National clashes, local backlashes:
The uneven metropolitan geographies of right-wing populism

> The oppressed have struck in the name of justice, the privileged in the name of order, those in between in the name of fear.
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> **Charles Tilly**, *Collective Violence in European Perspective,* 1978.

Themes: Urban planning, Transport policy, Electoral geography, Political polarization, Comparative politics

Far-right parties have scored significant electoral successes across Western Europe in recent years. Concurrently, major municipalities (e.g. Paris, Barcelona, Milan) have launched ambitious initiatives aimed at cutting down car use or promoting more sustainable, equitable and healthier travel modes (Nikolaeva et al., 2019). Most of these efforts have faced strong resistance from various opposition movements—primarily populists defending individual liberties and accusing 'ruling elites' of deepening the 'rural-urban divide'. While right-wing populism centers on immigration and identity, it often politicizes infrastructures—energy, transport, or public services—to spur reactionary agendas and nationalist sentiments (Anderson and Secor, 2022). Urban infrastructures are indeed shaped by moral, ideological, and everyday politics (Winner, 1980), providing the material foundation for inequalities and grievances which prompt political mobilization (Graham and Marvin, 2002; Beveridge et al., 2024). The widespread oppositions to the implementation of the '15-minute city' concept—including pedestrianization and the expansion of bike lanes—highlighted gaps in understanding how such movements emerge, evolve, and challenge the future of this urban norm. Conflicts are undoubtedly driven by distrust in centralized planning and concerns about automotive freedom or gentrification (Anguelovski et al., 2023; Marquet et al., 2024). However, the metropolitan dynamics of segregation remain under-explored (Tammaru et al., 2023) and there is still little knowledge on the influence of conspiracy theories (Pummerer et al., 2022) or affective polarization (Harteveld et al., 2022) .

To address these gaps, I propose a series of hypotheses about right-wing populism and the local determinants of its success. My research will be scheduled into three Work Packages (see hereafter) assessing, along the rural-urban continuum, the intertwined electoral implications of suburbanization (1), political polarization (2) and backlashes against car restrictions (3). My long-term goal is to ground a comparative perspective spanning various infrastructure sectors and areas where far-right groups are more or less established—hence the mix of French and Italian cases. By emphasizing the uneven demographic patterns of political change from a multi-scale spatial approach, my proposal seeks to challenge the reduction of context to a single (local) dimension and contribute to the integration of methods from both political sociology and electoral geography (Agnew, 1996). This will allow broad-scale conclusions, thereby enhancing generalization through interdisciplinary dialogue and complementing comparative studies that seek to understand politics across different contexts (notably Alter and Zürn, 2020). Therefore, I believe this research would lie at the intersection of *TD21* and *Inequality* clusters. During the initial months, I aim to gather multi-level and cross-sourced datasets (i.e. demographics, housing, income, surveys, turnout and vote choices) dating back at least to the 2007–08 financial crisis. This is to be used for subsequent processing, starting at regional levels (2), then focusing on two metropolitan studies which will drill down to polling stations (3). At the end of the first 12 months, I should have carried out most of the analyses and pre-published the evidence from the case studies. That said, I think another year will be needed to discuss all the results, draft a second paper on multilevel polarization, and pursue further research in line of my findings.

1. France as a peculiar case of a periurban effect on voting behaviors *(research already underway)*

French sociology has already explored the situated construction of political practices and offer multiple explanations for differences between urban, periurban and rural voters (e.g. respectively Rivière, 2022; Lambert, 2015; Bruneau et al., 2018). These studies share the endeavor to understand electoral choices in their social and geographical contexts, seeing voting less as a political statement and more as an expression of social preferences influenced by personal trajectories and electoral offerings. As many others, they stress demographic and economic factors as the main determinants of political behavior (e.g. Broz et al., 2021; Kenny and Luca, 2021; Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2024). Nonetheless, preliminary regression analysis of the last European elections results in France—using data provided by Piketty and Cagé (2023)—suggest

people living in periurban areas are statistically more inclined to Euroscepticism. It is true that rural-urban differences seem primarily linked to social composition effects, rather than density; the net gap is reduced by about the same proportion after accounting for age, income and education. But the net density effect remains strong in periurban areas as regards Bardella's list (*Identity and democracy*), while it is negligible elsewhere. How these results relate to equity issues within city-regions warrants in-depth investigations (Pons et al., 2024). The (mis)perceptions of inequality might affect electoral trends (Gimpelson and Treisman, 2017).

2. The long-term rural-urban differences in political polarization: a comparative perspective

Atkins and Menga (2022) state that populism 'can vary from country to country and populist to populist'. This might be for capitalizing on social and cultural cleavages (Ford and Jennings, 2020). Polarization and fragmentation are arguably the most enduring consequences of populism (Roberts, 2022). For instance, the French 'rural-urban divide' has been reshaped by contrasted social movements in the past years, whether triggered by carbon tax hikes (2018 Yellow Vest Movement, current European farmers' protests), or police brutality (2023 French urban riots). The former fueled the narrative of 'left-behind places' (Pike et al., 2024) associating anti-party sentiments among periurban dwellers and rural workers. The latter fed the racial stigma afflicting populations living in suburban social housing estates with brutalist architecture (Wacquant, 2016). It is unclear how these symbolic divisions locally shifted (or not) electorates, more specifically among right-wing parties. I will assess this heterogeneity throughout France and Italy to put in perspective the spatial aspects of affective polarization (Reiljan, 2020; Wagner, 2021). Perhaps their significance is strengthen by the national spread of ideological extremism (Bettarelli and Van Haute, 2022) and urban demonstrations opposing it (e.g. 2019-20 Sardines movement). First, selected citizen's perceptions of political elites and out-groups (CSES datasets) will be aggregated at sub-national levels (Bettarelli et al., 2023). Then, I propose to gauge electoral flows within various city-regions and design a detailed cluster analysis, drawing from the work of Bordignon and Ceccarini (2021). Next stages will involve the use of multilevel models (considering various contextual effects) together with indices of spatial autocorrelation (estimating the influence of local interactions), as part of a longitudinal comparison of political behavior.

3. Mapping backlash politics: how does metropolitan segregation hinder the acceptance of car restrictions?

The last work package will deal with major infrastructural changes in two functional urban areas: Lyon (where I have prior research experience) and Milan. Both cases have to begin with an inventory of controversial car restrictions, notably interventions within the built environment. There will follow a study of correlations between policy backlashes and voters' flows across (municipal) elections. One of the main challenges concerns the Modifiable Area Units Problem, since different methods of aggregating geospatial data lead to scale or zoning effects. Many divisions could be compared, such as polling stations coverage, wards, districts or natural neighborhoods (similar density, income, housing and job markets). Thus, scalable measures (Lee and Rogers, 2019) will be tried out to detail metropolitan patterns induced by backlashes and situate the examination of public acceptability. These metrics shall be decisive for evaluating inequalities in policy outcomes and the uneven representation of homeowners (Hall and Yoder, 2022) or commuters (Remme et al., 2022)—in other words, revealing how disproportionate exposures and swings disrupt the electoral redistribution. Accordingly, I will at last draw up a conceptual map of (un)acceptance drivers amidst city-metropolitan disparities (i.e. sprawl, economic segregation, spatial and modal mismatches, etc.).

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