared to the last provincial election (in 2014, the pro-independence vote was 41.5 per cent); therefore, the rise is insignificant. What is notable, however, is the fact that the pro-independence parties secured 48.1 per cent of the congressional seats with only 42.2 per cent of the votes. This over-representation of pro-independence parties at the institutional level has two major causes, which are discussed as follows.

A distortion in representation

When the territory was divided into three provinces, a distorted representation was implemented to the benefit of the Northern and Loyalty Islands provinces. In order to guarantee a balance between the two principle political currents, both provinces have, in proportion, more seats in congress than the Southern Province. A strictly proportional representation of the population would produce a completely different balance of 40, 10 and 4 seats (ISEE 2014). Based on electorate only, the numbers of seats would be 34, 13 and 7. For comparison, the actual number of seats is 32, 15 and 7. This distortion favours the pro-independence representation in congress.

Table 1. The distribution of those elected to the New Caledonian congress (2019)

Provinces	Loyalty Islands Province	Northern Province	Southern Province	TOTAL
Number of elected members in New Caledonian congress	7 (13%)	15 (27.8%)	32 (59.2%)	54 (100%)
Population registered on the special electoral list for the provinces (LESP) in 2019	21205 (12.5%)	39905 (23.5%)	108473 (64%)	169,583 (100%)
Theoretical number of elected members in New Caledonian congress	7	13	34	54

Source: Compiled by the author using 2004 and 2019 provincial election results and the composition of the 2019 special electoral list for the provinces (LESP).

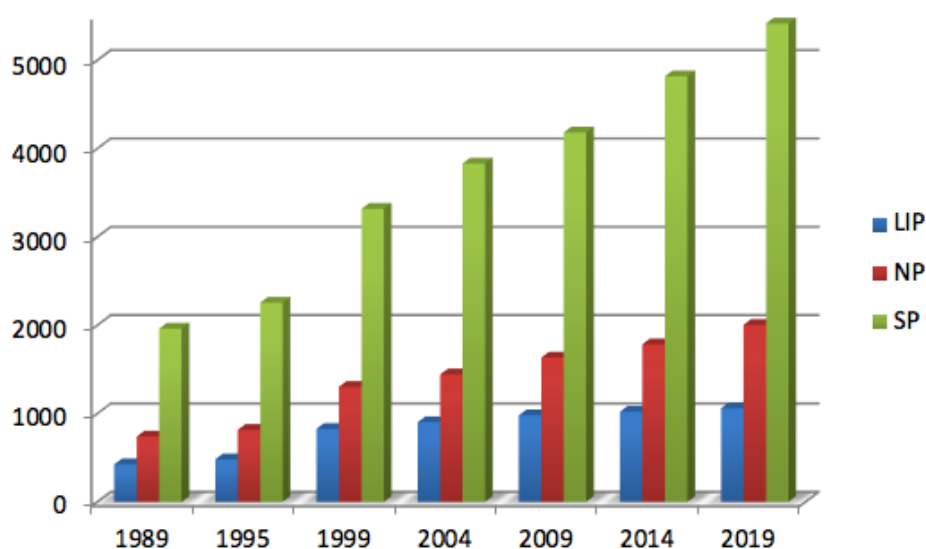
The five per cent rule

In addition, political parties have to follow the five per cent rule in order to be represented in congress. Since 1999, parties need to obtain the votes of at least five per cent of registered voters in order to win a seat in congress. Votes in favour of parties that fail to meet this requirement may be deemed 'useless', as they don't materialise into seats. This makes the number of seats that will be won by either side difficult to anticipate. It should be noted that the number of votes required to get a seat in congress varies from one province to another, sometimes by double.

The main consequence of the five per cent rule is stasis in the political landscape, which benefits historic parties, but hinders smaller or newer ones. The votes

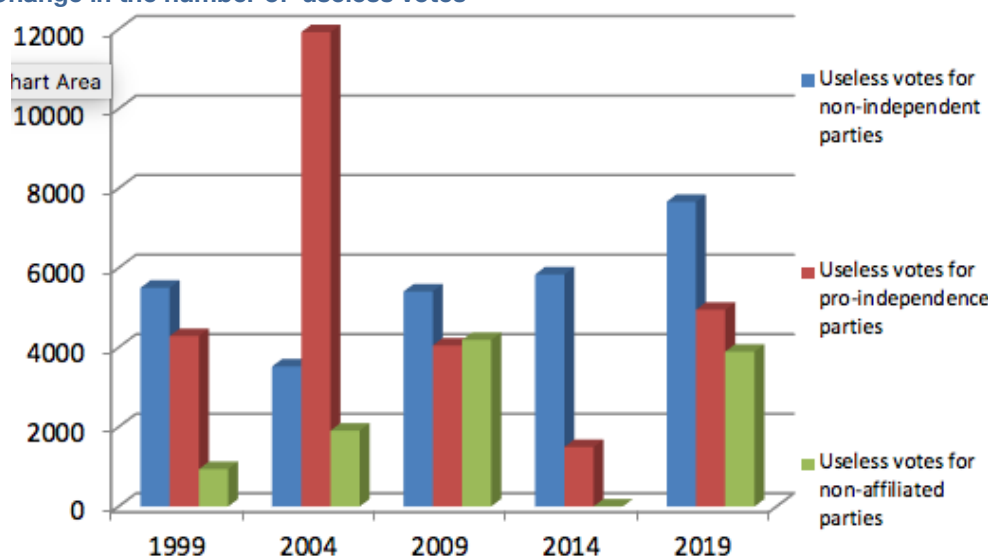
garnered by parties that fail to meet the required threshold are not taken into account in the allocation of seats and can be considered useless. Since the 2004 election, the pro-independence parties have greatly reduced their number of 'useless votes', mostly in Southern Province, where they have opted for a unitary approach so as to maximise their representation. The votes lost by the anti-independence parties, however, have not only considerably increased in Southern Province, but also in Loyalty Islands Province, where they are currently not represented in the provincial assembly. Consequently, the difference in congressional representation does not indicate a shift in the political balance in New Caledonia. The 2019 provincial election has not changed the situation.

Figure 8. Change in the number of voters required per province to obtain at least one seat in congress



Source: Compiled by the author using the composition of the special electoral list for the provinces (LESP) between 1989 and 2019. Key: LIP (Loyalty Islands Province), NP (Northern Province), SP (Southern Province).

Figure 9. Change in the number of 'useless votes'



Source: Compiled by the author using electoral results between 1999 and 2019.

CONCLUSION

Electoral geography is a method that helps confirm with some objectivity the resilience of the unchanging voting patterns in New Caledonia. It does, however, have limitations. While it allows for the observation of discrepancies in the mapping of votes and makes it possible to establish a correlation between the Kanak population's spread and the mapping of the pro-independence vote, it does not allow for an exact measurement of the rise in the pro-independence vote within the non-Kanak population, or the anti-independence vote within the Kanak population (except in the Loyalty Islands, where the population is almost exclusively Kanak). Nevertheless, in an archipelago where social and ethnic discrepancies overlap, this method provides a few certainties on voting geography.

The first is that if an electorate has definitely been frozen, so have its voting patterns, with minor observable changes. There are very few 'swing states', that is, towns that switch from one side to another come election time. Indeed, Kanak and pro-independence strongholds were built based on this stability. Electoral resilience is, in the end, what characterises the archipelago's electoral landscape. This could be responsible for decreased provincial election turnout.

The second certainty is that 30 years of political stability and balance have failed to change the ethnic and geographical nature of the vote. The Kanak people continue to overwhelmingly back independence, while non-Kanak people keep voting to remain in the French Republic. On both sides, the challenge of reaching beyond ethnic boundaries has failed to be met. What are the prospects, then, when dealing with this unchangeable situation? The map of abstention from the referendum – which can be superimposed on the map of the pro-independence vote – may be a sign that the gap is narrowing between both political poles for the coming referendums. For this to happen, however, would require a maximum turnout on the pro-independence side and the hope of a diminished commitment on the anti-independence side. Only then would pro-independence parties be able to break the glass ceiling at the referendum. However, a narrow victory for the pro-independence parties would not be the solution to the New Caledonian conundrum: together with those who are not allowed

to vote ([36,000 people for the referendum in 2018](#) and [41,000 for provincial elections in 2019](#)), those against independence will make up more than half of the population of New Caledonia. It would be the same if independence fails at the second and third referendums: a significant part of the population will still be support the prospect of leaving the French Republic. The stasis of the New Caledonian political landscape leads to a double dead end. It seems that, in all likelihood, only a shift in the political paradigm, breaking with a polarised opposition, would offer a realistic and satisfying way out for the greatest number of people.

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Author notes

Pierre-Christophe Pantz received his PhD from the University of Paris I Panthéon Sorbonne in 2015 on the geopolitics of the Kanak vote. He is a prominent commentator on New Caledonian elections for various media outlets and also writes on the topic in French.

Endnotes

1. Figures for the results of the referendum and provincial elections used in both the text and charts have been sourced from the [High Commissioner of the Republic in New Caledonia](#).
2. The independence score in 1999 was 40.2 per cent, compared to 43.3 per cent in 2018 and 42.2 per cent in 2019. The difference over 20 years is therefore 3 points for the referendum and 2 points for the provincial elections.
3. Anti-independence voting declined in both the Northern and Loyalty Islands Provinces. These parties were in a very small minority of successive provincial executives, and their actions were not very visible to the electorate of these provinces. On the other hand, the referendum vote showed a slight increase in the anti-independence vote compared to the provincial elections.
4. Some 35,950 voters from the general voters' list were excluded from the special voters' list for the referendum, [equating to 17.11 per cent of the total 210,105 registered voters on the general electoral roll](#). These voters are mainly Europeans who arrived in New Caledonia after 1994. In theory, this is an electorate opposed to

independence. As a reminder, for provincial elections, 41,000 people are excluded from the right to vote. For more information on the issue of voters' lists in New Caledonia, see Robertson 2018.

5. For more information about the differences between customary status and common status, see Lafargue 2014.
6. The referendum campaigns dealt mainly with institutional issues (remaining French or being independent), while the provincial election campaigns focused more on territorial and governance issues.
7. This political party was created two months before the provincial elections to represent the ethnic minorities from Wallis and Futuna. L'Éveil Océanien managed to obtain 6077 votes, thus allowing four candidates from the Southern Province and three at the New Caledonian congress to be elected. Mostly relying on a Wallisian and Futunan electorate, and despite a definitively anti-independence political platform, the party hopes to go beyond the pro/against independence polarisation and denies being an electoral adjustment variable. With only three congressional seats out of 54, l'Éveil Océanien has kingmaker status and, being in the position of strategic intermediary, has the power to tip the majority. For further information about this particular issue, see Pantz 2019.

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