

Bike Lane to the Élysée

Madeleine Schwartz

The environmentalist policies of Anne Hidalgo, the Socialist mayor of Paris, have transformed the capital. Why is her presidential campaign faltering?

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Chestnot/Getty Images

Anne Hidalgo inaugurating a new bicycle path on rue de Rivoli, Paris, September 2018

Reviewed:**Une femme française**

by Anne Hidalgo

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On a Wednesday evening in December, I took a tour of a parking garage that had been transformed into housing. It was located in the northeast of Paris, in the nineteenth arrondissement, a working-class quarter that has been growing more expensive for over a decade. The building had an imposing entrance and was surrounded by thin shrubs and anemic grass. People stood by space heaters while waiting for the ribbon-cutting ceremony to celebrate 149 new apartments, the rents for 74 of them capped at between €14 and €18.5 per square meter—far less than the average cost in the neighborhood.

The project combined several policies that Paris mayor Anne Hidalgo has fought for since she was elected to the first of two terms in 2014: more housing for low- and middle-income families, less space for cars, and the use of recycled and sustainable materials in construction. In the past eight years she has transformed the French capital, making it more modern, environmentally friendly, and bikeable, and has done much to “give back space to Parisians,” according to Dominique Alba, the managing director of APUR, the city agency for urban planning.

Hidalgo has made these changes aggressively, often testing the limits of her powers as mayor. She prohibited cars from the roads along the Seine only to have the ban contested by the French Ministry of Justice. (Hidalgo prevailed: the roads are now filled with runners, not taxis.) She has built more than 43,000 units of public housing for people with lower- and middle-class incomes, including in wealthy neighborhoods. The redevelopment of the long-empty Samaritaine building near the Pont Neuf into a new department store and hotel—which opened in June with rooms starting at \$1,250 a night—included ninety-six affordable apartments with rents averaging \$504 a month.

In recognition of her efforts to build a city of the future, she has been included in rankings such as *Politico*'s "Most Influential People in Europe" (number 1 in the "Dreamers" category) and *Time* magazine's "100 Most Influential People of 2020." She talks about rubbing shoulders with San Francisco mayor London Breed and former New York mayor Michael Bloomberg. She is admired by urban planners around the world, especially in the United States. A recent article in French *Elle* notes, "It's no secret, Americans 'loooove' Paris. But if there's one thing many of them love even more than buttery croissants and Montmartre, it's Anne Hidalgo."

And yet none of this has helped her in this year's presidential election, in which she is the Socialist Party's candidate. French president Emmanuel Macron, who in 2016 founded a new centrist party, *La République en Marche*, is planning to run for reelection. But the campaign has been dominated less by his record in office than by controversies over crime, immigration, and identity politics driven by two far-right candidates, Marine Le Pen and Éric Zemmour.¹ Hidalgo has been nearly absent from debates on these issues, which are far removed from the urban planning and environmentalism she has built her career on.

Hidalgo appears to have the perfect credentials for a center-left presidential candidate. She was born "Ana Hidalgo" in Spain in 1959, and her family immigrated to France when she was two. She grew up in Lyon, where her father, Antonio ("later on, he will also like to be called Antoine," she says), worked as an electrician and her mother as a seamstress. In her book *Une femme française*, she credits her love of France to her time in school, which "gave all the children in my situation a common feeling of belonging," and describes her feelings of elation when she gained French citizenship at fourteen. She studied labor law and worked as a labor inspector, a rare woman in a male-dominated field, after which, in 1997, she became an adviser to the Socialist labor minister Martine Aubry, who is now the mayor of the northern city of Lille. Starting in 2001 Hidalgo worked her way up in Paris politics under the mentorship of her predecessor as mayor, Bertrand Delanoë, whose policies of urban renewal, such as finding new uses for the city's industrial areas, she has continued. She has three children, two from her first marriage; her second husband, Jean-Marc Germain, is also a Socialist Party politician.

Paris, like many large cities, is undergoing a housing crisis that has pushed many residents out. The average rent increased by 19 percent between 2011 and 2020, according to Geneviève Prandi of the Rent Observatory of the Paris Metropolitan Area. Officials have calculated that the larger urban region needs to build 70,000 homes a year to meet demand.

Hidalgo's commitment to addressing the problem was evident at the ribbon-cutting ceremony in December. Politicians spoke in praise of the project. "It's good for a city to look toward the future and reinvent itself by trying to rethink the place of cars, by trying to find suitable housing solutions for families," said François Dagnaud, the Socialist mayor of the nineteenth arrondissement. He was followed by Ian Brossat, Hidalgo's deputy mayor for housing and a Communist Party member who is the campaign director for its presidential candidate, Fabien Roussel. (Hidalgo governs Paris at the head of a coalition made up of the Socialist, Green, and Communist parties.) "We have a great example here of what we are able to do when we work well with the state services," he said. "This is a building that belonged to the state." The city of Paris had bought and repurposed the garage. The architects noted with pride that they had reused seven thousand tons of its materials in the construction. "That's seven hundred dumpsters that didn't cross Paris!" one said. A few minutes later, a colleague came onstage and raised the amount to ten thousand tons.

The ribbon cut, I went inside behind Stéphane Dauphin, the head of Paris Habitat, the public housing agency that had overseen the construction of the rent-regulated half of the new building. (The other half, affordable rent-to-buy housing, was overseen by a for-profit developer.) By the elevator, a woman stopped to say that she had just moved in and was thrilled—especially because the building was heated. A teacher, she had waited seven years to get public housing. Dauphin told me that he had recently been contacted by the New York State Affordable Housing Corporation, which wanted to learn more about the practice of repurposing real estate.

On my tour, I was accompanied by an Italian journalist writing his own article on Paris. He took out his phone to show us pictures of apartments he had visited that day. One was six square meters (sixty-four square feet), which left little room for more than a bed and some storage. The landlord, he said, knew it was illegal. But why should he care? It could still be rented out.

Unlike her predecessors, Hidalgo is trying to alleviate the housing shortage while also pursuing green initiatives. Construction is the largest source of nonrecyclable waste in France; new buildings alone create some 42 million tons of waste a year, according to Clara Simay, a Paris-based architect who works with sustainable materials. She notes that the city government has tried to approach the problem from all angles, most recently launching a training course to teach people to restore buildings and encouraging the use of biosourced materials like straw and hemp. Hidalgo has vowed to make Paris carbon neutral by 2050. "We won a cultural battle in Paris," says Emmanuel Grégoire, Hidalgo's deputy mayor, who oversees urban planning projects. "It's the idea that our great cities of the world...are facing a major sustainability issue." (Hidalgo did not answer questions for this article.)

Hidalgo's environmentalism has meant a careful repurposing of space in Paris, which has more than twice as many inhabitants per square mile as New York City and far fewer skyscrapers. Each square meter must be useful, environmentally friendly, attractive, and good for the inhabitants—yet also appealing to tourists. The challenge is exacerbated by Paris's strict rules about building height. In 1977, as a result of backlash against the Tour Montparnasse, a 689-foot black-clad skyscraper in the fifteenth arrondissement, a height limit of thirty-seven meters (121 feet) was imposed. Since 2010, this has been slightly relaxed: certain commercial buildings can go up to 180 meters. Hidalgo has been inventive in taking advantage of this to create housing and more greenery, arguing for creative use of public spaces and roofs. She has also cracked down on Airbnb and has passed legislation to control rents.

A large concentration of new public housing is located in neighborhoods like the nineteenth arrondissement, but Hidalgo has also managed to add low-income housing in neighborhoods whose right-wing representatives have been openly hostile to it, such as the tony sixteenth, where large Art Nouveau apartments sell for millions of euros. She has achieved this in part by working with the national government to buy up land, as with the parking garage. However, Emmanuelle Cosse, who was the French minister of housing from 2016 to 2017 under President François Hollande and now leads France's public housing agencies, notes that such renovations are “far from sufficient” to solve the housing crisis, and blamed the Macron administration for its lack of interest in the issue.

That December night in the nineteenth, Brossat, the housing deputy, described a new development in the conservative and wealthy seventh arrondissement. “The former offices of the Ministry of Defense will be transformed into 254 public housing units,” he boasted. The mayor of the seventh is Rachida Dati, who served in President Nicolas Sarkozy's right-wing government. She has said she worries that the inhabitants of her neighborhood will be “aggrieved” by public housing residents “throwing things over the balcony.”

Like Justin Trudeau or Jacinda Ardern, Hidalgo is a politician more beloved outside her country than within it. Many Parisians complain that the construction of new housing has done nothing to slow the increase in rents. *The Economist* recently ranked Paris as the second most expensive city in the world. Living there has become so costly that its population has been decreasing by about 10,000 inhabitants a year since 2014—so many that schools have reduced the number of classrooms. According to a local official, Catherine Lécuyer, the eighth arrondissement lost about 14 percent of its schoolchildren between 2020 and 2021. Some families may have left because of the difficulty of living in small apartments under pandemic restrictions, but

increasingly it is a city that only the affluent can afford. Even the food for sale has changed: between 2014 and 2017, the number of organic grocery stores increased by 47 percent.

Hidalgo, of course, cannot stop market forces or a pandemic. But many of her innovations, which have earned her prizes and recognition abroad, have encountered opposition at home. Chief among them is her effort to ban cars. She has vowed to make Paris car-free, promised to make the city entirely bikeable by 2026, and subsidized the purchases of electric bikes. These initiatives have not been met with universal admiration. Posts on social media with the hashtag #saccageParis (the ransacking of Paris) regularly point to pictures of trash on the streets or scooters blocking the sidewalks. “Until very recently, no one, or almost no one, was interested in one aspect of the Paris city hall’s actions: the methodical destruction of the heritage of the capital as we know it,” writes the art historian Didier Rykner in his new book, *La disparition de Paris*, which includes pictures of aspects of the city he finds particularly ugly.

Another problem for Hidalgo as a presidential candidate is that French people in the provinces hate Paris—both the city and what it represents. The highest-paying jobs are here, as are the best schools. Many French businesses are based here, and it is the country’s cultural and political center. Hidalgo’s supporters like to mention that French president Jacques Chirac had been mayor of Paris. But as the political scientist Olivier Rouquan notes, Chirac had also twice been minister before he ran for president—a far stronger position from which to build his national campaign.

In addition, Hidalgo doesn’t really seem to want to be president. In *Mon combat pour Paris* (2013) she wrote:

I could have been a minister, I’ve been offered it. My ambition is elsewhere. I am a candidate to become the next mayor of Paris. Unlike others, I do not consider this function as a stepping stone to a national destiny, but as a full-time job. Paris is enough in itself.

She maintained this throughout her reelection campaign in 2020, almost word for word: “I am satisfied by Paris. I will not be a presidential candidate.”

The Socialist Party, once France’s largest, won only 6 percent of the vote in the 2017 national election. Unable to decide if it is a party of workers or the elite, where it stands on questions of migration and identity politics, or what it wants to do for the French economy, the main message the party has sent in recent years is one of reticence.

While the party positions itself against the rising French right, the government of its most recent president, François Hollande (2012–2017), was responsible for evacuations of Roma camps in France and,

following deadly terrorist attacks, controversial antiterrorism legislation that many criticized as discriminatory. Between 2015 and 2020, the French newspaper *Le Monde* has calculated, the party has lost some 30 percent of its leaders, many to Macron's La République en Marche. Few Socialists have been able to respond effectively to the recent flood of far-right rhetoric. The party has lost so much money that it had to sell its historic headquarters in the seventh arrondissement and do what so many Parisians dread: move to the suburbs, in this case the much cheaper town of Ivry-sur-Seine, south of Paris.

One might expect that Hidalgo would be able to regain support for her party by pointing to her considerable achievements as mayor of the country's largest city. But instead her campaign has downplayed them, waiting months to reveal plans and platforms, as if trying to anticipate what voters want. Her problems point to those of her party—she is not well known outside Paris, and where she is, her policies are often attacked for catering to rich liberals. In Paris, the symbol of Hidalgo's time as mayor has been streets filled with bikers. But across France, bike jackets have another meaning: the *gilets jaunes* worn by antigovernment protesters since late 2018.

Une femme française, her campaign biography, was released last year and seems to point away from her time as mayor of Paris, perhaps anticipating the antipathy that many have to the capital. She only announced her platform in mid-January, after her competitors had spent months talking about fears of migrants or rising crime rates. She hasn't always known how to sell her accomplishments to voters outside Paris. As mayor, she has aggressively fought against cars. But she recently argued that the gas tax should decrease, in an attempt to appeal to rural voters.

At a campaign rally on January 22 in Aubervilliers, north of Paris, a promotional video showed Hidalgo traveling by train across France, meeting the elderly, listening to nurses, visiting a farm. Sometimes she spoke to the camera, wearing a black leather jacket. The screen flashed the names of all the cities she had visited: Amiens, Perpignan, Clermont-Ferrand. "I listened to your voices, your fears, your desires," said her voiceover. Paris appeared for a split second and disappeared.

The room was about two-thirds full; I sat toward the back behind party members who waved rainbow flags, which they dutifully returned at the end of the rally. In her speech, Hidalgo said she would raise the minimum wage, increase teacher pay, and continue to support the EU. She offered these proposals in a list, but they felt very much like possibilities rather than plans. Perhaps this was humility, but what exactly did she have in mind when she spoke of an "international court for environmental crimes"? The meaning of the campaign posters was also hard to fathom. "Samir, Léa, Sarah want public housing," one red sign said in big letters. Below, so small I could

barely read it, was added: “If the issue here for you isn’t their names, join us.” Her campaign was trying to set itself apart by pointedly not engaging with identity politics. But what was she suggesting?

Almost everyone I talked to, whether party members or sympathizers, said that they would vote for her because she was the Socialist candidate. Few cited the candidate herself. “It’s more for the values of the Socialist Party,” said Guillaume, a party member and university student studying international relations. “We have one candidate,” said Sibt Muzzamil, a politician from the town of Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, north of Paris. “Our candidate of all the Socialists will be Ms. Hidalgo. That’s it.”

The only exceptions were Franck, Cécile, and Marion, three younger party members from the southern city of Toulouse. While we listened to Daft Punk over the loudspeakers, they explained that they found the idea of the first woman mayor of Paris inspiring. Marion was particularly drawn to Hidalgo’s proposal to create a public program for childcare. “I’m a young mother,” she said.

How many parents struggle to find childcare? How many parents find themselves having to adjust their work life to balance family plans and their child’s development? It’s a crucial subject and nobody talks about it. She talks about it. She is connected to what happens in people’s lives.

It occurred to me that in three months of reporting, this was the first I had heard of this proposal in conversations about Hidalgo.

Unfortunate political decisions have also weakened Hidalgo’s campaign. In an effort to strengthen her candidacy, she called for a primary so that the left could unite behind a single choice among seven candidates, then backed off when the Green Party candidate said he would not participate. Her uncertainty muffled whatever noise she might have been able to make about her platform. Former Socialist justice minister Christiane Taubira came in first in the primary. Hidalgo, who had declared it inconsequential, came in fifth.

Even if Hidalgo remains in the race, she may not get 5 percent of the vote, the threshold required for candidates to have campaign costs reimbursed by the state. Many in the party, the political scientist Rouquan told me, are just trying to “survive” this election in the hope that things will go better in 2027, when they’ll next have a chance to put forward a candidate. According to a recent story in *Le Nouvel Obs*, “The mayor of Paris feels that she is supported by her party like a hanged man is supported by the rope.”

Perhaps nowhere is the tension between Paris and the rest of France clearer than in Hidalgo’s own backyard. The Paris metropolitan area has some 7.2 million people—comparable to many world capitals. But the city itself is small: 2.2 million. Hidalgo’s remit is much closer to

that of the mayor of Philadelphia than of the mayor of New York. She governs about thirty-eight square miles, less than two thirds the size of Brooklyn. In many ways, the city is an island: it is surrounded by a ring road, the *périphérique*, which physically and symbolically cuts it off from the 130 small towns that surround it.

Paris and its banlieues have huge inequalities—from household incomes to the number of doctors—but they need each other. Every day 800,000 people come into Paris to work, according to Pierre Mansat, who served as deputy mayor under Delanoë and Hidalgo. Parisians have always been part of a larger metropolis, says the urban geographer Aurélien Delpirou. Coordination is important to solve many of the city's problems. Hidalgo's new public housing projects, for example, cannot fix Paris's housing crisis on their own. The city added 41,354 new low- and middle-income apartments between 2014 and 2020. By 2025, one fourth of its units will be categorized as public housing. But this is not nearly enough, notes Frédéric Gilli, an economist at Sciences Po who studies urban development. "There is currently a shortage of between 400,000 and 500,000 homes in the Paris region," he says. "We will never build 400,000 to 500,000 new homes in Paris."

As mayor, Hidalgo has had to coordinate between her turf and the communes outside it, what is known as "Le Grand Paris."² A new subway system, announced in 2010 and scheduled to begin service around the time of the Summer Olympics in 2024, will connect the suburbs to the city. This has been accompanied by a new institution, the Métropole du Grand Paris, created in 2016 to link them politically, but they have not coalesced. The Métropole encompasses 131 communes, many of which align politically with the president of the Île-de-France region, Valérie Pécresse, who is the presidential candidate of the center-right Republicans.

Paris is "a capital that is folded on itself, which nevertheless lives on the enormous contribution of all its neighbors," says Mansat, the former deputy mayor, who is also considered to be an architect of Le Grand Paris. He cites Hidalgo's attempt to end Paris's pandemic lockdown before the rest of France does—without considering those who travel into the city every day to work. Delpirou notes that even as jobs and companies have moved outside the city, many of the highest-paying jobs are concentrated in Paris. Choices that might seem good for the city's inhabitants, like making the roads along the Seine car-free, may be disruptive to commuters who do not have access to the same transport options. Hidalgo's first book about the city, *Mon combat pour Paris*, describes its future as an extended metropolis. In *Le lieu de possible*, written five years later, she implicitly sets up borders by discussing "the Parisians and the visitors."

These questions are very much in the air at city hall. “I am the first to say that the institutional situation is not satisfactory and that we will have to think about it collectively in the coming months and years,” says Grégoire, Hidalgo’s deputy. He notes that Paris donates money to the surrounding areas—\$160 million this year—and has been working particularly hard to invest in and improve the areas on the edge of the city. “This is really the work of the next forty years.” In the next few months he hopes to launch a new plan to do away with the *périphérique*, transforming it into an “urban boulevard” that will be more open and greener.

“Naturally, there can be this feeling of a form of imperialism of the big over the small,” says Grégoire. Paris, he says, is huge compared to the towns around it. “But I believe that we show on a daily basis how much we try to erase this in our relations with the neighboring towns. And we do it not because we are nice, even if we are nice. I am nice! But because it is where our fellow citizens live and breathe.”

In December I asked Delpirou to show me an area on the edge of Paris that had recently changed. He chose Paris Rive Gauche, a former industrial area in the thirteenth that now houses residences and offices. As I waited for him at the métro station, I received a text message: he had twisted his ankle while riding his bike to meet me.

We met instead a few weeks later at an Italian restaurant in Station F, a former freight-train station in the thirteenth that reopened in 2017 as “the world’s largest start-up campus,” with some one thousand wannabe tech unicorns. I watched the crowds order lunch via app. One woman had a tote bag with an image of a large rooster and a logo reading, “French Tech.” I wondered why Delpirou, who does not have the polished gleam of a start-up employee, had chosen this restaurant. When he arrived, he explained that it illustrated what was wrong with Paris today: tech-focused, expensive, homogeneous. Even the food, he added, was “not very good. It’s medium plus. It’s way too expensive.... I actually find [the place] pretty unbearable.”

Once we had picked at our pasta and incoherent salad, I noted gently that while I understood the many complaints about the mayor, I had recently been home in New York and had been shocked by what I saw. In the West Village, I had walked through streets of empty storefronts, decimated by the pandemic and a lack of government coordination. I returned to Paris with the feeling of relief: finally I was in a city where it seemed that someone was in charge.

“If you knew how much I agree with you!” Delpirou exclaimed. “Yes, we have an incredible opportunity here in France.... Urban planning remains controlled by the public powers.... Of course, everything is not perfect.” He noted that he had recently been in Toronto, where he had

talked with urban planners in despair over “disgusting skyscrapers” built out of materials that wouldn’t last three years: “We’re light-years away from that.”

We walked along the Avenue de France, which is meant to resemble the Haussmannian boulevards of central Paris and is lined with modern buildings and new trees. Delpirou showed me the area’s different stages of development under successive mayors, including the imposing new Bibliothèque nationale de France, inaugurated in 1996. The next stage of linking the city with the suburbs is currently underway, but the plans are being revised, according to Grégoire. It is not possible to say how Paris will reach out to its neighbors.

I left Delpirou and walked down the Avenue de France. The end of Paris looked fixed. Any further and you would fall off or crash into the *périphérique*. Two controversial new buildings designed by the French architect Jean Nouvel hovered overhead—thirty-nine stories of offices and luxury hotel rooms. On the other side of the ring road was the town of Ivry, long a stronghold of the left, where large apartment buildings jutted out like teeth. The avenue ended at a concrete barricade topped with a wire fence. Graffiti in English said, “Fuck Them Middle Class.” The *périphérique* blocked the view. Below it, train tracks led out of Paris. The suburbs seemed very close, and at the same time I couldn’t figure out how to get to them.

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1. See James McAuley, “Who Does Éric Zemmour Speak For?” *The New York Review*, January 13, 2022. ↩
2. See *Atlas du Grand Paris: Une métropole en mutations*, edited by Daniel Béhar and Aurélien Delpirou (Paris: Autrement, 2020). ↩