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Beyond the Second-Order Election Model in French Regional Elections

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Bruxelles, le 16/08/2026 *Domenico Celestin Schinella*

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« Qui sème la misère récolte la colère »

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INTRODUCTION

In the most recent regional elections, more than two-thirds of French citizens did not vote, marking the lowest turnout ever recorded (Gougou 2023). Regional elections have never enjoyed higher voter turnout than legislative or municipal elections, and turnout has declined sharply since their establishment (Bristielle & Guerra 2021).

France today has never been more decentralised, a process that has lasted for more than forty years and is now entering its fourth act. It is certainly not the European champion of decentralisation, but it is undoubtedly far from being the unitary state it once was (Hooghe et al. 2016). Moreover, French citizens consistently declare strong support for regionalisation in surveys (Ifop 2025; Pasquier 2014; Schakel & Smith 2022). Furthermore, the annual French survey measuring what French citizens trust (and distrust) consistently shows that they have greater confidence in the political institutions closest to them, first their municipality (Cautrès 2024; Chanvril & Jouffre Lafargue 2026).

According to the Second-Order Election (SOE) model – the traditional theoretical framework for understanding non-national elections – these characteristics should make French regional elections more first-order than second-order elections, that is, elections in which electoral participation should be higher than the turnout recorded in 2021. The question, therefore, is not simply why French citizens do not vote in regional elections, but why they do not vote despite the presence of factors that should encourage them to do so, namely:

Why do French citizens not participate in regional elections if they claim to strongly support regionalisation, if they report having greater confidence in political representatives closest to them, and if regions have never had more power than today? (R.Q.)

The French case challenges the validity of the SOE model for understanding subnational electoral phenomena, a validity increasingly questioned by scholars, who call for moving "beyond" the model (Golder et al. 2017; Gougou 2023; Linek & Škvrňák 2024; Schakel & Romanova 2023). Moreover, the paradoxical French case fits the well-known "devolution paradox" (Henderson et al. 2013, 2014; Schakel & Smith 2022) – which emerges from the discrepancy between citizens' electoral behaviour and their political preferences – yet, despite having been identified over a decade ago, this paradox remains difficult to unravel empirically (Sautter 2026b).

It is no coincidence that the French case challenges the SOE model and appears as an outsider in regional studies. Indeed, these studies have largely been developed through investigations of decentralisation in the "noisier" regions (Tatham & Mbaye 2018), or so-called *usual suspects* –

Catalonia, the Basque Country, Flanders, Scotland, Quebec, etc. – that display strong regionalist public discourses and where regionalisation is justified according to an identity-based paradigm (Reuchamps et al. 2021). While we therefore know much about what occurs in these regions, much less is known about how regionalisation is experienced in the far more numerous "quieter" regions (Tatham & Mbaye 2018; Henderson & Medeiros 2021), where regionalist public discourses are absent and decentralisation is driven by political elites according to a utilitarian paradigm (Guinjoan & Rodon 2014). Therefore, studying the French case constitutes an initial step towards filling this gap in the literature by moving beyond the investigation of the *usual suspects*.

In order to unravel apparent paradoxes such as the inconsistencies between the variables of the SOE model, and the "devolution paradox", scholars have called for more in-depth analyses (Henderson et al. 2013; Schakel & Romanova 2023; Schakel & Smith 2022) and for greater attention to "how citizens feel about decentralisation […], and what impact these attitudes have on policy variation within states" (Henderson & Medeiros 2021: 139). Scholars thus call for a constitutive approach to regionalisation centred on mass publics, that is, an approach focused on understanding how citizens make sense of regionalisation (Walsh 2012). Therefore qualitative methodology, which has demonstrated its value in precisely these situations (Berg & Ternullo 2025), appears to be the most appropriate choice for capturing the complexity of the phenomenon. By adopting a qualitative approach within electoral studies, which have traditionally relied heavily on quantitative methods, this study also seeks to highlight the value of the former in complementing the latter where appears limited (Simonsen 2021; Walsh 2012).

Finally, this study follows the recent approach that places regionalisation within the framework of policy-feedback studies on mass publics (Dupuy & Van Ingelgom 2014; Dupuy et al. 2021; Verhaegen et al. 2021; Sautter 2026a). This approach provides a solid analytical framework for understanding decentralisation, which is inherently dynamic: the level of decentralisation has continued to increase across states, and the level of decentralisation forty years ago has little resemblance to that of today (Hooghe et al. 2016). Previous studies adopted a static approach to decentralisation. Policy-feedback studies, by contrast, show how citizens' everyday interactions with regional authorities or the central state shape their perceptions of these institutions, which in turn influence their political preferences and behaviour (Bussi et al., 2022).

Building on the three arguments outlined above, this study adopts a qualitative, constitutive approach to capture how citizens make sense of regionalisation in their own terms and, following the policy-feedback approach, how this perception influences their political

preferences and behaviours. This leads to a second research question, consistent with the investigative process needed to answer the initial research question:

How do French citizens perceive and experience regionalisation, and how does this influence their participation in regional elections? (R.Q.)

Through 17 in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in the *Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes* region in France, I provide empirical evidence for the validity of the SOE model's main mechanism – the "more/less at stake" mechanism – which the literature has so far hypothesised to shape how citizens reason about elections. I also confirm the importance of the regional policies distinctiveness in fostering the citizens' politicisation of regional authorities. Finally, by identifying the meanings that participants attach to regionalisation, this study shows that survey findings indicating strong French support for regionalisation should be understood as reflecting dissatisfaction with national governance rather than satisfaction with regional government performance. This helps unravel the "devolution paradox" in the French case and further underscores the importance of paying attention to how citizens make sense of regionalisation, how these meanings vary across space, and how they are shaped by citizens' everyday interactions with specific institutions (Sautter, 2026a).

The following chapter reviews the literature on regional electoral studies, highlights its limitations, and proposes ways to overcome them. The second chapter describes the study's methodology and justifies the case selection. The third chapter presents the results of the thematic analysis. Finally, the fourth chapter discusses the three main insights emerging from the findings and answers the initial research question.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Second-Order Elections Model

> "Regional elections have not received a lot of academic interest in France. Specialists in French electoral studies have generally preferred to focus on presidential and legislative elections" (Escalona et al. 2013: 88).

Since 2013, the situation has not changed. To my knowledge, only two additional studies on regional elections in France have been published. One is by Romain Pasquier, part of the broader project "Citizenship after the Nation State" (2014) directed by Henderson, Jeffery and Wincott. The other is an article by Florent Gougou in 2023, in which he analyses the results of the 2021 regional elections, proposing an interpretation that is different from the one traditionally used for subnational elections. Before 2013, three other articles on regional elections in France were published: one by Jean-Luc Parodi (2004), one by Élisabeth Dupoirier (2004) and one by Fauvelle-Aymar & Lewis Beck (2011)

All these studies have interpreted the regional elections in France using the *second-order election* (SOE) model introduced by Reif and Schmitt in 1980. "French regional elections fit 'second-order election' model particularly well" (Escalona et al. 2013: 102), so first we need to take a closer look at this model.

Reif and Schmitt (1980) developed the SOE model by analysing the results of the first European Parliament elections in 1979 (aggregate-level data). They observed three main results: a very low turnout compared to usual, bad results for the national governing parties, and good results for small parties compared to large ones. They interpreted these results as the outcome of a *second-order election*. What makes an election first-order or second-order is its importance for citizens, and this importance derives from how much is at stake in the election. How much is at stake depends on the power that the government, to which the voters are electing, has to change citizens' lives. National elections are considered first-order elections, because there is a lot at stake, and therefore the results obtained are opposite to those observed in the 1979 European election, which is a second-order election. When voting in a second-order election voters look to the first-order election, which explains the three main results listed above.

1. A lower turnout. If the election is not important because there is less at stake, then voting or not voting makes no difference. European elections fail to mobilize non-regular voters like national elections do (De Sio et al. 2019).
2. Parties in government at the national level perform worse than in national elections. Because voters use the European election to send a message to the parties that form the national government, to punish them for their actions at national level. Voters use the

European Parliament elections as a kind of US midterm election for their national government (Hobolt & Wittrock 2011).

3. Small parties perform better than in national elections. Since the European election is not about forming a government, citizens vote in a more "sincere" and less "strategic" manner, which means: "supporting parties less relevant to government formation but closer to the voters' ideal positions" (Hix & Marsh 2007: 497).

Reif and Schmitt, while focusing on the European Parliament elections, included in the "plethora of 'second-order' elections: by-elections, municipal elections, various sorts of regional elections, those to a 'second chamber' and the like" (1980: 8). So, they hypothesized that the effects of being an SOE observed in the first European election would also be observable in regional elections.

> Today, "the second-order election model is clearly widely referred to analyses of regional election outcomes" (Schakel & Romanova 2023: 401).

But while the effects of being an SOE are clear, the causes are not: what does it mean that there is *less* (or more) *at stake*? Over time, researchers who have applied the SOE model to regional elections have tried to define the elements that constitute the stakes. Schakel and Romanova (2023) identified three generations of studies on regional elections that applied the SOE model from different perspectives.

The first generation of studies seeks to answer the question: which factors can vary the *second-orderness* of regional elections? In other words, how can an election be less second-order and more first-order?

Jeffery and Hough (2009) studied the electoral results of subnational elections in Scotland and Wales through a comparative analysis with regions from different states (Canada, Germany, and Spain) and applying the SOE model. The authors verified the effects of a SOE using aggregate election result data. Furthermore, they adopted a supply-side approach, focusing mainly on the strategies adopted by political parties to adapt to the context of a second-order election.

The two authors found that the more decision-making power the subnational level of government where elections take place has, the less second-order the elections are. More specifically, regarding voter turnout: the higher level of decentralisation, the higher regional voter turnout (see also Blais et al. 2011). Furthermore, not only the level of decentralisation impacts the second-orderness of the regional election, but also "territorial cleavages" (2009: 232).

> "If sub-state elections are held in areas with distinctive territorial identities, voters are more likely to disconnect themselves from the first-order, state-wide arena and make distinctive decisions in the sub-state context" (2009: 223).

Here, Jeffery and Hough highlighted an important mechanism of voters according to the SOE model: benchmarking. An election is second-order because, when voting, voters do not look at the issues at the level of government where the election is taking place but vote by looking at the first-order political context, traditionally the national one. Finally, subnational elections are less second-order when voters, comparing levels of government, consider that the issues that concern them can be resolved at the subnational level. Or subnational elections are less second-order when voters decide not to compare because they are strongly attached to the subnational territory[1].

The second generation of SOE studies challenged a voting theory that the first generation had implicitly accepted: rational choice theory (Blais 2000). According to this theory, citizens are able to evaluate the performance of the incumbent administration during elections, allowing them to reward political parties that have performed well and punish those that have performed poorly. However, this view is not realistic – especially in decentralised contexts such as those found in many European countries. In such settings, citizens must not only evaluate the performance of different parties but also attribute responsibility to the correct level of government. A party may have performed well at the national level but poorly at the regional level, for example. Decentralisation complicates the accountability mechanism, making the task of assigning political responsibility significantly more complex for citizens (León 2018; Hobolt & Tilley 2014). León (2010) showed how Spanish citizens make mistakes in attributing political competences to the national or regional level of government.

Moreover, as previously mentioned, the first generation of SOE studies implicitly assumes that, when voting in subnational elections, voters may consider the national political context (second-order thinking) or the subnational political context (first-order thinking). Voting with first-order thinking means that there is consistency between the level of election and the political context that voter looks to when deciding how to vote. First-generation studies using aggregated data (election results) are unable to capture this difference in voting behaviour. Therefore, the second generation used individual-level data through pre- and post-election surveys, rather than just electoral results (Schakel & Romanova 2023).

[1] It is important to point-out that these two mechanisms are implicitly assumed by the authors and have not been verified. Only the cause-effect links have been verified: greater regional identity and greater political autonomy of the region lead in the election results to greater voter turnout, more votes for regional parties, etc.

Henderson & McEwen (2015), through electoral surveys in 29 regions in three multi-level states (Spain, Canada and the UK), investigate why participation is higher in some regional elections and lower in others. Going beyond rational choice theory, these studies start from the assumption that what makes an election important – or what increases what is at stake, and thus its attractiveness to voters – is not necessarily the effective degree of political authority of the government where the election takes place, but rather citizens' perception of that authority.

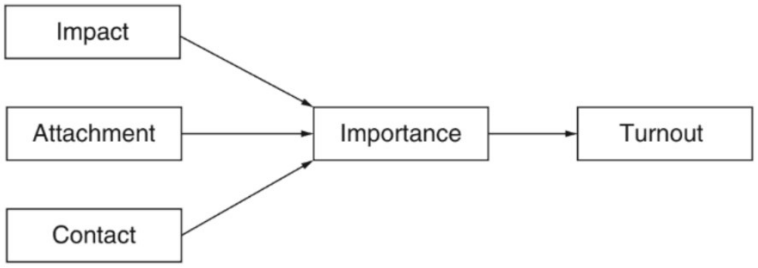
There are three main results.

- First, the design of decentralisation matters. Self-rule (regional political autonomy) tends to increase voter turnout in regional elections, whereas shared rule (regional influence in central institutions) is associated with lower turnout.
- Second, age matters. Older citizens vote at higher rates than younger citizens, a trend that is also evident in national elections (Smets & Van Ham, 2013; Blais & Rubenson, 2013). Additionally, young people appear to have a "stronger sense of regional identity" (Henderson & McEwen, 2015, p. 206) compared to older generations, which is reflected in their greater support for regionalist parties.
- Third, citizens who feel a "greater sense of attachment to the region" (2015: 208) are more likely to vote in regional elections.

The third generation of studies applying the SOE model has an institution-oriented approach. The SOE model traditionally focuses only on the top-down influence of the national political context on subnational elections. However, it is also possible that the regional political context influences national elections (bottom-up spill-over) or that regional political contexts influence each other (horizontal spill-over).

Golder et al. (2017) aimed to verify Reif and Schmitt's work from the beginning, rechecking all results from previous SOE model generations. The originality of their work was that they studied the behaviour of parties and voters in relation to elections at three different levels of government in three different states during the same period (from 2011 to 2015). The states were France, Germany and Spain, and the three levels of government were European, national and subnational (regional or municipal). Their approach is original because, until then, scholars had examined the SOE model in regional and European elections separately. As a result, comparisons of the model's validity across different types of elections were not accurate. Furthermore, like the second-generation studies, Golder et al. used individual-level data from pre- and post-election surveys. The authors opened the "black box" of electoral importance by examining what determines the stakes of an election. To explain variations in voter turnout,

they identified three independent variables: the "impact" of the level of government being elected on citizens' daily lives, the "attachment" voters feel to the corresponding political community, and the direct "contact" voters have with the competing parties (see Figure 1).



The conceptual framework

Figure 1 (Golder et al. 2017: 69)

The results show that the main variable of the SOE model – the degree of power held by the level of government being elected (what the authors call "impact") – has strong explanatory power in European elections, for which the SOE model was originally developed, but less in regional elections. In the case of Catalonia, the "impact" plays no role in the high voter turnout; it is the "attachment" that has the strongest explanatory power. And in other regions where regional voter turnout is low, this does not correspond to citizens' perception that the region has less power. The authors conclude that the roles of "impact" and "attachment" in shaping the importance of an election vary significantly. In one regional election, turnout may be best explained by the former; in another, by the latter. As a result, no consistent patterns can be identified across different regional elections – either within the same country or between regions in different countries. In other words, the authors are unable to explain why "attachment" is more influential than "impact" in some regional elections, while the opposite happens in others.

This limitation leads us to consider two more recent studies on regional elections in France, which also highlight further limitations of the SOE model when applied to the regional context.

Gougou (2023), analysing the results of the 2021 French regional elections, shows that they can still be interpreted as second-order (Parodi 2004; Dupoirier 2004). In fact, voter turnout was very low, the president's ruling party performed poorly, and traditional French parties, marginalized at the national level, performed very well. However, the SOE model does not predict two major outcomes that characterized the 2021 elections. The increase in split-ticket voting between regional elections and cantonal elections (which took place simultaneously with the regional elections) and the fact that all regional presidents stood for re-election, and they were all re-elected. Therefore, the author proposed a model in addition to the classic SOE

model, the "candidate-centered politics model" (2023: 527-528). The latter seems to fill the explanatory gap left by the SOE model.

Pasquier wrote as part of the "Citizenship after the Nation-State" project by Henderson et al. (2014). The project explored the effects of regionalization (the process of devolving powers from the national to subnational levels) on citizenship in five European countries (UK, Spain, Germany, Austria and France). The macro hypothesis was that regionalization – by providing new opportunities for regional leaders and institutions to develop diverse policies and construct regions as political spaces – may have contributed to a redefinition of citizenship. Traditionally tied to the nation-state, citizenship may now be increasingly associated with the region.

Citizenship is measured using two dependent variables: political participation and economic and social solidarity[2]. Political participation can help to understand what the "primary political community" (Henderson & McEwen 2015) of French citizens is. If it changes, this may be a symptom of a shift in citizenship from the national to other levels.

There are three independent variables: identity, institutional factors, and economic factors.

- According to the first hypothesis (identity), a strong regional identity increases regional electoral participation and influences social and political solidarity – potentially leading to a reduced desire for wealth redistribution between regions.
- The second hypothesis (institutional) suggests that a more powerful regional government reshapes citizenship. When citizens encounter problems, they may no longer turn exclusively to the national level but instead look to the regional level.
- According to the third hypothesis (economic), when a region is wealthier than others, this can promote a sense of regional pride and reduce citizens' willingness to support interregional wealth redistribution.

The project was based on regional surveys, which in France were conducted in 2009 in three regions: Alsace, Brittany and Île-de-France[3].

I am interested in Pasquier's findings regarding the regional electoral turnout. The author interpreted the regional election results – especially the low voter turnout – according to the SOE model. Through his analysis (OLS regression), he confirmed the main claim of the SOE

[2] Socio-economic solidarity is understood as citizens' preference for "uniformity and equality of services and living conditions" (Pasquier 2014: 145) (policy uniformity among regions) and "economic transfers from richer to poorer regions" (2014: 146).
[3] "[They] were selected to ensure sufficient variation on variables of identity (strong-weak) and economic disparity (rich-poor sub-state units) and to allow exploration of the (different) expectations held by citizens of (equally empowered) regional institutions" (2014: 137).

model. The greater the decentralization, the greater the importance of regional decisions and, therefore, the greater the importance of voting at this level. However, Pasquier identified the so-called "devolution paradox" (Henderson et al. 2013; 2014) in the French context:

> There is a pronounced gap between the pride people take in their regions and the actual political and institutional reality they wish for. Regional institutions, political participation and regional decisions matter for a majority of people. At the same time, they are not clearly in favour of a new decentralization act and the transfer of new competences to the regions" (2014: 150).

In other words, this paradox takes the form of a discrepancy between citizens' preferences for regionalisation and their voting behaviour: citizens may strongly favour decentralisation but not vote in regional elections (as is the case in France), or they may vote predominantly for regionalist parties while not supporting greater decentralisation (as is the case in Belgium, see Sautter 2026b).

The Limits of the Identified Limitations

Finally, I identify three limitations of the SOE model that highlight the need to move "beyond" it, as many studies have suggested (see Golder et al. 2017; Gougou 2023; see also Linek & Škvrňák 2024). The first limitation pertains to the independent variables that constitute the mechanism of regional election importance. The second points out the lack of consideration for citizens' agency. The third relates to the model's static nature.

First, scholars from three generations have tested the independent variables that constitute the "more/less at stake" mechanism of regional election importance individually, evaluating their explanatory power on the dependent variable (voter turnout) (see Figure 2, red arrows). However, this approach overlooks the fact that these variables operate simultaneously and may influence one another, not just the dependent variable (see Figure 2, blue dotted arrows). The interactions among independent variables may help explain the findings of Golder et al. (2017), which showed that the explanatory power of "impact" and "attachment" varied significantly across regions, without any clear or consistent pattern. For example, the authors show that in some regions, despite the fact that they have gained more competences, voter turnout has remained the same; or even though the level of decentralisation has remained the same, citizens are more likely to vote in regional elections (2017: 78-82). To understand how independent variables influence one another, it is essential to define the mechanisms through which they operate. While scholars have measured the strength and direction of the links between these variables and the dependent variable, the mechanisms underlying these relationships remain largely hypothetical or unexplained.

As a reminder, the mechanism hypothesis underlying the link between the degree of decentralisation and voter turnout is as follows: if a region has little power, citizens may believe that regional governments cannot make significant changes to their lives. As a result, they may be less motivated to vote.

The second hypothesis concerns the mechanism connecting regional attachment and electoral participation. As Henderson and McEwen explain: "[…] those who feel a strong sense of regional identity may thus regard the region as their primary political community. Under such a scenario, regional institutions can assume a symbolic importance, and serve as the vehicle for expressing regional difference and the collective voice of the community" (2015: 192).

The two hypothetical mechanisms do not always work, as demonstrated by the mixed findings of Golder et al. (2017) and the persistence of "devolution paradox" (Henderson et al. 2013, 2014). Therefore, it is necessary to verify them and look for new ones, as suggested by Shakel & Romanova (2023: 402) and succinctly summarised by Golder et al.: "Much of the story lies elsewhere" (2017: 80). How do we know where? I think the answer lies in overcoming the second limitation of the SOE model.

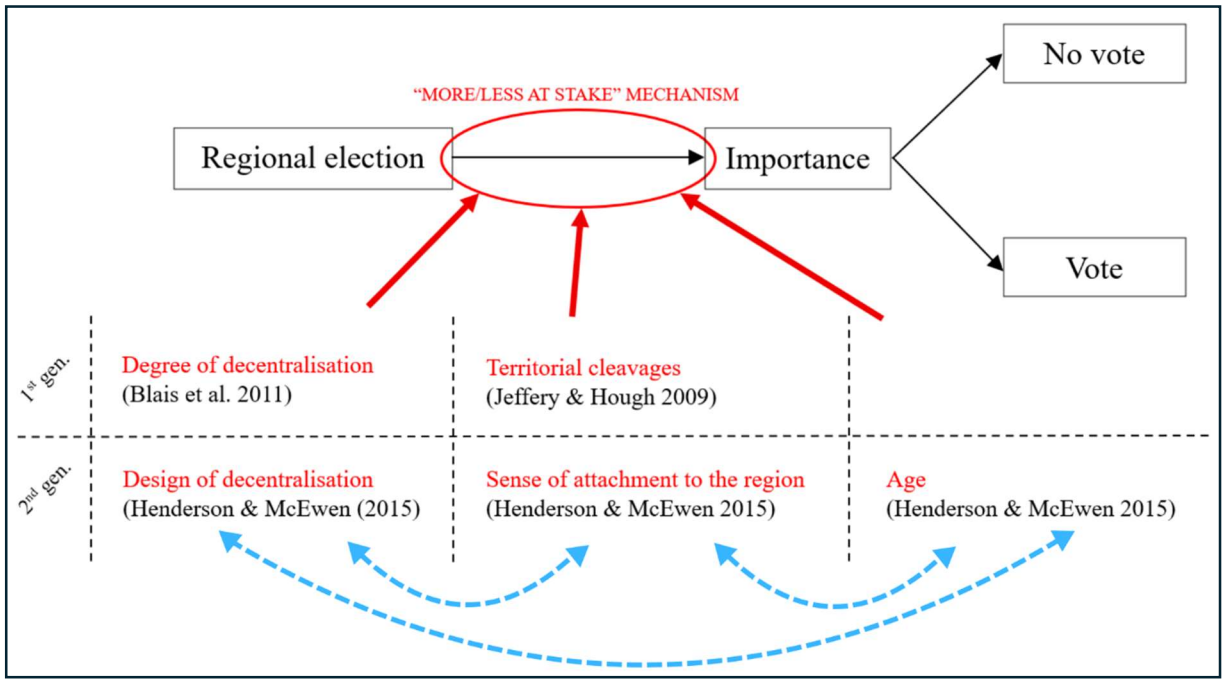


Figure 2 – Theoretical framework of the SOE model

The second limitation of the SOE model is the lack of consideration of citizen agency. Second-generation scholars have shown that voters' electoral choices are not rational, because they do not objectively assess the costs and benefits of voting or abstaining. The evaluation of the importance of the regional election is subjective and influenced by regional identity and the

design of institutional devolution implemented (Henderson & McEwen 2015; León 2010; 2018). The authors went beyond the erroneous rational choice model but continued to conceive citizens as passive and simply sensitive to direct and precise external inputs. On the contrary, they are active and make choices that are the result of the interpretation of multiple inputs. A top-down approach, in which the SOE model is applied to each new subnational election and gradually adjusted, fails to capture the complexity of the citizen's decision-making process, leaving unexplained phenomena not predicted by the model (Henderson et al.'s decentralization paradox etc.). By recognizing that citizens' electoral choices are subjective, we acknowledge the complexity of human reasoning. To understand what influences their decisions to vote or abstain in regional elections, we must begin by listening closely to citizens themselves.

The third limitation lies in the static nature of the SOE model across all generations of studies. While scholars have conducted regional comparisons at both the subnational and international levels, they have largely neglected temporal comparisons within the same geographic context. In other words, they have compared across space, but not across time. Yet regionalisation – the process of restructuring the political-institutional landscape within the state – is a dynamic and evolving phenomenon. The level of decentralisation in France twenty years ago differs significantly from that of today, and such shifts undoubtedly affect citizens' political behaviour. The lack of temporal investigation makes it impossible to understand how certain factors have become fundamental in shaping the perceived importance of regional elections. For example, how does the sense of regional attachment evolve over time? How does it strengthen or weaken? To answer this question, scholars need to examine institutional factors over time, not just across space. It is important to understand institutional regionalisation as a broad and on-going phenomenon, rather than limiting it to policies directly related to politics, such as electoral rules or types of political regimes (As done, for example, by Golder et al. 2017, in chapter 3). Verhaegen, Dupuy, and Van Ingelgom (2021) rely on policy-feedback literature to study regionalisation without neglecting its dynamic character. According to this perspective, policies are not only outcomes of decision-making processes but also inputs that shape the political perceptions and behaviours of the citizens who experience them. Institutional regionalisation thus takes place within a political cycle, where its evolution results from decisions made by politicians who are elected by citizens whose preferences are, in turn, shaped by previous regionalisation policies. The next section reviews the development of policy-feedback literature, leading to its recent applications in territorial politics (Dupuy et al. 2021; Verhaegen et al. 2021) and electoral studies (Simonsen 2021).

Policy-feedback studies on mass publics

Policies have traditionally been studied as the outcomes of the policy-making process – the final stage of a sequence that begins with citizen input through voting. Consequently, studies have generally interpreted policies as effects rather than causes. In a seminal article, Pierson (1993) formalized the emergence of a new paradigm for analysing policies. He argued that policies feed back into the political system by influencing three distinct categories of actors: interest groups, political elites, and the mass public. Early scholarly attention focused primarily on the first two groups: Pierson (1993; 1994; 2000) introduced the concept of "path dependence" to describe how previously implemented policies constrain and shape the choices available to policymakers when designing new ones.

Since the early 2000s, an increasing number of scholars have turned their attention to the effects of policies on the mass public (i.e., citizens). Within this growing body of literature, two main approaches can be identified: a *policy-centred* approach and a *citizen-oriented* approach.

The policy-centred approach is the more traditional and has been widely used in policy feedback studies, particularly in the United States, where most case studies are based (Bussi et al., 2022). It is defined *policy-centred* because the research begins by selecting a specific policy (e.g., aid for veterans, see Mettler 2005; pensions, see Campbell 2003; prison policies, Lerman & Weaver 2014) and then examines its outcomes for the directly affected populations (e.g., veterans, pensioners, prisoners).

Pierson (1993) distinguished two mechanisms that explain how policies affect their target populations: the "resource" mechanism and the "interpretative" mechanism[4]. The resource mechanism refers to material empowerment or disempowerment that policies confer on those directly affected – such as money, time, or other resources. A classic example is Campbell's (2003) study of American pensioners, which demonstrated how the complex set of U.S. policies supporting pensioners provided them with financial resources and free time. This, *ceteris paribus*, enabled greater political engagement compared to the general population. Campbell refers to these pensioners as "über-citizens," highlighting how pension policies have granted them significant electoral power capable of influencing decisions about the future of the U.S. pension system.

[4] Pierson called them "effects", but Dupuy, Teuber, and Van Ingelgom (2022) rightly argued that they are more accurately described as "mechanisms," because the term "effects" is more commonly understood to refer to outcomes rather than the processes through which those outcomes are produced (see also Dupuy & Van Ingelgom 2023).

The interpretative mechanism points out that policy design matters, because it transmits "messages" to the target population about their role in the state and society. The way a policy is constructed helps shape the representation and identity of its target population within society. For example, a policy that imposes numerous eligibility criteria for accessing a public service may suggest that the target population consists of opportunists who do not truly need the service and therefore must be closely monitored. As a result, those citizens will be identified negatively by society. Universal programs, on the other hand, are less stigmatising. (see Soss 1999; 2002). A classic example of the interpretative effect is Mettler's (2005) work on US veterans who benefited from the GI Bill, a fund that financed their higher education. Second World War veterans, having received from the state the opportunity to reintegrate into society free of charge – an opportunity denied to veterans of the previous war (Mettler & Soss, 2004) – developed a strong sense of reciprocity and felt indebted to society for the support they had received. They expressed this gratitude, *ceteris paribus*, through high levels of political and social engagement, deserving the label "civic generation."

Over time, the traditional approach has revealed certain limitations that scholars have asked to be addressed. Campbell called for "capturing the lived experience" (2012: 347), arguing that studying the effects of one policy at a time is unrealistic, as citizens are simultaneously influenced by a multitude of policies. Béland and Schlager (2019) encouraged researchers to expand policy feedback studies beyond the U.S. context. Finally, Larsen, in a quantitative review of policy feedback research, pointed out that "policies do not have as large effects [e.g., outcomes] on the public as often presumed" (2019: 389), and emphasized the need to identify additional mechanisms through which policies influence citizens.

Mettler (2018) responds to Campbell's call by applying Pierson's mechanisms and making a list of 21 policies. However, this approach still treats citizens' experiences in isolation, limiting them to a predefined set of policies without any guarantee that all relevant ones have been captured (Dupuy et al. 2022: 131). It reflects a top-down perspective that *arbitrarily* determines which policies are considered to influence citizens and which are not. Furthermore, Rosenthal (2021) highlights that it is not merely the addition, but the combination of policies that shapes their effects on citizens. Studying policy feedback with the aim of fully understanding every individual policy becomes increasingly complex, as it requires managing too many factors.

Dupuy, Teuber, and Van Ingelgom (2022) respond to these three scholars' calls by seeking to "*faire voyager*" (Dupuy & Van Ingelgom, 2023) policy feedback literature across the Atlantic, from the United States to Western Europe. They describe the European context as "saturated"

with public policies, remarking that the state has traditionally played a pervasive role in citizens' lives "from cradle to grave" (see also Bussi et al., 2022). As a result, there is a clear need to develop approaches for studying how citizens simultaneously experience multiple policies.

They identified two main limitations of Pierson's mechanisms that make them difficult to apply to the study of multiple policies simultaneously. First, the mechanisms were developed to explain the effects of a single policy on citizens, as they rely on detailed knowledge of the policy's resources and design. For this reason, the mechanisms are considered "policy-specific" (Dupuy et al., 2022: 129). Second, the two mechanisms account for the effects on directly affected citizens, since the policy's resources and design target a specific population. Their dependence on single-policy analysis makes them unsuitable for the European context, which is saturated with policies. Furthermore, Simonsen (2021), in a study on youth voter turnout in Denmark, demonstrated that policies can also impact citizens who are not directly targeted. Therefore, it is necessary to move beyond Pierson's mechanisms (1993), but how?

First, "How to adapt research designs to the study of multiple policy experiences?" (Dupuy et al. 2022: 131). Traditional research design is policy-centred (or "policy-specific"), so Dupuy et al. suggest adopting a "policy-selection-free strategy" (2022: 131) instead. This approach had already been used by Hern (2019) and Rosenthal (2021), who created their list of policies based on the experiences of the citizens interviewed at the beginning of their studies. This research design can be described as *citizen-oriented* because it starts by identifying a specific socio-political citizen phenomenon (e.g., support for regionalisation, support for state intervention, voter turnout) and then examines the influence of institutional factors, namely citizens' experiences of policies (see Barnes et al. 2024).

Second, "How to draw causal inferences from multiple policy experiences?" (Dupuy et al 2022: 141). Pierson's mechanisms are useful for explaining and describing the causal link between a single policy and its effects on the citizens directly affected. However, when considering multiple policies and a non-specific target population, new mechanisms are needed to explain how the experience of multiple policies shapes citizens' behaviour and attitudes. Dupuy et al. (2022) suggest employing the "normative" mechanism defined by Svallfors (2010).

The author showed that, following reunification, Germans who grew up in East Germany are more supportive of greater state involvement in citizens' lives, whereas those who grew up in West Germany tend to favour less state intervention. Furthermore, the new generations who

grew up in eastern Germany after reunification support state intervention to the same extent as their western counterparts, unlike their parents and grandparents who grew up under the Soviet regime. According to Svallfors, the combination of citizens' various experiences and perceptions of the state (those of the West Germans were different from those of the East Germans) shapes their view of how the state ought to work: what he called "the desirable state of affairs" (Svallfors 2010: 120) in a given context. He denominated the mechanism "normative" referring to *norms*, which are understood as the shared idea of *normality* – in other words, what society considers appropriate and how things should be done. Even if we do not personally accept these norms, we are still aware that, *normally*, according to the community's perspective, this is how things are done (Dupuy & Van Ingelgom 2023; Dupuy et al. 2022).

> So, "New institutions create new normative expectations that lead to new attitudes towards public policies. New generations are particularly susceptible to the new institutional conditions, as they have no previous formative experiences that need to be reconsidered" (Svallfors 2010: 131).

Moreover, the originality of this mechanism lies in its consideration of citizens' overall experiences and perceptions of the state over time – making it non-policy-specific – and in its ability to capture the "group-based" (Dupuy et al. 2022) normative construction, where individual experiences (such as being part of the target population of a policy) play a relatively minor role.

The shift toward a *citizen-oriented* research design enables the use of policy-feedback literature as a new explanatory approach to phenomena typically studied in separate research areas, such as territorial politics or electoral studies[5].

Verhaegen, Dupuy, and Van Ingelgom (2021) applied policy feedback literature to the study of regionalisation. Traditionally, differences in support for regionalisation among citizens have been explained by economic factors – whereby living in a wealthier region increases the desire for greater autonomy in order to reduce wealth redistribution – and by regional identity, which suggests that citizens seek alignment between the community they identify with and those who govern them. However, the authors argue that these explanations are temporally static, while regionalisation is an on-going process that typically expands over time (see also Van Ingelgom & Dupuy 2014). As Svallfors (2010) demonstrated, institutional changes shape citizens'

[5] Studies within the traditional policy-centred approach have also addressed electoral behaviour, but as one of the possible outcomes of a given policy, rather than as a starting point from which to question institutional factors.

attitudes, and regionalisation – the shift from a unitary to a decentralised or federal state – clearly can influence citizens.

Taking the case of Belgium, which has recently moved from being a unitary state to a federal one, the authors identified the presence of a normative mechanism through political socialisation. Younger generations in the two main regions of Belgium, Wallonia and Flanders, who grew up in a federal state, are more supportive of regionalisation than older generations who experienced the unitary state. Surprisingly, this difference is not evident in Flanders, where young and old generations support regionalisation equally. Verhaegen et al. attribute this situation to the discourse of regional political elites. In Flanders, regionalisation has been a central topic in the political arena from the beginning, which has maintained its salience (visibility) and allowed the normative mechanism to work on older generations as well (see also Dupuy et al. 2021).

The importance of political discourse as a means of increasing the visibility of certain public policies or institutional changes has also been highlighted by Simonsen (2021), who applied policy feedback literature to electoral studies. The author examined the phenomenon whereby young Danish children of immigrants vote less than both their parents and their Danish peers without a migratory background. Moving beyond the traditional explanation of youth abstention as apathy or political disinterest, Simonsen demonstrated – through 71 in-depth interviews – how political discourse influences the electoral behaviour of minority youths. The salience of anti-immigrant rhetoric in Danish political discourse has made anti-immigration policies highly visible to minority youths, despite their low policy proximity, as they are not the direct target population (Soss & Schram 2007). This increased visibility shapes their electoral behaviour, leading many to abstain from voting (Dupuy & Van Ingelgom 2023). The further originality of Simonsen's work lies in emphasising the agency of citizens, which, when looking at concise data – not only aggregate but also individual-level – remains unexpressed and overlooked.

In conclusion, policy feedback literature – particularly considering its recent developments through applications in Western Europe – demonstrates strong explanatory potential in the fields of electoral behaviour and regionalisation studies. This suggests that it can help address the three limitations previously identified in the SOE model.

Brief conclusion to the theoretical framework

The application of policy-feedback literature to the phenomenon of regionalisation by Verhaegen et al. (2021), using Svallfors' normative mechanism (2010), is developed via a cross-national and longitudinal comparative design. This temporal comparison enables the authors to address the third limitation of the SOE model discussed above – its temporal staticity.

Furthermore, Simonsen's (2021; see also Sautter 2026a) qualitative, citizen-oriented approach, based on in-depth interviews, demonstrates two key benefits. First, it reveals the agency of citizens, fully responding to the call made by Mettler and Soss (2004: 64). Second, it highlights the huge explanatory power of capturing this agency within the political sphere – specifically, in understanding citizens' political decision-making processes (Berg & Ternullo 2025; Michener et al. 2022). This methodological approach helps to overcome the second limitation of the SOE model, that is, its neglect of citizens' agency.

Finally, Simonsen (2021) responds to Campbell's call for the definition of mechanisms, suggesting the use of "in-depth qualitative work" (2012: 345). The limitation highlighted by Campbell with regard to policy feedback studies corresponds to the first limitation of the SOE model. The new approach to the study of policy feedback developed in works by Verhaegen, Dupuy, Van Ingelgom, Teuber, and Simonsen adopts a citizen-oriented research design, and a methodology explicitly focused on defining mechanisms. This leads me to conclude that the policy feedback literature appears to offer all the necessary tools to address the limitations of the SOE model.

To conclude, considering the initial research question formulated in the introduction[6], and based on the findings presented in this first chapter, the research question can now be updated as follows:

> How do French citizens perceive and experience regionalisation and how does this influence their participation in regional elections? (R.Q.)

French regionalisation is not driven by regionalist parties representing a strong regional identity – as in the often-studied cases of Catalonia, the Basque Country, and Scotland – but rather by a top-down process of decentralisation initiated by political elites. This form of regionalisation aligns with a broader mainstream European and international trend towards decentralisation; characteristic of what Tatham and Mbaye (2018) describe as the "quieter" regions. Focusing on

[6] Why do the French not participate in regional elections if they claim to be more attached to the region than to the central state, if they declare that they have more confidence in the political representatives closest to them, and if the regions have never had more power than today?

this less salient type of regionalisation responds to the call made by Verhaegen et al. at the end of their study (2021: 271; see also Sautter 2026a), where they encourage examining the effects of institutional regionalisation in regions beyond the *usual suspects*.

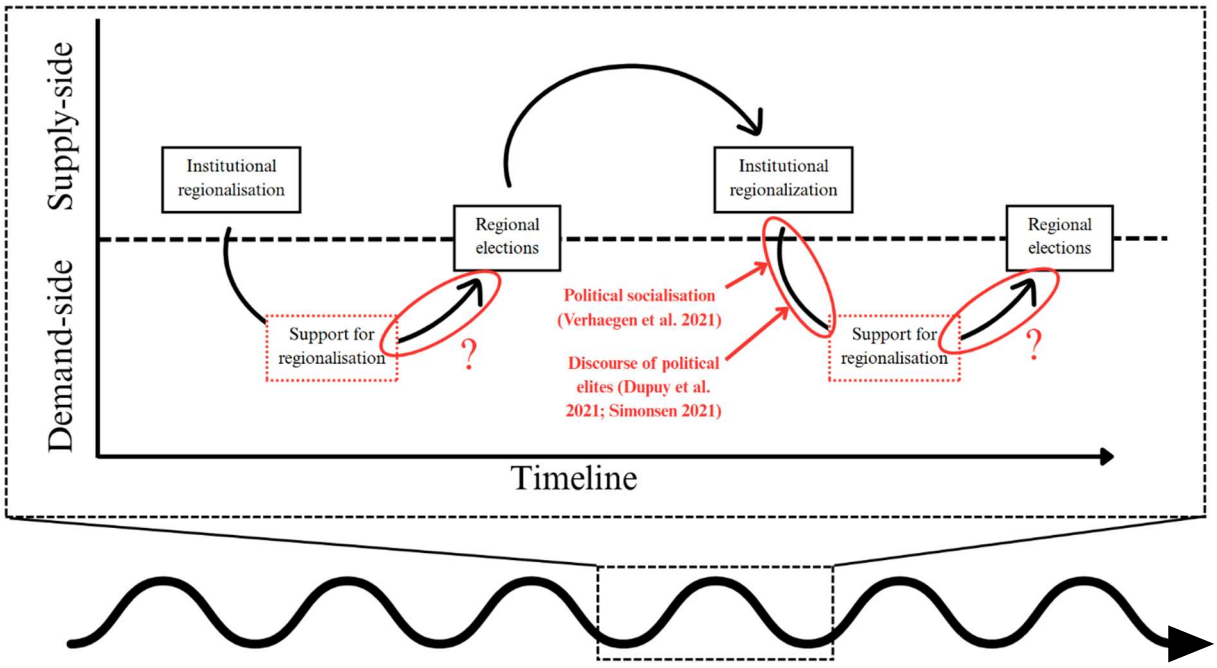


Figure 3 – Theoretical framework of regionalisation according to the policy-feedback approach

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research project adopts a constitutive approach (Walsh 2012), aimed at identifying the mechanisms that regulate citizens' electoral behaviour. It therefore employs a qualitative-analytical methodology centred on a "surprising" case study (Berg & Ternullo 2025; Timmermans & Tavory 2012), that is, a case whose socio-political and economic features exacerbate the explanatory limitations of the traditional theoretical model.

The case study focuses on the eastern part of the current French region of Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes (ARA), which corresponds to the territory of the former Rhône-Alpes region. The ARA region exhibits a set of features that, according to the SOE model, should lead to a particular type of electoral behaviour, yet this expected behaviour does not occur: it is the richest region in France after Île-de-France[7], citizens of the region seem to display a strong sense of regional attachment (Bianco & Thouilleux 2022), the region has much more power than it did forty years ago (Hooghe et al. 2016; Kernalegenn & Pasquier 2018); but voter turnout in regional election remains very low (Bristielle & Guerra 2021).

The ARA region is the result of the merger implemented in 2016 between the Auvergne region and the Rhône-Alpes region. It was an asymmetrical merger between two markedly different regions: the latter is much more economically and demographically developed than the former. The decision sparked, on the one hand, concerns in Auvergne about being forgotten and governed from afar; on the other hand, concerns in Rhône-Alpes about having to share its economic wealth with a region that is less industrially developed and infrastructurally isolated (Dubois 2017).

Within a single region, there are therefore two territories that retain the distinctive features of two separate regions in their own right. Consequently, the regional features described above that challenge the expectations of the SOE model appear to correspond more closely to the former Rhône-Alpes region than to the former Auvergne region. This study therefore focuses on the eastern part of the ARA region, which corresponds to the former Rhône-Alpes region (see Figure 4). Moreover, incorporating citizens from the former Auvergne region into the study would have increased the level of interpretive complexity by introducing a comparison between macro-territories that could have risked obscuring equally important micro-territorial differences (Sautter 2026a).

[7] "Citizens from donor regions and economically richer regions within any country may prefer more regional autonomy and lower inter-regional fiscal tranferts" (Schakel & Smith 2022: 652-653).

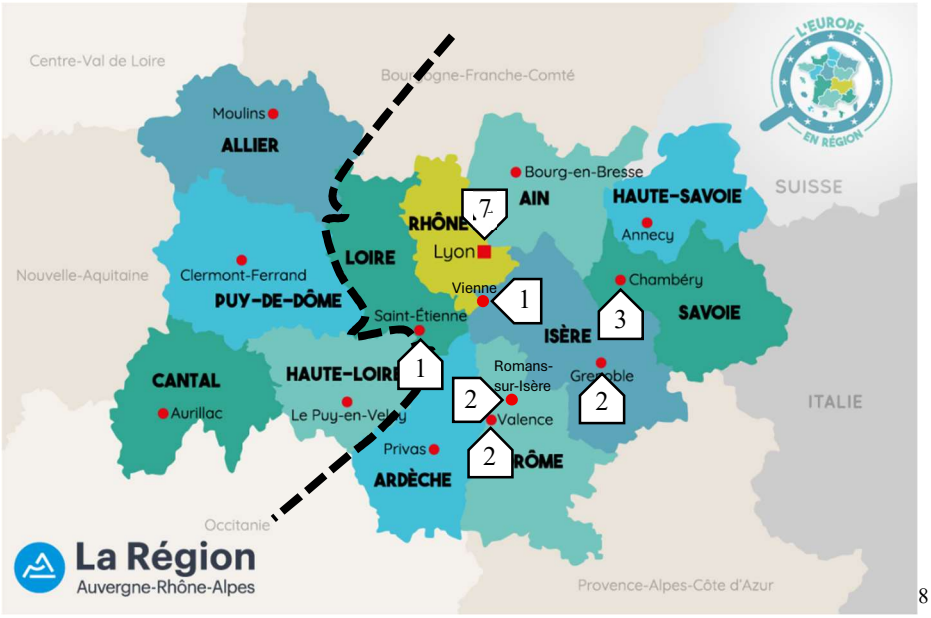


Figure 4

Map of the case study areas and number of respondents by place of residence

[8]

I did 17 in-depth, semi-structured interviews of a structured sample of *ordinary citizens*[9] from across the former Rhône-Alpes region. By ordinary citizens, I mean the opposite of the political elites, according to Cramer's definition: "people who spend a considerable amount of time, paid or otherwise, communicating with others about public affairs [e.g., elected and nonelected public officials, political consultants, journalists and bloggers, leaders of advocacy organizations, lobbyists, and social scientists who communicate often with the public at large]" (2024: 196).

The sample is not aimed at being statistically representative, but rather at maximising the range of citizens' life experiences (Berg & Ternullo 2025; Sautter 2026a: 12). Therefore, the sample prioritises diversity in terms of gender, levels of education, and occupation.

In addition, the sample aims to capture the variation in the historical moment in which citizens were politically socialised: the pre-regionalisation generation (pre-1970s/1980s); the *in itinere* regionalisation generation (between the 1970s/1980s and the 2000s) and the generation of the latest decentralisation reforms (since the 2000s). In fact, as highlighted in recent studies, the institutional context of socialisation is internalised by citizens as normal and more easily supported (Svallfors 2010; Verhaegen et al. 2021).

Finally, the sample aims to reflect the diversity of the places where citizens live: urban, peri-urban, and rural areas; but also, differences in city size, namely large cities (e.g. Lyon), medium-sized cities (e.g. Grenoble), and small cities (e.g. Romans-sur-Isère). Scholars have shown that

[8] https://www.touteleurope.eu/l-europe-en-region/l-europe-en-region-auvergne-rhone-alpes/

[9] However, I interviewed 18 citizens, as one interview in Lyon was conducted with two participants at the same time.

place matters not only for the material resources it provides to citizens, but also for its ability to generate meaningful everyday interactions between citizens and the state or the region (Michener 2018; Sautter 2026a).

The in-depth interviews will focus on citizens' experiences and perceptions of politics in all its aspects (policies, political discourse, etc.), their political behaviour and how they justify it (Simonsen 2021; Walsh 2012). The project seeks to collect citizens' subjective perceptions rather than factual information (Cramer 2024), responding to the research call to understand how citizens make sense of regionalisation (Henderson & Medeiros 2021; see also Michener et al. 2022).

The interview guide (see Appendix 1) includes an initial warm-up section to get to know the respondent (also to determine which types of policies they are most likely to interact with), followed by four sections, each of which will collect specific information.

1. The first concerns the citizens' relationship with politics in general: conception of politics, political participation, perception of politicians, etc.
2. The second captures citizens' understanding of regionalisation and their conception of the region.
3. The third focuses on citizens' interactions with the region, whether first-hand or not.
4. The fourth section is devoted to citizens' electoral participation at national and sub-national levels.

Throughout the interview period, I modified the interview guide several times in order to make the questions less academic, make the conversations more fluid and, consequently, facilitate more spontaneous responses from participants. The second and third sections were revised the most, as they constituted the core of the interview. The first interviews confirmed my initial expectations: given the lack, in France, of a public discourse on regionalisation comparable to that found in Flanders (Dupuy et al. 2021; Sautter 2026a), as well as the predominantly top-down way in which decentralisation was implemented by political elites (Cole 2006; Pasquier 2012), French citizens, who had been less or not at all exposed to public debate on regionalisation and the role of regions, would have difficulty discussing these issues. Therefore, whereas I initially asked participants to spontaneously recall their experiences with the region, observing their difficulty in doing so led me to subsequently compile a list of regional policies that I could suggest to them at the beginning of this part of the interview. Nevertheless, the interview remained highly flexible, allowing respondents to recall the experiences they considered most relevant. This was intended to adhere to the *citizen-oriented* approach of policy-feedback studies on mass publics (Michener et al. 2022), which seeks to identify the

policies that matter to citizens rather than to *test* the effects of specific policies on them (Dupuy et al. 2022; Dupuy & Van Ingelgom 2023).

I conducted face-to-face interviews in March and April 2026. Participants were recruited using snowball sampling. The interviews were conducted in French and recorded, each interview lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour and 50 minutes. They were conducted in locations chosen by the participants, including their homes, parks and cafés, in order to make them feel as comfortable as possible. As the interviews took place shortly after the French municipal elections in March 2026, many of the participants' examples of their experiences with politics and public institutions referred to this electoral event.

The sample is balanced in terms of gender, age and occupation, but relatively homogeneous in terms of socio-economic characteristics. Indeed, many respondents have a higher education qualification, and none report being in a situation of socio-economic hardship. Furthermore, all participants live in urban areas (see Figure 4). Although some currently reside in rural areas, they have an urban background, and their current place of residence is the result of a deliberate choice. They can therefore be considered part of the so-called "neo-rural" population (Rivera Escribano & Mormont 2007).

N.		Chambery	Grenoble	Grand Lyon	Romans-sur-Isère	Saint-Etienne	Valence	Vienne
1	Philippe							
2	Pierre							
3	Sophie							
4	Magali							
5	Manon							
6	Romain							
7	Grégoire							
8	Gabrielle							
9	Nicolas							
10	Jean							
11	Augustin							
12	Amélie							
13	Jacques							
14	Fanny							
15	Jeanne							
16	Violaine							
17	Armand							
18	Aline							

4		Pre-regionalisation generation (pre-1970s/1980s)
6		*In itinere* regionalisation generation (between the 1970s/1980s and the 2000s)
8		Generation of the latest decentralisation reforms (since the 2000s)

I transcribed the interview recordings (see Appendix 2) and conducted a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006) in order to identify common sense-making patterns among citizens regarding their experiences with the state and the region, as well as their political behaviour. The analysis was conducted within an abductive approach (Timmermans & Tavory 2012, 2022). This iterative and controlled approach facilitates the identification of surprising patterns through which existing theory can be further developed and refined (Dupuy & Van Ingelgom, 2024; Maes et al. 2024; Sautter 2026a, 2026b).

FINDINGS

All participants, whatever their age, reported that they usually vote in every election, and the majority considered electoral participation to be very important. The 18 participants therefore correspond to the so-called civic citizens. Moreover, they were mostly supportive of regionalisation, in line with the findings of the latest IFOP survey (2025), which indicates that a majority of French citizens share this preference. However, surprisingly, more than half of the participants had no recollection of the 2021 regional elections (n = 10); only 5 participants remembered the elections and their voting choice, whereas 3 participants had no idea that the regional authority was elected by the citizens.

To contextualise and understand these voting behaviours, I will present the results of the thematic analysis following the logic of the research question: How do French citizens perceive and experience regionalisation, and how does this influence their participation in regional elections?

Therefore, in the next section I will expose the participants' understanding of regionalisation; the following section will be devoted to their conception of the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region; the section after will focus on the participants' perception of the regional authority; and I will conclude with the section on their electoral behaviours.

Understanding of Regionalisation

Participants justify the existence of regions in France by citing "utilitarian" arguments relating to greater efficiency and responsiveness in government action at local level (Guinjuan & Rodon 2014; Reuchamps et al. 2021; Sautter 2026).

In interviews, they mention three main arguments. Firstly, the simplification of territorial management and regional-central government interactions through the merging of departments into regions and the fusion of regions. Secondly, regional political representatives provide better representation because they are closer to the people than their national counterparts and therefore have a better understanding of citizens' needs in the region and can respond to them more effectively. Thirdly, regions enable the sharing of resources and services between neighbouring territories, thereby achieving economies of scale.

The participants reasoned abstractly on these issues, without drawing on their experiences with the regional authorities, but rather by making comparisons with other levels of government or different regional contexts.

Interview with Fanny (65 years, architect, Valence)

Fanny *[…] Comment peut-on gérer, assimiler quelque chose d'aussi vaste [La région Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes] ?... Et en même temps… Alors je peux peut-être revenir un peu en arrière sur les communes, parce que ça me fait penser à ça. À Saint-Julien, dans le Vercors, 250 habitants. La commune d'à côté, Saint-Martin-en-Vercors, 400 ou 600 habitants. Il a été question de réunir ces communes. Et je comprends tout à fait que financièrement, ça peut être quelque chose de très intéressant, de mutualiser des choses […].*

Interview with Amélie (25 years, student, Lyon)

Author *Et pourquoi selon toi avoir des régions… Pourquoi il y a des régions en France ? Pourquoi avoir créé des régions en France ?*

Amélie *[…] En vrai je ne sais pas du tout parce qu'on n'a pas forcément… Tu vois là juste je pense par exemple à la Bretagne où là il y a une identité de région et du coup ça pourrait faire sens tu vois. Mais en vrai à part le côté… Je ne sais pas, mais je ne sais même pas s'il y a des trucs, d'un point de vue économique, tu vois, de… bon beh on va regrouper des départements pour qu'il y ait des solidarités entre les départements. Franchement, je n'en ai aucune idée vraiment.*

Interview with Manon (21 years, student, Grenoble)

Manon *Je pense que ça rassemble les gens quand même la région. Enfin bon, pas la région Auvergne Rhône Alpes, mais par exemple, bah c'est peut-être plus lié à l'histoire de la région. Mais par exemple, je ne sais pas, j'ai un pote alsacien. Et pareil, ça le rassemble. Enfin, ça… il se sent alsacien et sa famille, elle le revendique. Son grand-père, il parle alsacien, je ne sais pas, mais c'est comme en Haute-Savoie… Bah du coup, ce n'est pas la région, mais je ne sais pas, tu sens qu'il y a vraiment une identité. Il y a même des gens qui parlent le patois […]*

Author *Mais alors pourquoi avoir des régions ? C'est qu'un facteur identitaire ?*

Manon *Bah non, c'est aussi pour, comme on disait tout à l'heure, pour organiser le fonctionnement de ce territoire-là. Et puis peut-être qu'aussi, vu que on est des territoires qui sont quand même très différents en France, ça permet de représenter tes intérêts à une échelle plus petite.*

Interview with Romain (55 years, manager, Lyon)

Romain *[…] Moi, quand je vois de plus en plus de communes, où les petites communes sont obligées de se fusionner ou sont centralisées parce qu'elles n'ont même plus de maires, moi je me dis, nous, notre pouvoir régional qu'on a, gardons-le le plus longtemps possible. Un jour on nous dira peut-être un jour, il n'y a plus de sous, on a plus besoin des régions et tout sera fait par l'Etat. Et puis nous on a quand même des gens qui sont au cœur des régions et qui connaissent.*

In this final sentence the participant suggested the regional level of government as a response to the complaint raised by all the participants against national politicians, namely that they are disconnected from local issues and the everyday lives of citizens. In fact, in the first part of the interview, which focused on respondents' relationship with politics, participants, regardless of

their political affiliation, expressed strong disappointment with the performance of the central state, criticising its lack of responsiveness to the needs of French citizens.

Half of the participants described the decision-making capacity of the regions in France as limited and complained that decentralisation has been implemented in a complex manner, making it difficult to know who is responsible for what. This perception takes the form of a discrepancy between what the region ought to be able to do – the expectations outlined at the start of this section – and what participants perceive the region to actually do.

It appears that regionalisation, as it currently exists, does not ensure better political representation – and therefore greater consideration of, and responsiveness to, citizens' needs – as the central state continues to have the final say.

Interview with Jean (25 years, employee, Lyon)

Jean *[…] chacune des régions propose des choses différentes et essaye d'agir sur leur propre territoire, mais dès qu'il y a des réformes, des lois, des responsabilités, des choses à mettre en place, c'est au-dessus que ça agit. Et là, pour le coup, bah les régions n'ont aucun pouvoir de décision par rapport à ça. Ils peuvent faire entendre leurs expériences, mais en France, ces régions ont moins, peut-être moins de pouvoir […].*

Moreover, the lack of explanation by all participants regarding the logic behind merging the Auvergne and Rhône-Alpes regions emphasises the feeling that regionalisation is beyond their control, decided elsewhere and highly changeable, as is evident in the extract from Romain's interview (55 years, manager, Lyon). This discrepancy did not leave the participants indifferent; some of them viewed those situations – the fact that the central state continues to interfere in regional affairs and the institutional complexity of decentralisation – in a negative way, seeing them as another demonstration of the lack of transparency and honesty among politicians in general. It does not matter that new political entities closer to the citizens have been created, as they will work as they do at national level: neglecting citizens and pursuing their own interests.

Interview with Pierre (30 years, merchant, Chambery)

Pierre *[…] l'administration en France c'est une telle galère, tu ne sais jamais qui est responsable de quoi si c'est l'agglo, si c'est la communauté de communes. Il y a un nombre de termes pas possible. Le département, la région, la ville, tu ne sais jamais si c'est je ne sais plus quoi… De toute façon les gens, ils se passent des trucs… Globalement, ils ne décident pas de grand-chose. Tu vois. Je n'ai pas l'impression qu'on nous demande trop l'avis.*

Interview with Grégoire (55 years, musician, Lyon)

Grégoire *[…] Je ne saurais pas dire depuis combien de temps on nous parle de la décentralisation et on met en place des structures peut-être de plus en plus*

indépendantes de l'État, comme les départements et les régimes. Mais finalement, ce sont des structures qui sont toujours dépendantes du budget de l'État, énormément. […] Pour moi, c'est un peu une multiplication du Parlement en fait, quelque part. C'est un tremplin politique pour certains. Quand tu es président d'une région, tu peux prétendre à concourir à une présidence du parti ou une présidence de la République.

The complexity of the French decentralisation system is seen as a deliberate choice of politicians at all levels of government. Some participants expressed a clear disinterest in what the region does, as they felt that paying attention to regional politics would only lead to them being taken for a ride and wasting their time.

Interview with Jeanne (63 years, employee, Saint-Etienne)

Jeanne *Comme je vous dis, j'ai pas suffisamment de temps pour m'y intéresser, puis je vois pas ce qui pourrait, ce qu'on pourrait trouver d'intéressant dans ces espaces… Où effectivement, la décentralisation, je ne m'y suis pas intéressée de près, mais je me dis que ça a été un vaste échec en fait, parce que je trouve que c'est quand même l'Etat qui continue à décider qu'est-ce qu'il attribue ou pas comme financement […].*

The failure of regionalisation in meeting expectations confirms and fuels citizens' negative sentiments – scepticism, disappointment and mistrust – towards the current state of French politics as a whole. This type of narrative appears to correspond to the third logic of understanding regionalisation recently highlighted by Sautter (2026) in looking at the Belgian case, namely the "affective-cynical" one. While it is not surprising that, in the French context, citizens understand regionalisation from a utilitarian perspective, as this is consistent with the justification for decentralisation used by political elites in public discourse (Cole 2006; Guinjoan & Rodon 2014; Pasquier 2012), the identification of an affective-cynical perspective was less expected.

Conceptions of the Region

Interview with Manon (21 years, student, Grenoble)

Author *Quand je dis la région Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes, qu'est-ce que ça t'évoque?*

Manon *Ça m'évoque une énorme région. Pour moi, c'est énorme. Sauf qu'au début, en primaire, on apprenait et ce n'était pas encore Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes. C'était juste, on était juste en Rhône-Alpes et pour moi, c'est énorme […].*

Interview with Romain (55 years, manager, Lyon)

Author *Quand je vous dis la région Auvergne Rhône-Alpes, ça vous évoque quoi?*

Romain *Alors ça m'évoque un changement parce que moi j'ai toujours connu la région Rhône-Alpes. […] Et en fin de compte, à l'école, en 5ème et en 4ème, on nous apprenait les régions. On nous disait : regardez la région, maintenant vous êtes dans la région Rhône-Alpes, il y a huit départements qu'il fallait connaître […].*

When I first mentioned the name of the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region, participants spontaneously associated it with one or more of the following four elements. First, the institutional fusion of the former Auvergne and Rhône-Alpes regions. Second, the description of the region as "large" or "immense". Third, the association of the region's name with the politician Laurent Wauquiez, who was president of the region until July 2024, when he was elected as a member of the National Assembly. Finally, the association of the region's name with its blue-and-white logo. Participants perceived the region as a political creation. The adjectives used to describe the region's size are always linked to the enlargement of its territory following the 2015 fusion political reform. Meanwhile, the logo – which participants reported seeing everywhere – was associated by them with the regional government's desire to increase its visibility across the regional territory and to "create an identity at a later stage" (Jean, 25 years, employee, Lyon).

Interview with Manon (21 years, student, Grenoble)

Author	*Et pourquoi tu me parles autant de la Bretagne?*
Manon	*[…] C'est vrai que je te parle tout le temps de la Bretagne. Parce que pour le coup, je trouve que c'est une vraie région, la Bretagne.*
Author	*Pourquoi?*
Manon	*Mais parce que genre ils se sentent bretons, ils sont fiers d'être bretons et je ne sais pas, j'ai l'impression qu'il y a plein de trucs qui, genre les autoroutes, ils les revendiquent, en mode c'est gratuit.*

By comparing Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes with other French regions that have a clearly defined regional identity, and by considering that the panels displaying the region's logos serve to create a regional identity – hitherto absent – the participants showed that, in their view, the region lacks a shared identity. The lack of common features was evident during the exercise in which participants were asked to describe the region, as they tended to speak about it in vague and general terms.

In fact, participants mainly described the region in terms of five characteristics: its large territorial size; its diversity, reflected in comments such as "there's everything" and "there's something for everyone"; its economic prosperity; the beauty of its natural landscapes, particularly its mountains; and, finally, its favourable geographical location for travel, as it is located between the north and the south of France and is close to several neighbouring countries. Furthermore, participants' descriptions of the region largely reflected the geographical boundaries of the former Rhône-Alpes region, with frequent references to the Alps and the Rhône Valley. By contrast, Auvergne was described as a separate and distinct area, perceived

as more isolated, less accessible, and less economically developed than Rhône-Alpes. Most participants showed considerable difficulty in internalising the current boundaries of the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region. Many stated that they do not visit the western part of the region regularly, unlike the eastern part, which they reported visiting more frequently.

Perception of Regional Authority

As participants view the region as a political creation, it is even more important to examine how they perceive the political authority governing it.

In almost all the interviews, at some point participants mentioned the politician Laurent Wauquiez. He was identified as the president of the region, and all regional policies were directly attributed to him by participants. Of the respondents who mentioned him, only three were aware that he had left office as president of the region in 2024, but they were unable to name his successor. In fact, he remains highly visible in regional politics, as he has held the role of Special Advisor to the region since 2024.

Participants' knowledge of his political actions and their opinions of Laurent Wauquiez followed two distinct patterns. On the one hand, there were participants who held a negative view of him and referred to his more radical decisions compared with the past, particularly in relation to cultural policies – funding cuts and funding allocated in accordance with political loyalty – and educational policies, namely the withdrawal of regional funding from Sciences Po Grenoble. These respondents therefore had a more in-depth understanding of his political actions and were able to identify his party affiliation (right-wing party).

Interview with Magali (24 years, student, Grenoble)

Author *Tu as évoqué vite fait les décisions de Laurent Wauquiez, comme quoi ?*

Magali *Par exemple, je suis à Sciences Po, il y a quelques années il y a eu… […] Il y a quelques années, je crois qu'il y a eu des trucs, mais débiles, et Laurent Wauquiez a décidé de couper les bourses pour les étudiants qui partaient en Erasmus. Et ce genre de trucs quoi. Parce qu'ils voient les étudiants à Science Po Grenoble, comme des menaces, ou wokistes, ou je ne sais pas quoi, et je trouve ça… Et puis il a coupé les subventions pour les assos, enfin juste il fait des trucs du genre de droite quoi.*

On the other hand, the remaining participants had no opinion of this politician and less knowledge of his political decisions. In fact, they could not cite any examples of regional policies that would allow them to identify his party affiliation. When some of them declared that he belongs to a right-wing party, it was because they had already read or heard that before.

Interview with Augustin (30 years, freelance, Lyon)

Author *Laurent Wauquiez, c'est qui cette personne ? Qu'est-ce que tu sais de lui ?*

Augustin *Je ne sais vraiment pas grand-chose. Je vois à quoi il ressemble. Mais sinon, je ne sais pas du tout. Je pense qu'il est… enfin c'est même sûr qu'il ne fasse pas partie d'un des deux extrêmes. Je pense qu'il est… je ne sais pas entre la droite et la gauche.*

Author *Si tu réfléchis à des politiques qu'il pourrait avoir fait tu n'arrives pas à le positionner à droite ou à gauche ?*

Augustin *Bah en fait… non pas vraiment… pas vraiment… en fait je n'arrive pas trop à dire ce qu'il a pu faire. Vu que je ne sais pas trop quand est-ce qu'il est arrivé et tout ça aussi, je ne vois pas si avant c'était différent.*

In describing regional action, participants' remarks revealed a paradox, as well illustrated by the following two extracts:

Interview with Gabrielle (45 years, actress, Lyon)

Gabrielle *[…] Mais du coup, on a l'impression que la région est partout et un peu nulle part. Je ne sais pas comment dire, il y a cette espèce d'impression ambivalente.*

Interview with Augustin (30 years, freelance, Lyon)

Augustin *[…] Et du coup, en fait, j'ai l'impression qu'ils sont à la fois partout, mais nulle part, tu vois.*

On the one side, participants were aware of the regional government's recent policy to increase its visibility by requiring the region's logo to be displayed whenever it provides financial support for a project. This decision has, in fact, led to an increase in the number of signs displaying the region's logo throughout the regional territory, to the extent that it has become the subject of mockery on social media because of their perceived overabundance.

Interview with Aline (34 years, employee, Vienne)

Aline *Ça m'évoque le logo bleu sur les trains [rires]. Ça m'évoque ça. Parce qu'ils en ont mis de partout, ils en ont mis de partout. Et d'ailleurs, il y en a qui rigolent sur ça en disant il y a une grosse communication justement en disant la région finance ça pour vous, pour améliorer la finance de la région. Investis dans ça et tout.*

Interview with Gabrielle (45 years, actress, Lyon)

Gabrielle *[…] C'est qu'il y a eu une campagne de pub sur ce que fait la région. Je veux dire, on faisait des blagues nous-mêmes, parce qu'en fait, le petit encart bleu avec la région Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes fait ci, fait ça, mais des fois tu as l'impression que si tu vas aux toilettes, tu repars, tu as le logo sur la fesse quoi, tellement c'est de partout.*

On the other side, participants commonly had trouble identifying regional policies, that is, understanding what the region actually does.

Interview with Nicolas (26 years, employee, Lyon)

Nicolas *[…] C'est à dire que oui tu vois je t'ai dit j'avais deux, trois trucs où je sais que là-haut, la région ils font des trucs et c'est parce que je les ai ressentis une ou deux fois comme ça… mais sinon en soi je ne sais pas ce qu'ils font.*

Interview with Fanny (65 years, architect, Valence)

Fanny *[…] s'il y a une étape, une tranche politique, c'est celle-ci [la région] qui me passe complètement au-dessus de la tête. Je pense que la politique très locale de la mairie, je la ressens et l'étage président-député aussi et là au milieu c'est beaucoup plus flou pour moi. C'est vraiment quelque chose que je ne perçois pas.*

Interview avec Aline (34 years, employee, Vienne)

Aline *Après, au niveau régional, ce ne sera que de la théorie, mais c'est vrai que je ne vois pas directement quel impact ça a […].*

The regional policies most frequently cited and most easily identified by participants as regional competences were the governance of high schools and regional trains. Regarding the former, participants reported that it was the classic example used at school to explain decentralisation; regarding the latter, their knowledge stemmed from the fact that regional trains are branded with the region's logo and that they hold regional rail passes, which provide substantial discounts. The display of the logo also helped participants identify other actions undertaken by the region, such as the renovation of a road, the construction of a sports ground, or the installation of security cameras at a station. Identifying these regional actions, which span a wide range of policy fields, did not clarify the regional authority's competences for participants. It appears to reinforce their perception that the region acts as a territorial coordination body.

Interview with Augustin (30 years, freelance, Lyon)

Augustin *Mais c'est vrai en fait quand on y repense la région elle est quand même à plein d'endroits que… ouais que je vois quoi… Enfin ils sont souvent en partie responsables de beaucoup de travaux… peu pensés, enfin peu pensés. […] Quand j'y pense ça ne me fait pas penser à la région qui s'occupe de ça quoi mais en fait ils permettent sûrement ça un peu plus.*

It happens that seeing the regional logo causes confusion rather than helping participants to identify the regional initiative.

Interview with Violaine (60 years, departmental official, Romans-sur-Isère)

Violaine *Ah bah ça veut dire qu'à chaque fois qu'ils mettent leur logo, normalement ils financent quelque chose. Alors c'est vrai que ces panneaux, ils en ont peut-être mis aux routes… mais routes non, puisque les routes c'est département et les routes nationales c'est l'État. Donc je ne sais pas qu'est-ce qui finance la région pour la route en fait… Je pense qu'ils ne financent rien…*

Electoral Behaviours: French regional election, an election that leave no trace

Interview with Jean (25 years, employee, Lyon)

Jean *[…] Mais sinon, tu vois, tu l'as remarqué, je n'ai pas cité les [élections] régionales, c'est parce que j'ai peu conscience de ce que c'est, je suis quasiment sûr d'avoir voté pour les régionales, mais je n'arrive même pas à te dire si c'est réellement le cas.*

Interview with Romain (55 years, manager, Lyon)

Romain *Donc le choix il n'a pas duré longtemps. Je n'ai même pas regardé son programme, je t'avouerais que je m'en foutais, j'ai vu l'homme [Laurent Wauquiez], le parti et puis voilà. Je me suis dit c'est celui-là.*

Interview with Sophie (24 years, unemployed, Chambery)

Author *Est-ce que t'as voté lors des dernières élections régionales ?*

Sophie *Est-ce qu'il y a des élections régionales ?*

Author *Oui.*

Sophie *Arrête. Les présidents de régions, ils ne sont pas désignés par le président [de la République] ?*

Most participants could not recall the last regional election (n = 10); five participants clearly remembered how they had voted and why, while three participants were unaware that regional elections existed.

In response to the questions, "Which elections do you prefer?" and "Which elections make you most keen to go and vote?", most participants cited national or municipal elections. They referred to the concrete impact these elections have on citizens' everyday lives and the fact that the victory of one party or another makes a significant difference to the policies that are implemented.

Interview with Romain (55 years, manager, Lyon)

Romain *Je pense que quand même, les présidentielles et les députés, oui, parce que c'est ce qui peut faire en fin de compte de basculer un pays dans un sens ou dans l'autre. Et puis comme ce que je dis, les conséquences sont beaucoup plus importantes… Je pense que les conséquences régionales, les conséquences régionales, que ça bascule d'un côté à l'autre, je ne vois pas réellement ce que*

ça me changera dans le quotidien. Ils vont continuer à développer les écoles, ils vont se développer ci ou ça, ce qui n'est pas du tout la même chose qu'un pays. Un pays, il te vote des lois quoi, ils te votent des lois, ils te votent des impôts, ils te votent des choses qui vont jouer sur ton avenir.

Interview with Manon (21 years, student, Grenoble)

Manon *Et là, les élections, par exemple à Grenoble, ça m'a beaucoup pris la tête avec le fait que Carignon [right-wing party candidate] il pouvait revenir et tout, et que ça allait mettre en enfin que ça allait changer un peu… […] Je me suis dit peut-être que en fait, je sais pas, ça va changer quelque chose dans la manière de vivre […].*

Conversely, participants perceived regional elections as having less of an impact on people's everyday lives. In other words, they believed that, regardless of which party won the elections, policies would be implemented in much the same way. The regional government seems to be considered as an apolitical, technical institutional body.

Interview with Grégoire (55 years, musician, Lyon)

Grégoire *J'ai l'impression que ce président-là ou un autre, tant qu'il ne décide pas de privatiser les lignes, comme c'est le cas dans le sud de la France, à la frontière italienne, à Nice.*

It is radical policies – that are those that differ significantly from previous ones – that lead participants to take a stance on candidates or parties in regional elections. This is, in fact, what has happened in the field of cultural and educational policies, which participants assessed as negative and right-wing in orientation. These radical policies make people realise that certain situations they had taken for granted are not necessarily so, and that, in the event of budget cuts, the absence of such policies has a tangible impact on citizens' everyday lives.

Furthermore, some respondents attribute their low propensity to vote in regional elections to the absence of major regional issues that would push citizens to call for change.

Interview with Amélie (25 years, student, Lyon)

Amélie *Enfin, j'ai l'impression que t'as ce truc de bah pourquoi aussi j'irai voter ? Parce que ça va, tu vois. Alors que si t'es vraiment dans une situation genre des régions qui ont été désindustrialisées où vraiment là ça ne va pas, ça peut aussi être une voie de montrer que ça ne va pas et t'es en mode je veux que ça change tu vois. Alors que là t'es un peu : bon au pire peu importe ce qu'il y a, ça va tu vois. T'as un truc que tu ne vois pas trop, si ça ne t'impacte pas aussi, bon…*

The participants' proposals for improving the regional authority's work are based on what they know and have experienced. Firstly, considering the current situation in the region, they propose, for example, reducing spending on security measures (security cameras, police, etc.) and increasing funding for cultural initiatives. Secondly, they refer to what is being done in

other regions, such as the proposal to make the motorway free of charge, as in Brittany. However, participants noted that all French regions have scaled back their spending, as required by central state, who is seeking to reduce its public debt. None of the respondents suggested moving a policy currently conducted by central state to the region. Yet, at the beginning of the interviews, when discussing what the central state does, participants were far from lacking examples of things that the state does poorly. In fact, when asked, "Which issues deserve the attention of political decision-makers today?", the response typically began with, "There are many… where should I start…". Participants, therefore, do not seem to have high expectations of what the regional authority can achieve. They do not perceive the region as an alternative to the central state in areas where the latter performs poorly.

As regards regional voting choices – either past voting choices or future voting intentions – Laurent Wauquiez is the central figure around whom participants take a stance, for or against. The participants who voted against the former regional president did so because of the regional policies he had put in place. The other two, however, justified their vote based on issues relating to other levels of government.

Interview with Aline (34 years, employee, Vienne)

Aline *Les régionales, c'était parce que… Comme je t'ai dit, c'est les municipales qui nous encourageaient à dire : votez pour la même famille politique que nous, parce que derrière ça permet de faciliter la concrétisation de certains projets au niveau de votre ville. Donc je n'ai pas cherché…*

Interview with Romain (55 years, manager, Lyon)

Romain *Je savais que c'était… Wauquiez qui se présentait et qu'il était ancré dans la région depuis longtemps. Donc je me suis dit, ce n'est pas un inconnu. Et puis je me suis dit, il a des ambitions nationales, alors il n'a jamais pu être ministre je crois, à son grand désespoir à lui, mais je m'étais dit quand on a un président de région qui est ministre, généralement ça apporte beaucoup plus de facilité quand même aux régions dans lesquelles on se trouve. Donc le choix il n'a pas duré longtemps. Je n'ai même pas regardé son programme, je t'avouerais que je m'en foutais, j'ai vu l'homme, le parti et puis voilà. Je me suis dit c'est celui-là.*

The electoral behaviour described in these two extracts reflects a "second-order thinking" approach to the regional election; in other words, the two participants had chosen to vote based on what was happening at other levels of government, which they regarded as more important, "first-order" decision-making levels. Meanwhile, the first three participants' electoral behaviour was guided by "first-order thinking", with their voting choices influenced by what had happened at the regional level.

DISCUSSION

Completely Beyond the SOE model?

This research starts with the question: why do French citizens not vote in regional elections? The results show that citizens perceive these elections as less important than national and municipal ones. They therefore *rank* elections according to a criterion of perceived importance; this mechanism corresponds to and confirms the "importance" mechanism hypothesised in the SOE model (Golder et al. 2017; Schakel & Romanova 2023). Having verified the model's central mechanism, the initial question can be reformulated in line with the model's logical approach, namely: why do French citizens have a "second-order thinking" in regional elections? Participants approach national and municipal elections with a "first-order thinking", considering them to be more important (Cabeza 2018). Participants define the importance of an election through the perceived *impact* that the level of government has on their everyday lives. In other words, the ability of that level of government to significantly alter their everyday lives. The results show that participants actually think about elections in terms of what is "at stake", confirming the findings of previous quantitative studies on electoral behaviour (Andersen et al. 2014; Henderson & McEwen 2010, 2015).

In short, citizens determine the extent to which a particular government can impact their everyday lives; this defines the "stakes" in the election of that government – the greater the impact, the higher the "stakes"; the higher the "stakes", the more important the election. Participants perceive the regional level of government as lacking the capacity to have a significant impact on their everyday lives, whereas they perceive the national and municipal levels as being able to do so; consequently, the "stakes" in a regional election are lower, as is its perceived importance.

The next step is to understand how citizens form their assessment of the impact of a particular level of government. They do not follow legislative works at regional level and then observe that nothing changes in their everyday lives; rather, no political decision that captures their attention – because it affects their everyday lives – usually comes from the regional level. Furthermore, they do not tend to think about the *region Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes*, as it is perceived as a political construct – artificial and lacking its own historical and cultural identity. Therefore, if the region does not show itself to citizens, the findings suggest that it remains completely invisible.

For some years now, the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region has been implementing a visibility campaign, systematically featuring the regional logo on all the region's initiatives. Nowadays, when driving around the region, it is easy to identify the policies implemented by the regional

government. This regional initiative provides a natural experiment to test the findings of previous research, which suggests that second-order electoral behaviour at regional level may be attributable to citizens' lack of understanding of "who does what", given the multiplication of political decision-makers resulting from decentralisation (Charbonneau & Anderson 2021; León & Jurado 2021; León 2011, 2012, 2018). In other words, decentralisation makes it more difficult for citizens to identify the decision-maker responsible for a particular policy because there are now far more of them than before; therefore, if citizens could more easily identify who did what, they would vote more in a "first-order" manner – i.e. basing their vote on the performance of the government to be elected rather than on what happens at higher or lower levels.

In the case of this region, which communicates a lot about what it does, confusion regarding the chain of responsibility should be minimised; citizens are able to know precisely what the region does and choose how to vote accordingly. However, this is not the case: despite claiming to see the region's logo everywhere, participants have little awareness of what the region actually does and cannot remember if they voted or not. This is despite the fact that they usually are interested in politics and have a university education – characteristics that make them 'politically sophisticated' citizens, who should, in theory, be better placed to understand the confusion surrounding decentralisation (Liñeira 2016). Therefore, it appears that the issue of low voter turnout does not lie in citizens' limited knowledge of the region's policies and is thus not a matter of educating citizens about what the region does. This provides a better understanding of the unexplained finding reported by Golder et al. (2017) regarding the lack of effect of party mobilisation on citizens' electoral behaviour. In other words, the authors found that for citizens, meeting the parties competing in the regional election – and thus having the opportunity to be made aware of what was "at stake" – did not influence their electoral behaviour.

The issue is not so much the citizens' lack of understanding of regionalisation and the consequent need to educate them about it, but rather the region itself – what it does and how it does it. The issue is not the citizens' knowledge of the impact, but the impact itself. It seems clear that, in the eyes of citizens – who are fully capable of understanding the impact of regional government – this impact is simply considered too weak. This observation is reinforced by the fact that when participants are significantly affected by regional policies, they correctly attribute the blame, as in the case of regional subsidies cuts in culture or education.

Therefore, although regionalisation in France has been steadily increasing for over 40 years and the regions have been accumulating ever more competences and political responsibilities

(Hooghe et al. 2016; Pasquier 2012), it is clear from the results that decentralisation has been implemented in fields that citizens do not perceive as having a significant impact on their everyday lives. This study investigates the mechanism driving the causal link between the level of decentralisation and regional electoral turnout – a link that has been widely demonstrated by several generations of scholars applying the SOE model to regional elections (Henderson & McEwen 2015; Golder et al. 2017; Schakel & Romanova 2023). The underlying mechanism hitherto hypothesised and demonstrated here is as follows: with a higher level of decentralisation, the regional government has greater opportunities to legislate on issues that significantly impact citizens' everyday lives; the more the regional government is perceived by citizens as capable of changing their everyday lives, then the higher the "stakes" in regional elections will be, as the victory of one party or candidate over another will change the status quo. Finally, an election with higher "stakes" is one that citizens perceive as more important; therefore, it is more important to vote.

The SOE model predicts that the results of a second-order election will lead to: 1) low voter turnout; 2) greater electoral success for opposition parties at national level; 3) greater success for small parties (Reif & Schmitt 1980). Although voter turnout in the French regional elections is consistent with the model's prediction, the other two points are not particularly supported by the electoral results. Gougou (2023) highlights how, in contrast, the most recent 2021 regional elections in France revealed two patterns not predicted by the SOE model: the widespread success of incumbent candidates and split-ticket voting between regional and departmental elections (see also Linek & Škvrňák 2024 for the Czech Republic). Gougou demonstrates that the US model of candidate-centred politics (Wattenberg 1991) provides a better explanation of electoral results than the SOE model. According to the American model, the decline of political parties leads citizens to vote on the basis of candidates' characteristics rather than party ideology; this would explain why incumbent candidates are more likely to be re-elected – as their position makes them more visible to citizens – and why citizens vote for opposing parties at different levels during the same election period. The findings of this study confirm the relevance of this approach: the former president of the *Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes* region, and current special adviser, Laurent Wauquiez, is the only regional politician recognised by participants across the political landscape, and their voting choice is determined by their stance on him – for or against. This study highlights the mechanism behind the phenomenon of split-ticket voting and the re-election of incumbent candidates, emphasised by Gougou in French sub-national elections; in fact, it reveals that respondents are generally unable to attribute regional government policies to specific parties, arguing that it matters little which party is in

power, as policies will be implemented in the same way regardless. Consequently, the regional government seems to be perceived as a depoliticised entity – that is, as a place of non-choice where regional policies are implemented in the only way possible (Palonen et al. 2019). In this situation, participants appear to focus on the candidate's characteristics rather than on their programme. Indeed, those who voted for Laurent Wauquiez in the 2021 regional election did so not because of his programme, but because of his ability to implement policies (responsiveness): his position at national level would have enabled the region to secure more resources, and his membership of the same party as the city's mayor would have accelerated and facilitated the implementation of municipal policies.

The phenomenon of split-ticket voting in French regional elections therefore corresponds to the citizens' perception of this level of government and their consequent focus on candidates rather than parties. In this context, candidates are evaluated on their potential capacity to rule effectively, regardless of their party affiliation or their manifesto. Moreover, given that it is the candidate's characteristics that drive citizens' voting decisions, the incumbent candidate is favoured because its mandate has given visibility to its features. One could argue that this visibility might actually be detrimental, as it would also highlight their failures; however, as shown above, the work of the regional authority captures few citizens' attention because it is perceived as having little impact on their everyday lives. Thus, the incumbent candidate can perform poorly or well with few consequences. Finally, incumbent regional candidates enjoy high visibility and face low-performance pressure. This may explain why, when citizens decide to vote in regional elections, they tend to reward incumbent candidates.

Policy design matters

The results show that the potential impact of regional authorities is not solely linked to the type of competence delegated to the region by central state, but also to how the region decides to legislate on the competences delegated to it, i.e. the design of the policies implemented. In fact, the participants who are better able to characterise the regional level – correctly identifying the governing party – are those who cite at least one regional policy as having a significant impact, such as in the field of education (cuts to university funding) or culture (cuts to funding for cultural events). What these regional policies, perceived as having a greater impact, seem to have in common is their radical difference from previous policies. In other words, the fact that decisions taken by the regional authority are clearly distinct from those taken by previous governments or by governments in other French regions. Examples include the Wauquiez regional government's management of cultural affairs, which differs from that of the previous

left-wing government; or the free use of motorways in Brittany; or the "privatisation"[10] of regional rail transport in the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur region – two policies implemented only in these two regions.

Dupuy & Van Ingelgom (2014) had previously identified policy distinctiveness as a factor underpinning the legitimacy of a political institution. The two authors found that the legitimacy of a political institution – that is, the institution's ability to generate and maintain the belief that it is the best at doing what it does (Lipset 1958) – depends on three conditions: 1) the distinctiveness of regional policy compared with past policies implemented by the national government or previous regional governments; 2) the presence of a public discourse that allows policies to be attributed to the regional government; 3) the policies must perform well and satisfy citizens. The authors tested these three variables in the Belgian context, focusing on the regions of Flanders and Wallonia. The two regions exhibit contrasting characteristics: Flanders implements policies that are clearly distinct from previous ones; there is a public discourse supporting the regional government's activities; and the policies are widely appreciated by citizens; in Wallonia, the situation is exactly the opposite. This does not allow the authors to discern "whether the three requirements are additive or whether all three need to occur in order to legitimate effects" (Dupuy & Van Ingelgom 2014: 217). The present case of the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region, which alternately fulfils the three requirements, allows for a better understanding of the relationships between the independent variables, among themselves and with the dependent variable (Table 1). In fact, in this French region there is a strong public discourse designed to give visibility to regional policies, but this does not seem sufficient to raise citizens' awareness of regional governance in the long term. The requirement for policy distinctiveness appears to be decisive, since, on the one hand, there are participants who are unable to assess the regional government's performance because they cannot see how it could have acted differently; on the other hand, there is a group of participants who hold a negative view of regional policies due to their perceived radicalism – that is, the distinctiveness of the policy choices compared with those of the previous regional government. Therefore, the mere presence of public discourse on regional governance is not sufficient to fuel the regional institution's legitimacy; it is the distinctiveness of regional policies that appears necessary for citizens to assess regional performance. It is interesting to note that participants' negative assessment of regional performance does not seem to lead to the delegitimisation of the regional government in the competences it manages poorly; in fact, participants do not express a desire

[10] This is not strictly speaking a "privatisation", but rather the assignment of the licence to a company other than SNCF. I have preserved the term used by the participant.

for another level of government to replace the region, but rather for the government to return to doing what it has previously demonstrated it is able to do.

	Policy distinctiveness	Public discourse	Performance assessment
Flanders	1	1	1
Wallonia	0	0	0
Auvergne-Rhone-Alpes	1	1	1
	0	1	0

Table 1 – Three requirements of institutional legitimation

To sum up, the lack of distinctiveness in regional policies prevents citizens from being able to compare them clearly, thus making it impossible for them to assess regional performance. This lack of distinctiveness in French regional policies echoes the findings of Dupuy's work (2012; 2014) on the decentralisation practices of French regional governments. The author demonstrates that regionalisation does not necessarily lead to a high degree of diversification in regional policies; rather, the fulfilment of certain requirements – as in the French case – can give rise to a "*course vers le milieu*" (Dupuy 2012) amongst regional governments. In other words, it appears that French regional governments pursue an "active-cultivation-of-policy-similarity strategy" (Dupuy 2014: 455) in order not to diverge from the general conduct of other regional governments, to avoid criticism that they are not doing enough, and to secure institutional legitimacy in the competences assigned to them.

Therefore, there is a deliberate institutional effort to ensure that regional policies are similar to one another – and thus indistinguishable. As is evident from the above, this practice does not seem to leave citizens indifferent but influences their voting behaviour. If the policies of any regional government tend to be similar, choosing whom to vote for in regional elections seems irrelevant, as citizens perceive that whichever party or candidate wins, they will do the same things. Consequently, the "stakes" in regional elections are strongly reduced, and with them the importance of regional elections. The attitudes of participants exposed to radical – i.e. distinct – regional policies confirm this: they strongly oppose former president Wauquiez and view the election as an opportunity to elect a government that will implement alternative regional policies. Consequently, the electoral "stakes" appear greater to them.

Unravelling the "devolution paradox"

Participants demonstrate an understanding of French regionalisation consistent with the "utilitarian" perspective (Reuchamps et al. 2021; Sautter 2026b; Trüdinger et al. 2026 call it "functionalist" perspective), according to which decentralisation addresses the need for greater efficiency and responsiveness in public action. This narrative corresponds to the dominant

narrative used by French decision-makers to justify the decentralisation process: not as a matter of identity, but rather as a matter of better territorial governance and a more effective response to citizens' needs (Cole 2006; Guinjoan & Rodon 2013; Pasquier 2012; Schrijer 2006). The findings suggest that French citizens have internalised the public discourse of the French political elite on regionalisation (Dupuy et al. 2021). This narrative does not appear to be reinforced by participants' experiences with regional authorities; on the contrary, the lack of everyday experiences of the region's *utility* and the perception of the state's persistent role in local matters contribute to making the citizens' regionalisation repertoire appear abstract and constructed through interactions with other levels of government.

The abstract way in which participants justify regionalisation, coupled with their strong criticism of national politicians, suggests that participants' support for regionalisation stems from their disappointment with the central state rather than from the regions' demonstrated ability to deliver tangible results. This may explain the "devolution paradox" (Henderson et al. 2013) applied to the French context, namely the inconsistency between citizens' regionalisation preferences and their electoral behaviour at regional level. In fact, in opinion polls, French citizens state that they strongly support decentralisation (Ifop 2025; Pasquier 2014; Schakel & Smith 2022; Schrijer 2006), yet their regional election turnout is very low.

The strong support for decentralisation expressed by French citizens appears to be a reaction to their dissatisfaction with the national government's performance and to the perceived "distance" and "lack of responsiveness" of national politicians. From that point of view, decentralisation appears positive as it would reduce the decision-making power of national politicians who misuse it. This regionalisation preference among citizens does not seem to be linked to the idea, based on their interactions with regional authorities, that regional politicians would perform better than national politicians. In fact, regional authorities and their activities remain largely invisible to citizens, who often forget that regional elections even take place.

Finally, the "devolution paradox" is less paradoxical than it seems, and the apparent contradiction is resolved through a more in-depth analysis (Henderson et al. 2013; Schakel & Smith 2022). As suggested by Sautter (2026a), the solution to the contradiction lies in the fact that citizens' interpretations of the phenomenon of regionalisation are far from uniform (see also Chassé et al. 2025; Trüdinger et al. 2025) and are shaped through everyday interactions between citizens and public institutions (Sautter 2026b; Verhaegen et al. 2021).

CONCLUSION

> "[…] it is only at the end of inquiry, and only very tentatively, that we can answer a *why* question with any confidence and only in the sense that the luminous empirical details of how things came to be suggest an answer to why things are the way they are" (Timmermans & Tavory 2022: 74).

Why do French citizens not vote in regional elections? (R.Q.) "Is it simply that some elections are deemed to be less important?" (Golden et al. 2017: 78)

Yes, it is. This indeed explains a substantial part of the picture. However, it is only one part of what the present study has highlighted.

This study offers three complementary lessons that provide an answer to the initial research question. The first concerns the SOE model, as it confirms the validity of the key mechanism of "more or less at stake", which influences the perceived importance of the election. Therefore, regional electoral competition in France is viewed as a second-order election, less important than national and municipal elections, because the stakes are lower, given the limited impact of regional authorities' actions on citizens' everyday lives. The second lesson is that policy design matters. The design of regional policies influences the outcomes of a second-order election. The lack of distinctiveness in regional policies, by limiting citizens' ability to assess the regional authority's performance, shapes citizens' perception of a depoliticised regional level – that is, whatever party governs, the policies implemented are the same. In such a context, when citizens decide to participate in elections, they do not choose on the basis of the manifesto or the party, since both are perceived as likely to do the same things. Rather, they choose the candidate they perceive as the most responsive and best able to deliver. The incumbent candidate is the one who has had the greatest opportunity to demonstrate these abilities. This explains regional electoral outcomes such as the strong tendency to re-elect incumbents and split-ticket voting across elections at different levels. The third lesson confirms what recent studies have highlighted and demonstrated, namely that "regionalisation is not a uniform concept" (Sautter 2026a: 21; see also Trudinger et al. 2025) but rather is constructed by citizens through their everyday interactions with decentralised governments. Thus, the strong support for regionalisation expressed by French citizens in opinion polls (Ifop 2025; Pasquier 2012, 2014; Schakel & Smith 2022) does not appear to derive from a positive assessment of regional governance per se. Rather, it seems to be rooted in recurrent dissatisfaction with national policies, which contributes to a perception of national policymakers as increasingly distant and disconnected from citizens' concerns. In this sense, regionalisation is perceived, at least in principle, as a means of reducing the perceived distance between citizens and decision-makers and of creating greater opportunities for citizens' voices to be heard.

This study makes two contributions in regional studies (see Figure 5). First, it turns attention to the "quieter" regions (Tatham & Mbaye 2018) that have thus far received comparatively little scholarly attention. Yet these regions constitute the majority of those that have increasingly acquired competences through top-down processes of decentralisation, driven by a utilitarian paradigm (Guinjoan & Rodon 2014; Sautter 2026b) and occurring in the absence of a strong public regionalist discourse. Focusing on such regions is important for two reasons. First, the absence of a strong public regionalist discourse provides an opportunity to identify and more clearly delineate mechanisms that might otherwise remain obscured (Dupuy et al. 2021; Verhaegen et al. 2021), and that may also operate in "noisy" regions (Sautter 2026a). Second, because understanding how citizens interpret and internalise decentralisation allows us to reflect on how best to implement it, to avoid situations in which regions accumulate ever more competences, while citizens remain unaware of these changes and abstain from voting. The mechanism of accountability would thus become ineffective, creating a democratic deficit.

The second contribution of this study is to highlight the value of a qualitative approach in capturing "how citizens feel about decentralisation" (Henderson & Medeiros 2021, p. 139), a research call that quantitative approaches have been unable to fulfil comprehensively (Chassé et al. 2025; Schakel & Romanova 2023; Schakel & Smith 2022; Trüdinger et al. 2025). A qualitative methodology allows for a more direct consideration of citizens' agency, capturing the reasoning through which citizens make sense of their political environment and demonstrating that they are far from passive actors in the face of multiple external inputs. A clear example of this is the limited effect of the ARA region's strong visibility campaign on citizens' perceptions: as they continue to perceive the region as a non-decisive authority, they choose to continue paying it minimal attention. Within the field of regional studies, the use of qualitative approaches remains relatively recent (Reuchamps et al. 2021; Sautter 2026a, 2026b). Yet the findings of this study, and their ability to uncover apparent paradoxes, further demonstrate the value of pursuing this approach (Berg & Ternullo 2025; Walsh 2012).

	"Noisier" regions	"Quieter" regions
Qualitative approach	Sautter (2026a)	!
Quantitative approach	+ + + (see state-of-the-art chapter)	Trüdinger et al. (2025)

Figure 5

To conclude, there are several issues that warrant further exploration in future research. Firstly, what does "impact" mean? How do citizens perceive whether a policy has an impact on their everyday lives? In other words, which policies matter to citizens? Which policies, if delegated to the region, would citizens perceive as having a significant impact? We know that place

matters (Michener 2018; Sautter 2026a) and this study confirms that policy distinctiveness matters too (Dupuy & Van Ingelgom 2014). Further elements need to be identified and, at the same time, related to one another in order to develop a broader overall picture.

Secondly, participants express dissatisfaction with the inconsistency of regionalisation: while it is expected to provide regions with greater decision-making autonomy, in practice, the central state continues to retain the final say on the most important matters. Some participants do not interpret this discrepancy as a problem that can be addressed through improvements to technical procedures, from a "utilitarian" perspective, but rather as further evidence of what they perceive as the deliberate hypocrisy of policymakers. This interpretation of regionalisation appears to correspond to that identified by Sautter in the Belgian context, which she describes as "affective-cynical" (2026b). If regionalisation, presented as a means of improving democratic governance, itself becomes a source of mistrust among citizens, this creates a significant democratic impasse. It is therefore necessary to understand which factors lead citizens to interpret the shortcomings of regionalisation in a "cynical" rather than a "utilitarian" manner, and how this 'affective-cynical' narrative shapes their political behaviour.

There are also limitations related to the selection of the interview sample. First, all participants lived in urban areas. It would therefore be useful to interview citizens living in rural areas, as they may have potentially different and more meaningful interactions with regional authorities (Sautter 2026a). Moreover, rural areas are identified by participants as being among the main *victims* of the disengagement of the central state (see also Spire 2026; Walsh 2012). Participants often refer to the increasing prevalence of "medical deserts" (Chevillard et al. 2018). In these areas, regional authorities may have greater opportunities to demonstrate themselves as a viable alternative to the central state (Enguer & Navarrete 2025; Manatschal et al. 2020), potentially allowing them to have a significant impact on citizens' everyday lives. Finally, the sample did not include participants experiencing economic hardship. As Sautter emphasises, "they often have very impactful experiences with social welfare systems" (2026a: 12; see also Amara-Hammou et al. 2026), as these citizens are less able to avoid interactions with public institutions than those with higher incomes (Herd & Moynihan 2018; Michener 2018; Spire 2012, 2026). It is therefore possible that some regional policies that could potentially have a significant impact on citizens' lives (Michener 2018), such as employment integration programmes (Berthet 2011), reduced fares for regional public transport subscriptions (Barone 2011), or support for the purchase of school materials (Dupuy 2011), remained unknown to the 18 participants because they were generally not essential to their everyday lives (Spire 2012, 2026).

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ABSTRACT

In France, the degree of decentralisation has steadily increased for more than forty years, and surveys indicate that French citizens strongly support regionalisation. Yet voter turnout in regional elections remains extremely low and has declined over time. This study addresses this paradox by responding to recent calls in the regional and electoral studies literature. First, it adopts the theoretical framework of policy-feedback studies to develop a longitudinal approach to regionalisation. Second, drawing on 17 in-depth semi-structured interviews, it examines how citizens make sense of regionalisation. Third, by focusing on the French case, the study moves beyond the usual suspects and examines regionalisation where it has been implemented by political elites according to a utilitarian paradigm. The findings indicate that French citizens perceive regional elections as less important because the stakes are lower, thereby demonstrating the mechanism underlying the traditional Second-Order Election (SOE) model. Moreover, the regional policies distinctiveness matters more than their visibility in public discourse in shaping how citizens perceive the electoral stakes. Finally, strong support for French regionalisation appears to be driven less by satisfaction with the performance of regional authorities than by widespread dissatisfaction with the performance of the central state.

KEYWORDS:

Policy-feedback;

Second-Order Election model;

Regionalisation;

Collective sense-making;

France.

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