



Department of Pacific Affairs

Exploring the Kanak Vote on the Eve of New Caledonia's Independence Referendum

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Introduction

On 4 November 2018, New Caledonia will determine whether or not to become independent from France in a referendum of self-determination.¹ This vote comes after nearly half a century of division on the independence question. In 1958, 98 per cent of the New Caledonian population voted to remain with France under the Constitution of the Fifth Republic. However, within 20 years, the large majority of Kanak had begun to oppose French sovereignty and demand independence. However, after decades of migration to the territory from France and other French territories, the Kanak had become a demographic minority in their own land, rendering the Kanak independence movement incapable of obtaining political dominance and winning a referendum.

Still, the Kanak population, said to be currently 39 per cent of the territorial total in 2014, is too large to be ignored. Thirty-one years after the last referendum on independence in 1987, which was boycotted by the pro-independence coalition, the Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste (FLNKS or Kanak Socialist National Liberation Front), few analyses have considered the evolution of the Kanak electorate. The demographic trend and number of Kanaks themselves are not clear given changes in the definition of the ethnic category of the census from 2003; while self-identified Kanaks totalled 39.1 per cent in 2014, the lowest proportion of Kanaks ever, the new post-2009 categories of 'Caledonian' and 'no declared identity'

all grew and could include Kanaks (Fisher 2016). The New Caledonian government register of persons with customary status — exclusively for Kanak — is also inadequate since it is possible for people to revoke their customary status in favour of a common law status. It may also ignore people who might identify as Kanak but also as 'Caledonian', 'several communities' or 'other' in the census.

Therefore, it is difficult to quantify with any precision both the Kanak population and the electoral weight of the pro- or anti-independence camps. In an effort to respond to the challenges involved in any attempt to relate electoral results to ethnic origins, and while census comparisons before 2009 are limited owing to category changes, this paper proposes a geopolitical reading through an examination of the relationship between electoral results and the demographic and ethnic profiles collected at the 2009 and 2014 censuses by the Institut de la statistique et des études économiques de la Nouvelle-Calédonie (ISEE, a government body).

Part A of this paper considers the origins, mechanisms and electoral sensibilities of the Kanak while examining the results of the elections since the 1988 Matignon-Oudinot Accords. Part B attempts to determine the role of the Kanak vote in the forthcoming referendum on self-determination.

Part A: The geopolitical characteristics of the Kanak vote

French colonial rule over New Caledonia began in 1853 and systematically excluded the Kanak from political life. From 1878 to World War Two, the colonial administration governed through the *indigénat* regime, a series of laws enacted to keep the Kanak

in reserves, subject to a head tax and forced labour. The end of the war led to reforms that saw the Kanak become equal citizens and, gradually from 1946 to 1957, obtain the right to vote. Their democratic weight — 51.1 per cent in 1956 (Fisher 2013:107) — rendered them a prized electorate. Certain more conservative political forces sought to restrict their right to vote by introducing separate electorates with disproportionate power granted to French settlers. The large majority of Kanak threw their support behind the multicultural pro-autonomy party, Union Calédonienne (UC or Caledonian Union), which enjoyed political dominance for much of the postwar period and included both Europeans and Kanaks under the banner ‘two colours, one united people’.

However, from the 1960s, an increasing number of mostly younger, educated Kanak began to challenge UC’s hold over the Kanak electorate, many members of which were influenced by anti-colonial and anti-capitalist ideas. They challenged the nascent Kanak political elite, which consisted mostly of customary leaders and senior laymen in the Catholic and Protestant churches. Some of these younger Kanak activists, strongly influenced by Marxist ideas, formed the Parti de Libération Kanak (Palika or Kanak Liberation Party) in 1976. The UC experienced a major division in 1977 after younger members pushed the party towards a pro-independence position, resulting in most non-Kanak leaving the party. Both UC and Palika continue to dominate the pro-independence political landscape today. In the 1980s, conflict between pro- and anti-independence partisans brought the territory to the precipice of civil war in what is known as *les événements* (the events), aggravated further by

a putative independence referendum in 1987 that was boycotted by the pro-independence groups.

New Caledonia’s present-day political landscape has been shaped by two key political settlements between pro- and anti-independence forces: the 1988 Matignon-Oudinot Accords and 1998 Noumea Accord. As part of France, New Caledonians vote for the President of the Republic, two members in the French national assembly, a senator, as well as representatives of their local *communes* (municipalities). In addition, New Caledonians elect their own territorial assembly, today known as the Congress. The Matignon-Oudinot Accords split the territory into three new provinces each with its own democratically elected assembly. The balance of power in the 54 seats of Congress corresponds proportionally to the distribution of seats in each of the assemblies. The result is that pro-independence parties have held control over the two Kanak-dominated provinces, the North (70 per cent Kanak in 2014) and the Loyalty Islands (94 per cent). These reflect the colonial underpinnings of New Caledonian society, where European settlement took place in Noumea in the south and small villages along the west coast, while Kanak reserves dominated the north, east and the Islands. The more populous South Province (which includes Noumea), where two-thirds of the territorial population and the large majority of non-Kanak live (only 26.7 per cent are Kanak), has remained dominated by political parties opposed to independence. Since the composition of the Congress reflects the varying size of the populations of the provinces, the anti-independence parties have maintained a majority in the assembly since 1988, albeit with a declining margin to the benefit of the pro-independence parties from 1998 (Fisher 2013:157).

Table 1: The different electorates in New Caledonia following the 1998 Noumea Accord.

Electoral List	General electoral list (LEG)	Special electoral list for the provinces (LESP)	Special electoral list for the referendum (LESC)
Elections	Presidential Senatorial Legislative (French national assembly) Communal/municipal European	Provincial assemblies and the New Caledonian Congress	Referendum on 4 November 2018 on the exit to the Noumea Accord
Eligibility	All French citizens	‘Citizens of New Caledonia’: French citizens with continuous residence in New Caledonia since 8 November 1998	French citizens with continuous residence in New Caledonia from 1994 to 2014
Number of voters	188,781	160,362	174,154 (as of 1 October 2018)

Source: compiled by authors from the provisions set out under the Noumea Accord.

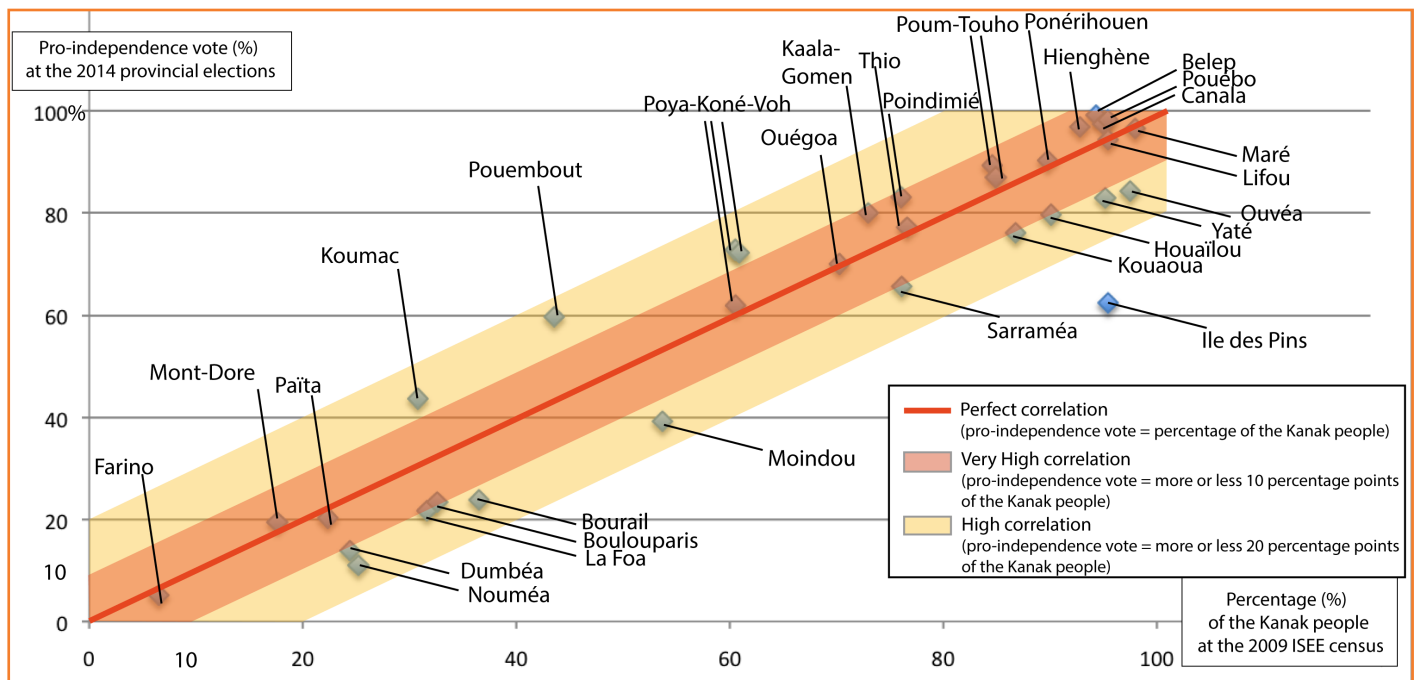


Figure 1: Correlation between the distribution of the Kanak people and the electoral distribution of the pro-independence vote at the 2014 provincial elections.

Source: Created by authors using data from ISEE (2009) and 2014 provincial election results.

Special electorates defined by conditions of duration of residence were introduced under the Noumea Accord to define, inter alia, who can participate in elections for the provincial assemblies and the Congress of New Caledonia (see Table 1). For provincial elections the Accord required residence of 10 years to 1998. After considerable disputation by pro-France forces, French national adjudication in 2007 confirmed the pro-independence interpretation of ‘freezing’ the electorate at this 10-year requirement for the duration of the Accord (as opposed to the pro-France preference, after the Accord was signed, for 10 years to each election date). This provision restricts the electorate to longstanding residents — above all, those French citizens who arrived before 8 November 1998 — to vote in elections for the provincial assemblies and the Congress, known as ‘New Caledonian citizens’. A separate special electorate with different residency requirements exists for the referendum (this aspect is covered further under ‘A pre-determined referendum?’ below).

The following section looks at three principal factors that structure and explain the Kanak vote; a vote that is essentially pro-independence, often communitarian and influenced by custom and proximity, and includes an extraterritorial vote.

An essentially pro-independence vote

The major trends of the Kanak vote in favour of independence underscored in this paper should not obscure other realities. Nevertheless, the most important trend is the dominance of the pro-independence cause in this electorate. This has been taken by academics and commentators as self-evident. This article suggests, however, that the situation is more complex than it appears on the surface, and is the first attempt to explore the issues involved in more depth.

If we correlate ISEE ethnic data across different census results with the results from different provincial elections, we can identify a strong connection between the distribution of the Kanak people in New Caledonia and the electoral distribution of the pro-independence vote (see Figure 1). The communes where the Kanak are in the majority (such as those in the north-east, east and the Loyalty Islands) are equally those where the pro-independence parties have obtained their best results over a period of nearly 30 years.

Although this correlation does not appear to be contested at the communal level, the case of Greater Noumea, where the largest concentrations (one-third) of Kanak live, raises some difficulties of interpretation. The area referred to as Greater Noumea incorporates central Noumea and the communes of Dumbéa and

Mont Dore. Across Greater Noumea, we observe important disparities between ballot boxes, as shown in Figure 2 below. In the 2014 provincial elections for the commune of Noumea, the pro-independence parties obtained 11 per cent of votes, of which half came from the north-west of the town and more particularly Kaméré, Rivière Salée, Montravel and Ducos among others. This area is largely dominated by public housing where the Kanak are the majority (including the industrial area of Ducos, Montravel, Tindu, Nouville, Kaméré, Rivière Salée).

To the north-east of the city (Normandie, Fifth and Sixth kilometre, Magenta Aerodrome, Upper Magenta), in the city centre and at Nouville, the registered scores of pro-independence votes exceeds the communal average (11 per cent). However, beginning in the quarter of Artillerie and in every part of southern Noumea, votes for pro-independence parties do not

exceed 5 per cent. By comparing this result with preceding provincial elections, we observe the same electoral fracture between the north-west and the south.

It is equally possible to compare the ethnic composition of individual suburbs or urban quarters according to the census and their corresponding electoral tendency. However, this analysis is rendered difficult by the differences between the census areas used by ISEE to collect their data and the electoral boundaries for each ballot box. It is therefore impossible to compare the suburbs with absolute precision. Still, as Figure 2 shows, mapping the results after cross-checking the ethnic statistics and the placement of voting stations highlights the link between suburbs where the Kanak population is significant and the ballot boxes where the pro-independence parties' scores exceed the average of Greater Noumea (14.14 per cent of 2014 votes).

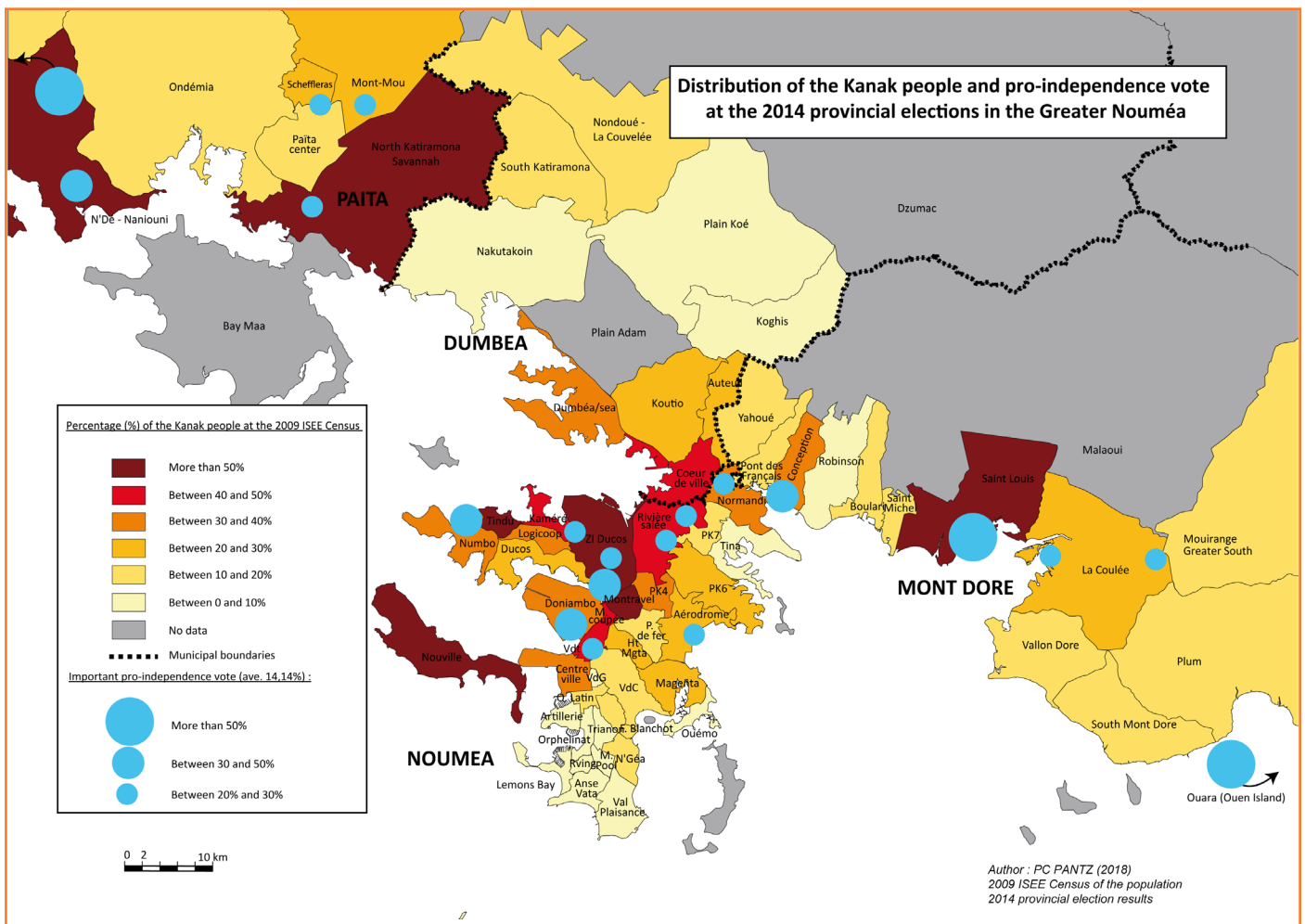


Figure 2: Map of the Kanak population and the pro-independence electorate in Greater Noumea. Source: Created by the authors using data from ISEE (2009) and 2014 provincial election results.

The commune of Dumbéa is an exception, where no ballot box recorded a pro-independence result above 20 per cent despite a large Kanak minority. Conversely, in Noumea, a dozen ballot boxes recorded above the average, while Mont-Dore and Païta recorded ten and five respectively. In the latter two cases, we observe important pro-independence scores in each of the *tribu* ('tribes' or customary land areas²) on urban peripheries (La Conception and Saint-Louis for Mont-Dore; Bangou, Saint-Laurent, Naniouni and N'Dé for Païta).

The figures show that there is a very strong correlation between the principal Kanak suburbs and the ballot boxes with a strong pro-independence result. However this correlation does not appear to be so strong with respect to Greater Noumea.

A close examination shows that there are numerous apparent discrepancies between ethnic distribution and the pro-independence score, especially in Greater Noumea (Table 2). For example, the Kanak population in the suburb of Nouville is in the majority (55 per cent according to the 2009 ISEE census). The corresponding voting station (Mairie 2, which includes some parts of the Noumea town centre), however, only scores a pro-independence vote of 18.87 per cent, with a relatively weak participation rate (60 per cent compared with an average of 72 per cent for Noumea).

Some of the most striking examples are in the suburbs of Doniambo and Montravel where 75 per cent of inhabitants identify as Kanak. In 2014, the provincial elections saw the corresponding electorate score only 48 per cent of pro-independence votes (with a 56 per cent participation rate). Despite a strong abstention rate, the statistical link is still clear even if the correlation is not absolute. A real disparity also exists between the suburbs, the population enrolled and the population identified in the census. For example, the number of enrolled individuals at the ballot box Mairie 2 only represents 17 per cent of the Kanak population identified at the census for the corresponding suburbs. This sharp divergence is explained later in this contribution.

In Greater Noumea, the dissonance between the census population, the enrolled population and the percentage of abstentions makes the link between the Kanak population and the pro-independence vote more uncertain. Only a broad tendency towards an 'electoral preference' can be observed.

Table 2: Comparison between the Kanak census population (2009) and the pro-independence results (2014) in three sample suburbs from Noumea

Suburbs	Kanak population in the census (%)	Pro-independence results in the corresponding electoral sectors (%)	Participation rate (%)
Montravel and Doniambo	75	48	56
Tindu and Numbo	64	37	54
Nouville and Centre-Ville	43	19	60
Municipal average (territorial)	25.2 (40.3)	11.01 (41.45)	71.7 (70)

Source: Compiled by authors using data from ISEE (2009) and the 2014 provincial elections.

A communitarian vote

With the end of the colonial period and the gradual extension of the right to vote from 1946 to 1957, the Kanak vote became increasingly important. The first Kanak political figures consisted mostly of customary chiefs. The first major political party formed in the territory, UC, emerged from two church-affiliated groups (one Catholic, one Protestant) which included both Europeans and Kanaks and provided a platform for a Kanak political class derived mostly from a customary elite. In 1953, a century after the declaration of French sovereignty over the territory, seven Kanak with the status of chiefs (or high chiefs) were elected to the *Conseil general* (the General Council) and paved the way for future Kanak leaders.

During this period, customary leaders strongly influenced the political tendencies of the Kanak. In the Koné region, Benoît Trépiéd (2010:14–18) described and analysed these tendencies towards a communitarian vote, which endured for a long time despite the individual liberty made possible through the act of voting. The political engagement of certain chiefs contributed to the birth of tribal or clannic 'micro-fiefs', sometimes running counter to the communal or provincial tendencies of the majority. The electoral strategy of UC largely depended on a system of 'tribal' relaying of political and electoral communication.

Today, there are hardly any high or lesser chiefs in the electoral arena. Two recent examples contradict this trend however, in the Isle of Pines and Maré. Both islands have overwhelming Kanak populations where the high chiefs Hilarion Vendegou (Isle of Pines) and

Nidoish Naisseline (Guahma district, Maré) have had a considerable influence on the distribution of votes. In the Isle of Pines (where there is one *grand chefferie* or paramount chiefly area and eight *chefferies* or chiefly areas), the superposition of customary and electoral territories has had a considerable influence on vote distribution. In contrast to almost all of the majority-Kanak communes, which elect pro-independence Kanak, the high chief Hilarion Vendegou, who is opposed to independence, has been the elected mayor for most of the period since 1989. During his political career, he has also been elected customary senator,³ senator (of the French Senate), and a member of the territorial and provincial councils. In this way, the superposition of two political levels (electoral and customary) seems in all likelihood to have played a considerable role in the establishment and reinforcement of an anti-independence Kanak area on this particular island.

This link between the *grand chefferie* and political life has a double effect: it permits the high chief to reinforce his power in a territory and identifies a political party as a symbol of fidelity or deference. But on the other hand, it can also lead to the exacerbation and hardening of a political and customary divide with those who criticise the accumulation of powers, territories and governance. In the 2014 municipal elections, an FLNKS list succeeded in toppling the high chief Vendegou.

Like the Isle of Pines, Maré is a particular electoral example where the customary order appears to play a dominant role. The island, which is the most southern of the Loyalty Islands, has 5648 inhabitants, 97 per cent of whom are Kanak according to the 2014 census. Like the other Loyalty Islands, Maré is a quasi-integral customary territory (no private property or public lands), divided into eight districts and 30 tribes. The district of Guahma encompasses all of the north-west of the island (approximately a third of its surface) and includes 12 tribes representing 45 per cent of Maré's population. This territorial and demographic supremacy adds to the customary hegemony as the high chief of this district is generally designated, rightly or wrongly, as the high chief of the territory. For nearly 40 years (1973–2007), one man held the position of high chief of Guahma, the late Nidoish Naisseline,⁴ founder of the moderate pro-independence party, the Libération Kanak Socialiste (LKS or Kanak Socialist Liberation). Centred in Maré, as leader of this party

(which he virtually embodied alone), Naisseline sat in the Loyalty Islands provincial assembly and the Congress without interruption from 1989. Another LKS figure, Basil Citré, was mayor of Maré between 2001 and 2014. In the 2009 provincial elections, 75 per cent of LKS votes came from Maré alone.

The fusion of the two political spheres is often considered by its detractors as a form of Kanak absolutism that would have been found in a precolonial political system of *grandes chefferies* in the Loyalty Islands. Nevertheless, these examples provoke the question of whether an interconnection exists between the customary territories and electoral territories or if it is a matter of exception? It might be suggested that customary influence is now a marginal force in Kanak voting patterns. Still, a closer reading of the electoral results at each voting station allows us to affirm that there are still clear inequalities in the distribution of votes within a single commune. How can these variations in the Kanak electoral vote be explained?

Voting by proximity

Several criteria might explain the distribution, or rather the geographical foundation, of the Kanak vote. The behaviourist approach to electoral geography emanates largely from Anglo-Saxon researchers. The most well known, Kevin R. Cox, proposed a theoretical model explaining the spread of influences and political and electoral opinions (1969:81–117). This model, as recently adapted by Michel Bussi, will be used throughout this section (1998:42–43).

This approach argues that the geographical origin of voters, their inclusion in a tribe or a clan, continues to play a considerable role in voting behaviour. In fact, the electoral behaviour of an area becomes accentuated in favour of a dominant political party (through political tradition, cumulative effect, clientelism, training or imitation to avoid marginalisation within a group), known as a 'neighbourhood effect':

We think that our vote is a free and personal act ... Yet, as soon as you look with a bit of distance the sum of individual acts, an observation becomes clear: we do not know who our neighbours voted for, but we have voted like them (Bussi 1998:385).

Within one tribe, village or quarter, the results seem rather homogenous.

Secondly, geographic and social proximity — the ‘friends effect’ (Bussi 1998:43) — or a customary proximity with the candidate, also informs the choice. The voters will more readily vote for someone they know through familial, customary or social linkages or by proximity to their living place. This effect generates a sentiment of local pride and the voter will have a tendency to declare their support for a candidate close to them in a geographic and social sense. These local bonds can be amplified if the candidate is a customary chief. This is especially notable in relation to the involvement of several customary chiefs in local political life.

Several examples permit us to illustrate this effect of local affinity. The results obtained by Palika in the North Province during the 2009 provincial elections are particularly significant in this way. The candidate at the top of the electoral list, Paul Néaoutyine, originally from Poindimié and the tribe of Saint-Michel (the Valley of Amoa), won the election (30.61 per cent) by obtaining his strongest result in Poindimié (44.95 per cent) and particularly at the voting station of Amoa (72.29 per cent).

In 1984, at the beginning of riots and clashes between Kanak and Europeans, the large part of pro-independence parties rallied together under the banner of the FLNKS, the objectives of which were to maximise the representation of the Kanak and pro-independence electorate throughout the territory. However, this unity disguised a coalition of several pro-independence parties whose differences involved important points of tension. The most important was competition between Palika and UC (both members of the FLNKS) for hegemony over the pro-independence electorate. These two parties have long contested each other’s legitimacy as the voice of the Kanak people and of the pro-independence movement. Furthermore, since 1999, Palika and UC are both dominant in a particular province (the Islands for UC and the North for Palika) and also in various communes.

If the pro-independence electoral areas of influence remain largely dominated by these two parties, their distribution of votes reveals an important complexity in which the tribes, community life and clannic alliances seems to play a sizeable role. A cartography of electoral fiefs clearly emerges, sometimes within a single commune, which are superimposed on the customary geography. The customary land areas, historically in favour of UC or Palika, are often the

stringent and rigorous conduits of voting preferences. Moreover, voting tendencies are largely influenced by guidance provided by customary authorities (Trépiéd 2010). Despite the seeming freedom and anonymity provided by the right to vote, the community-based and customary structures continue (Muckle and Trépiéd 2010). Today, the Kanak electoral territories seem indissociable from the various tribes and clans, just as the link between them appears evident based on electoral patterns at voting stations.

Extra-territoriality and the growing importance of Kanak absentee votes (proxy voting)

Despite a demographic decline in the Islands Province (–4.6 per cent) and a stagnation in the North Province (+0.2 per cent) between 2004 and 2009, their respective ‘special’ electorates have continued to increase, entrenching a gap between the electoral and census populations in these two largely Kanak provinces, since those who have moved outside their electorate retain their electoral residence in their commune of origin. Strikingly, certain communes on the east coast of the Grande Terre (the main island) and the Loyalty Islands record more voters than expected on the basis of the number of inhabitants, while at the territorial level only 55 per cent of the census population was enrolled in the special electoral roll for provincial elections. It seems quite evident for the Kanak population in particular that their place of residence does not necessarily correspond to their electoral residence.

Other communes have an abnormally high electorate compared to the census population, such as certain communes on the east coast of the North Province (Canala, Ponérihouen, Hienghène, Ouégoa and Pouébo) or in the Loyalty Islands (Lifou, Ouvéa and Maré). If it is a matter that affects the majority Kanak communes, two other mainly non-Kanak communes in the South Province (Boulouparis and Moindou) also record important percentages. The particular case of the Loyalty Islands appears the most intriguing since the enrolled population easily exceeds the census population, even when one excludes the population of those under the age of 18!

In Lifou, for example, the census population in 2009 was 8627 inhabitants, while in the 2009 provincial election, 9586 people enrolled in the commune (that is, 111.1 per cent of the population). No voting station in Lifou (each of which brings together the

inhabitants of one or more tribes) is below the New Caledonian average ratio for the population percentage enrolled/census population (55 per cent of the census population). Moreover, across the whole island, this percentage appears remarkable when only adult population figures are used. According to the 2009 census, 45 per cent of the Lifou population is under 18 years of age. It can be estimated that in 2009, the census population of voting age was approximately 4745 people, equivalent to half of the enrolled population in the provincial elections (9585). The situation in certain tribes, with the number of enrolled individuals up to four times the adult census population, appears even more surprising. This 'grotesque' situation extends to the entirety of the Loyalty Islands.

These apparent discrepancies can be explained in part by the important migratory movements that push an increasing number of Loyalty Islanders to live in Greater Noumea and other urban centres rather than their commune or tribe of origin. When moving to Greater Noumea, however, often for professional, medical or academic reasons, the Kanak from the Loyalty Islands do not abandon their electoral residence within their tribe. This maintenance of an electoral residence might be explained by the need to keep a real and symbolic anchorage in the tribe to which one belongs. Yet, the majority of Loyalty Islanders interviewed in Greater Noumea, who all kept their electoral residence in their tribe of origin, note that they have not changed their electoral residence because 'they have not necessarily considered it'. Others, however, admit that they have not changed their electoral residence primarily for ideological and political reasons:

the stakes in the Loyalty Islands are not the same as those in the South Province and Greater Noumea. They feel more concerned by the improvement of living conditions in the Islands than in Noumea (Pantz 2015:148).

Today, the situation in the Islands seems to have passed a threshold: there are as many Loyalty Islander voters living in Greater Noumea as in the Loyalty Islands. Nevertheless, in order to continue to participate in the electoral debates, a section of 'delocalised' voters from the Loyalty Islands have regularly used *procurations* (absentee or proxy voting). For several years, the number of absentee votes taken up in Noumea for the Islands has steadily increased,

election after election. In the commune of Noumea, between the 2004 and 2009 provincial elections, the number of absentee votes increased by 64 per cent. This practice of 'voting at a distance' largely concerns the Kanak populations in the Islands and the North Provinces, leading to electoral manipulations and arousing jealousy among pro-independence parties.

The disparities noted earlier between the distribution of the Kanak population and the pro-independence vote in the quarters of Greater Noumea appear to be explained by the important number of Loyalty Islanders residing in Greater Noumea who continue to vote in the Islands or who abstain. During the 43rd congress of UC in 2012 in La Foa, the pro-independence party highlighted this tendency and called on '... the voters of the North and the Islands residing in the South Province to mobilise, to enrol and vote massively ... in order to combat abstentionism' (UC 2012). Moreover, for the provincial and communal elections, certain parties have adapted to the practice, while attempting to expand beyond their strongholds through door-knocking and phoning probable Loyalty Islander voters who reside outside their commune (principally in Greater Noumea).

From election to election, the political parties in the Islands put together a network of members, partisans and families who work to compile a document detailing the names of Loyalty Islanders residing in Greater Noumea who would be susceptible to being called to vote by proxy.⁵ This strategy aiming to deliberately target and maximise the Kanak vote in Noumea, adopted by other parties with a presence in the Islands, raises numerous questions of ethnicity and democracy. The race for absentee votes appears to distort the true stakes of the provincial elections. Indeed, the abnormally high number of absentee votes and 'an accumulation of irregularities of particularly significant bearing' have already resulted in the cancellation of provincial elections on two occasions (1999 and 2000) in the Loyalty Islands by the State Council (Conseil d'Etat, 16 October 2009).

Part B: Approaching the referendum: an uncertain Kanak vote

If the significant number of absentee votes in the 2014 provincial election did not result in a legal battle, the disparity between the voting population and the number of absentee votes continued. In the upcoming

referendum, New Caledonia will be confronted with the same situation. On 1 October 2018, the Haut-Commissariat de la République française (French High Commission⁶) published the definitive composition of the special electoral list for the referendum (or LESC⁷) which includes 174,154 voters, or 85 per cent of the New Caledonian population of voting age. The distribution of this electorate by commune confirms the prevalence of long-distance voting observed throughout the different provincial elections. In the Islands Province, for example, the number of people enrolled for the referendum has risen to 21,366 voters, while the ISEE estimates the population of voting age to be 11,500 in 2018 — a little more than half the number of people enrolled.

To avoid any questioning of the future of the referendum, the political leaders agreed during the last Committee of Signatories meeting (November 2017) to put voting stations in place in Noumea for the Loyalty Islands, the Isle of Pines and Belep. On this occasion, it was also decided to make supporting documentation for absentee votes compulsory in order to prevent any fraud. These mechanisms have two objectives: to ensure the participation of the largest number of people for the referendum, and to limit the probability of electoral fraud in the Loyalty Islands. Nevertheless, it seems clear that the ‘vote at a distance’ is likely to have a continued significant impact on the referendum results. The solution of ‘delocalised’ voting stations in Noumea, introduced in order to overcome this difficulty, has not succeeded as planned: only a little more than 3200 voters from the islands have taken the steps to vote in Noumea on 4 November.

In the next section, we will consider the historical power relations shaping the Kanak vote in the lead-up to the referendum on 4 November. First, we will return to a major shift in New Caledonian politics that has occurred over a half a century, where the Kanak have gone from a majority to a double minority: Kanak and pro-independence. Then, we will examine the circumstance where a tendency towards particularly high abstention rates within the Kanak electorate increases uncertainty about the referendum. Lastly, we will try to tease out the principal difficulties and risks of attempting to predict the referendum result.

The Kanak as a ‘double minority’

When the Kanak attained full French citizenship between 1946 (end of the *Indigénat*) and 1957 (the right to vote for all Kanak), the demographic question progressively acquired a political dimension as the balance of power between the communities evolved. This law of numbers has cast a shadow over New Caledonian political life ever since, especially as the majority Kanak population recorded important demographic growth (David, Guillaud and Pillon 1999), yet has still been in the minority since the 1960s. From 1972, certain political leaders understood that this ‘unfavourable numerical balance’ (former Prime Minister of France Pierre Messmer, cited in Fisher 2013:57) could result in a nationalist threat and could only be avoided if residents from metropolitan France or other French territories became the demographic majority (Fisher 2013:57) reflecting a concerted policy of immigration to outnumber the Kanak population.

Electoral and census figures after 1963 demonstrate how the Kanak became a minority through increased waves of migration due to the economic boom⁸ and outright conservative policies where the French state increasingly eroded New Caledonian political autonomy against the wishes of most members of the territorial assembly. Towards the end of the decade, the radicalisation of Kanak political ideology (Chappell 2014) and the hardening of the French state’s conservative position, contributed to the transition from an autonomy/anti-autonomy divide to one between pro- and anti-independence camps (Bertram 2012).

The upending of the demographic and electoral balance of power during this period explains without doubt why the Kanak did not succeed in attaining independence during the ‘wave of Oceanian independence’ between 1970 and 1980. They had become a ‘double minority’, that is a minority within the population (though still the largest single community) and an electoral minority. Noting their minority position and their inability to obtain independence through the ballot box, the FLNKS began to engage in various forms of illegal and armed resistance. Due to the size and loyalty of their electoral following, those leaders were able to demonstrate their legitimacy as distinct from other French citizens and initiate the political settlement from 1988 (Matignon-Oudinot then the Noumea Accords). This electoral power equally made recourse to the United Nations and

international laws on the right to self-determination of colonised peoples and increasingly, from the mid-1990s, the rights of indigenous peoples to self-determination. Still, their electoral weight fell short of an overall majority, provoking calls from the pro-independence movement to restrict the electorate — a major element of the successive political settlements (see further below). As a senior French official has noted, it is this demographic equation and distinctive politics, without parallel in the rest of the world, which comprises the progressive institutional process of decolonisation (Christnacht 2008).

Kanak abstention

The year 2017 was marked by two major French national elections — presidential and legislative — separated by several weeks, the last before the referendum on 4 November 2018. Despite the importance of these elections, there was a record rate of abstention in both votes.

It must be noted that, historically, New Caledonians have a lower voter turnout for European and French elections than for their local provincial elections. The 2017 national French elections marked the lowest turnout for the first and second rounds since the 1988 Matignon-Oudinot Accords. In the 2012 presidential elections, the participation was 55.38 per cent in the first round compared to 48.14 per cent in 2017, then 61.19 per cent in the second round compared to 52.96 per cent in 2017. Several weeks later, the French legislative elections were marked by particularly low participation rates (48.7 per cent in the first round and 54.8 per cent in the second).

In greater detail, in light of the method previously proposed, we can see that the distribution of these abstention rates primarily concerns the communes with a majority and traditionally pro-independence Kanak population. This Kanak abstention in French national elections is not new. In part it indicates a sentiment that French metropolitan politics are of little concern to everyday Kanak. However, it can also be explained by differences in voting advice from the different political parties of the FLNKS. Effectively, for these elections where UC had called on people not to vote, a detailed analysis of participation confirms this division. The communes and the customary land areas traditionally supportive of UC have largely abstained in French national elections.

If this abstention is not entirely surprising, the provincial elections, which attract far greater participation levels, saw their participation rate fall continuously since 2004 throughout New Caledonia and more particularly in the North Province⁹ and the Islands.¹⁰ Considering the stakes surrounding these key local institutions, it may be that the Noumea Accord, which delayed the referendum for 20 years, has blunted the political bipolarisation and in particular the pro-independence electorate (Tutugoro 2017). This observation seems especially true for younger Kanak voters between 18 and 25 years old, less than 10 per cent of whom went to the ballot box during the latest elections. This decline in citizen engagement highlights a generational, ideological and identitarian fracture that seems to manifest itself at each election.

It would be presumptuous to assume that this abstention will reoccur in the referendum, noting that the pro-independence camp is well aware of the potential of this silent electorate, with the issue resonating throughout their recent campaigns. More broadly, one of the key features of the vote will in all likelihood be the mobilisation of the undecided and abstentionist electorate.

A pre-determined referendum?

Due to the dominance of the anti-independence parties, it has often been assumed by commentators that an anti-independence victory is almost certain. With the referendum electoral campaign under way, we can quantitatively analyse the various political forces present.

Since the beginning of the pro-independence movement, the right to vote for the referendum has not ceased to be a critical geopolitical question between pro- and anti-independence supporters. From the early 1980s, the electoral body for the referendum has systematically been a point of division between the two political sides. However, the notion of restricting the electorate was long considered contrary to France's principles of democratic equality and the constitutional principle of the 'one and indivisible republic'. With the 1988 Matignon-Oudinot Accords the referendum was delayed until 1998. The electorate permitted to take part in this vote comprised those residing in the territory since 1988, equivalent to a period of 10 years. This accord delimiting the electoral body aimed to exclude the temporarily resident posted public servants

or other people with a less intimate connection to New Caledonia so that they could not weigh in on such a fundamental vote.

When the referendum was delayed to between 2014 and 2018 under the Noumea Accord in 1998, the question of the electoral body for the referendum still remained at the heart of New Caledonian geopolitics. As set out in Table 1 above, there are three distinct electoral lists in New Caledonia as stipulated under the [Organic Law of 19 March 1999](#) (which formalised the Noumea Accord in French domestic law): the general electoral list for French national elections (LEG), the special electoral list for the provincial elections (LES) and the special electoral list for the ‘consultation’ or referendum of self-determination (LESC). The multiple criteria for the LESC, which are more restrictive than the LES, are enumerated in Article 218 of the Organic Law. For example, in 2014, one must have had 20 years of continuous residence in New Caledonia to feature on the LESC, though there are other criteria apart from the duration of residence that permit some individuals to enrol.

It is the enrolment on this third list that has been at the heart of political debates in the months preceding the referendum. While some 164,000 people had already been enrolled in 2017 (89,000 persons with civil status and 75,000 with customary status (that is, Kanak) (Haut-Commissariat de la République française 1/10/2018), parties claimed that cross-checking this list with other statistical data available revealed that several thousand inhabitants are not enrolled, in particular among the Kanak — according to these sources, between 10,000 and 20,000.

These individuals were a central topic of discussion at the Committee of Signatories meeting held in Paris on 2 November 2017. After many hours, an agreement was finally achieved in order to guarantee the ‘legitimacy and sincerity of the vote’. It was determined that ‘10 922 natives¹¹ who reside in New Caledonia permanently are not enrolled on the general electoral list’ (Communiqué du Comité des Signataires, 2 November 2017). This incorporated 7000 people with customary status and 4000 people with civil status.¹² The bill modifying the Organic Law flowing from this Committee of Signatories will institute an exceptional procedure of automatic enrolment on the general electoral list of all French citizens living in New Caledonia. Then, as originally previewed in the Organic Law, persons of customary status will

automatically enter on to the referendum list. The others will be admitted to the list if they are born in New Caledonia and identified as being residents for three years under special agreed criteria.

Table 3: Automatic enrolment on the LESC

	Before Automatic Enrolment	After Automatic Enrolment
Customary status	75,000	80,120
Common status	89,000	94,034
Total	164,000	174,154

Source: Compiled by the authors using data from Haut-Commissariat de la République française (1/10/2018).

As Table 3 shows, the ratio between the two groups has largely remained the same (46–54 per cent). It is notable, however, that whereas all those of customary status are Kanaks, the common status may include some Kanaks (see below).

Unlike in the French metropole, where the collection of ethnic data is strictly outlawed, the ISEE in New Caledonia is authorised to collect data pertaining to individuals’ ‘community of belonging’ due to the historical and political significance of demography (Maclellan 2010). In 2014, ISEE recorded 104,958 Kanak, of which approximately 72,000 were of voting age, or 41.3 per cent of the entire LESC. Without a more recent census (the next occurring in 2019), the Kanak population can only be estimated, and on the assumption that population growth remains stable in comparison to the 2009–2014 provincial elections. Therefore, for 2018, the Kanak population will likely sit between 108,000 and 110,000 people, with 74,000–76,000 people of voting age (between 42.5 and 43.6 per cent of the LESC).

Two important factors need to be considered: first, the proportion of Kanak, who for one reason or another, are not enrolled on the LESC; second, the representativity of the ‘Kanak’ category in the censuses which, as referred to earlier, do not take into account those who declared themselves ‘Caledonian’, ‘several communities’, ‘other’ or those who did not respond to this question. In 2014, these three categories together represented 18.5 per cent of the New Caledonian population. However, on the basis of these figures and the hypothesis that at least 10 per cent of Kanak have common status, it is possible that Kanak form the majority of the LESC, which is relatively surprising given

the demographic history of New Caledonia as reflected in ISEE census figures since 2004 — and underscores the politicisation of ethnic data.

Relying on electoral figures and the census data on ethnic belonging, which have been skewed since the temporary removal of the ethnic category in 2003 and subsequent category changes (see Maclellan 2010), certain political leaders have not hesitated to speculate on the potential of this pro-independence electorate in order to quantify the balance of power prior to the vote. However, it is important to use these figures with caution to avoid overly simplistic and erroneous observations. In fact, even though there is no doubt the quasi-totality of persons with customary status is of Kanak origin, no study has measured with any precision the increasing Kanak presence among persons with common law status.

Besides this fact of the difference of the general electoral body and the provincial and referendum electoral bodies, the demographic, statutory and ideological complexity of the Kanak people is a significant obstacle to determining the result of the referendum in advance. Moreover, the most radical party within the independence movement, the Parti Travailleiste (Labour Party), with two elected members in the New Caledonian Congress and overseen by Louis Kotra Uregeï, announced on 14 July 2018 that they would not participate in the referendum on 4 November because it was ‘insincere’ and ‘already lost’ — an attitude roundly criticised by other pro- and anti-independence parties.

A large level of abstention among young Kanak, as has been observed in elections for some time, could also play a particularly important role. Even if it is correct that the Kanak constitute the majority of enrolled persons, they may not form the majority of voters. Therefore, the question of mobilisation looms as a key factor in the referendum.

Predicting the result

New Caledonia suffers from an absence of polls on electoral intentions with representative samples, with not a single large-scale poll published in 30 years. The local television channel Caledonia and the polling institute I-Scope attempted to fill this void with a public poll on 12 May 2017 on New Caledonian intentions to vote: 54.2 per cent declared themselves to be opposed to independence, 24.4 per cent were favourable and 21.4 per cent undecided.

Unsurprisingly, this poll pointed to the correlation between pro-independence support and the Kanak: the communes in the north-east and those living in the tribes are generally favorable towards independence. However, the number of people favorable towards independence appears statistically equivalent to the number of undecided. These undecideds are notably ‘more numerous in the tribes, on the Loyalty Islands, among women, the inactive and blue-collar populations’ (I-Scope 2017:6–9). Nevertheless, even if the methodology and the sampling of this poll were validated by the National Polling Commission, the relatively restricted size of the sample (476 people), the fact that those sampled self-identified as eligible to vote in the referendum, and the high margin of error (+/- 6 per cent), raises questions about the validity of the poll.

Just one year after this first poll, Caledonia and the polling institute I-Scope conducted a second poll. This new poll found that 59.7 per cent of New Caledonians questioned would vote against independence, compared to 22.5 per cent in favour of ‘yes’ and 17.8 per cent undecided. Despite a 28 per cent increase in the number of respondents (608 compared to 476) and a result validated by the National Polling Commission, the sample’s scale and representativity was once again modest, with a large margin of error of 5 per cent. Despite these reservations, these two polls, which have the advantage of having used the same methodology across a comparable sample, permit a limited analysis of these two main tendencies and their evolution over time. For example, and bearing in mind margins of error of 5–6 per cent, at the scale of the archipelago we observe a decline in the number of undecided (–3.6 per cent) and of the ‘yes’ to independence (–1.9 per cent) to the benefit of the ‘no’ (+5.5 per cent). In the mainly European South Province (75 per cent of the New Caledonian population), the results evolve in the same way (–3 for the ‘no’ against +4 points for the ‘yes’). In the predominantly Kanak North Province, if the ‘yes’ remains stable (42 per cent), the ‘no’ has progressed (+7 points or 41 per cent) and the undecided declined (–7 points or 17 per cent). Lastly, in the predominantly Kanak Islands Province, the ‘no’ to independence led the ‘yes’ (49 per cent against 30 per cent in 2018, 44 per cent against 19 per cent in 2017). But, as for the rest of the survey, the scale of the sample in the islands (43 respondents compared with 32 in 2017) warrants great caution.

Despite the poll's limitations, the pro-independence/Kanak correlation seems to diminish. Even if the communes of the north-east and those living in the tribes remain favourable towards independence, the decline of the undecideds mostly relates to the communes that are traditionally supportive of independence and Kanak-dominated, and generally occurs to the benefit of the 'no' to independence. This shift may be explained by the recent officialisation of the referendum question, its date, the visit of the prime minister and the launch of the referendum campaign. Without doubt, and as seen in other referenda of self-determination (for example, Scotland in 2014), as the referendum approaches, the percentage of undecideds is likely to decline.

In recent weeks, three other polls have been conducted: two by the Quid Novi Institute and a third by Caledonia/I-Scope according to the same methodology. These last polls confirm the initial research: an uncertainty that diminishes as the referendum approaches, and a pro/anti-independence ratio that appears to crystallise in the realm of 30–40 per cent to 60–70 per cent respectively (Commission des Sondages 2018).

It is noteworthy that in the North and Islands Provinces anti-independence results have largely declined to the advantage of the pro-independence parties since 1989. In fact, in 2009 and 2014, in the Loyalty Islands, the anti-independence score obtained only 6.83 per cent and 6.89 per cent of voters (960 and 939 votes respectively) while in the first provincial elections (1989), more than 3000 Loyalty Islanders (more than 35 per cent) voted for the anti-independence camp. A similar phenomenon can be observed (but not to the same extent) in the North Province where the anti-independence score declined from 32.1 per cent in 1989 (5410 votes) to 20 per cent in 2014 (4584 votes) (statistics drawn from official results and ISEE data). However, special circumstances need to be taken into account for the North Province. Until the late 1980s there was a significant non-Kanak minority (European and other) in the north of New Caledonia, but most of these people, under land claims and other pressure from the Kanak, departed the north and resettled in Greater Noumea.

The two political camps have a diametrically opposed analysis of the overall decline in the anti-independence vote. With respect to the Loyalty Islands, the pro-independence leader Louis Kotra

Uregeï interprets this phenomenon as the progression of the pro-independence ideology within the Kanak community:

There is an evolution within the Islands' electorate. Progressively, there are lots of anti-independence people who have become pro-independence because there is a large majority of Kanak for independence. In the loyalist parties, they place Kanak in important posts to make people believe that the anti-independence parties are doing well among the Kanak ... The majority of Kanak, the colonised people, refuse this situation and want independence (Uregeï 11/5/2014).

On the other side of politics, Simon Loueckhote, former anti-independence political leader who represented New Caledonia in the French Senate, a candidate in the provincial elections in the Loyalty Islands in 2014, and a Kanak originally from Ouvéa, believes that this degradation of the loyalist vote within the Kanak population from the North and the Islands derives from pro-independence parties dominating the exercise of government since the beginning of the Matignon-Oudinot Accords that succeeded in winning the electorate's loyalty. He considers that:

The provincial elections are not representative of the progression of an ideology to the detriment of another and the referendum of self-determination alone will allow us to evaluate the extent of pro-independence sentiment among the Kanak population. I am personally persuaded that, when confronted with the choice between independence and staying within the French Republic, a good number of Kanak will opt for the latter possibility (Loueckhote 5/6/2014).¹³

Moreover, Loueckhote is of the view that pro-independence sentiment is a social reality before being a real ideology:

It is less the pro-independence ideology than a social reality that has progressed. It is simply a fact of the times for the youth in the Islands to vote for independence. This is a social phenomenon where peer pressure is strong, especially among the Kanak (ibid.).

The delayed holding of a referendum, first with the Matignon-Oudinot Accords and subsequently with the Noumea Accord, has raised uncertainty about the evolution the pro-independence ideology among the

Kanak population. Does the progression of results in favour of pro-independence parties across the different provincial elections in the North or Islands correspond with a Kanak population that has become increasingly supportive of independence over time, or is it support for, at least familiarity with, the performance in government of pro-independence parties? Or is it a combination of these two elements? Whatever the case might be, this hypothesis of a Kanak electorate sensitive to the different institutional stakes at play contributes to the uncertainty of the self-determination vote.

Conclusion

Since 1946, voting rights have allowed the Kanak to go from an invisible to a visible political world, in terms of 'modern' electoral politics. From that moment on, the acquisition of the vote offered the Kanak people a powerful place within the New Caledonian political landscape, which they in turn reshaped. Through this electoral visibility, the Kanak took on a more combative stance, marking the collective consciousness in the form of a nationalist and pro-independence struggle.

More than 40 years after the birth of pro-independence claims, New Caledonia is preparing to conclude the Accords process through a referendum of self-determination in 2018. Despite some clear trends, such as the Kanaks' large minority status and their failure to hold a majority of government at the territorial level since 1977, the result of the referendum still seems uncertain.

To predict a referendum outcome is always difficult and recent events have proven that unexpected results can eventuate: most notably the Brexit referendum and the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States, both of which occurred despite polls predicting the contrary. To confirm or contradict the polls that have determined the 'no' vote will prove successful on 4 November, several variables will play a significant role: the percentage of the pro-independence vote among Kanak but equally the votes of the non-Kanak, and the difference in participation levels between the Kanak and non-Kanak.

Several weeks from the vote, the definitive composition of the LESC (174,154 people, Haut-Commissariat de la République française 1/10/2018) reveals a possible majority of Kanak among the enrolled, whereas the seemingly stable results of the different polls, albeit with qualified validity, have

suggested a major defeat of the independence vote. There are also indications that an increase in the anti-independence vote among Kanak could eventuate in comparison with the apparent pro-independence tendency in previous provincial elections. It is more likely than not that there may not be the same correlation between the Kanak and pro-independence votes as previously seen. On the other hand, of course, it is also possible that the recent electoral polls have been entirely wrong.

Are there other elements allowing us to doubt that there will be a crushing victory for the anti-independence vote? Simon (1954) pointed to two principal 'effects' on the potential impact of a poll on a group. The 'underdog effect' plays out in favour of the candidate behind in the polls, whose partisans mobilise to overcome the deficit, while the opposite happens for supporters of the candidate ahead who believes that victory has already been achieved. In this latter scenario, the 'bandwagon effect', mobilises undecided voters in support of the favourite. Simon argues these two effects cancel each other out. It is also the case that no convincing study has yet shown that electoral polls have had a significant impact on election outcomes. However, it is important to note that recently, in the age of social media, the 'surprises' seem to multiply, recalling that in the cases of Brexit and Donald Trump, both causes were considered underdogs.

What is more certain is that the rate of abstention will likely play a particularly significant role in the vote, especially for Kanak where the phenomenon has been most prevalent. A strong mobilisation of voters in the traditionally Kanak and pro-independence communes would be a sign of a possible resurgence of the pro-independence score, whereas an average or weak participation in these communes would diminish any chance of a pro-independence victory. Overall, it is likely that there will be a stronger participation among the non-Kanak than Kanak, especially among younger non-Kanak voters (Tutugoro 2017), with a potentially significant impact on the result.

With participation rates declining across successive elections in New Caledonia for more than a decade, political leaders across the spectrum need to look into the causes of this apparent depoliticisation, at least for a portion of the population. This phenomenon goes beyond the 'yes' or 'no' to independence. Whatever the result of the referendum, however, the demographic and electoral weight of the Kanak will

remain an unavoidable variable in New Caledonian politics. Moreover, given that youth account for a high proportion of Kanak people, their electoral significance will only increase in the coming years.

Notes on authors

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

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Endnotes

1. What is termed here as a 'referendum' is technically a 'consultation', as a referendum can only be national (involving all of France).
2. The term *tribu* refers to areas of land that were designated as reserves in the colonial era and, by extension, to the Kanak population resident therein.
3. The Noumea Accord instituted a Customary Senate of sixteen members (two from each of the eight customary regions) to act as a consultative body on all matters pertaining to Kanak identity.
4. Nidoish Naisseline passed away in 2015 and his huge impact on New Caledonian political life was widely acknowledged by both sides of politics despite the relatively small size of the LKS political party.
5. The matter of potential proxy votes is rather sensitive and taboo among some political parties, notably in the Islands. Officially, political party leaders deny the existence of such documents.
6. The Haut-Commissariat de la République française (French High Commission) is the institution representing the authority of the French state in New Caledonia.

7. *La liste électorale spéciale pour la consultation pour l'autodétermination* (the special electoral list for the consultation for self-determination).
8. Between 1967 and 1972, a major surge in global nickel prices brought about what is remembered as the 'nickel boom' in New Caledonia. This saw a significant rise in migration from other parts of France to New Caledonia and increased prosperity, but also the entrenchment and exacerbation of local inequality along ethnic lines.
9. 79 per cent in 2004 and 67 per cent in 2014.
10. 72 per cent in 2004 and 66 per cent in 2014.
11. People born in New Caledonia.
12. The French constitution distinguishes between persons of 'civil status' under common law and those with 'customary status', enabling to varying degrees recourse to customary laws, customs and institutions. In New Caledonia, the large majority of Kanak have customary status, though it is possible for those born with customary status to renounce it in favour of civil status. New Caledonia's Department of Customary Affairs retains the list of persons with customary status.
13. Simon Loueckhote 5/6/2014. Interview with Pierre-Christophe Pantz, Noumea. Transcript of interview (in French) in possession of the author.

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