Loss of social capital and rise of political abstention in contemporary urban France, an ecological approach

Abstract

Electoral participation is one of the channels through which social capital is built. It also testifies for the existence of such a capital. In France over the last thirty years, the trend toward a decline is general, though not linear. Its rhythms depend upon the type of election (Bréchon 2009: 25-62). The new European and regional polls, created in 1979 and 1986, provide the steepest declines, testifying for the rise of European scepticism and for some deceit about the regional politics. At the national level, the interest remains high in presidential elections, and declines in “elections legislatives”. At the local level, the rhythms of change are diverse. While in rural France and in most of small urban areas, local elections raise up more participation than national ones, the reverse is increasingly true in large urban areas and in former industrial districts. This phenomenon can be analyzed as a loss of “capital d’autochtonie” (social capital which is built at a local level, see Retière 2003): being an autochthon provided a member of the working classes with access to employment and to benefits from the local Welfare system. The globalization process has specific dismantling effects upon this type of social capital. The changes in the rates of abstention at national and local elections are observed over the 1977-2008 period in the 220 towns numbering 30 000 inhabitants or more in 1975 (35% of the population of France lived then in these localities). We analyse their correlations with demographic, economic and political data (and with some old data about religious attendance). Our analyse complements Gombin’s one, focused on rural areas (“The more periurban a canton, the higher the abstention”, Gombin 2008: 11)