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The 2018-2021 sequence of referendums in New Caledonia: The uselessness of a 'Yes/No' referendum in divided societies

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Abstract: New Caledonia was first settled around 4,000 years ago by the ancestors of today's Indigenous Kanak population. France annexed the territory in 1853, and Kanak people only obtained citizenship after World War II. As a former settlement colony, New Caledonia remains deeply divided along political and ethnic lines: citizens of European origin generally support remaining within France, while many Kanak advocate for the independence of Kanaky. The 1998 Nouméa Agreement – negotiated by the French government, separatist leaders, and autonomist parties – established a gradual transfer of powers and provided for three self-determination referendums. Votes held in 2018 and 2020 rejected independence with 56% and 53% "No" results. However, the third referendum in 2021 took place without consensus during the COVID pandemic and was boycotted by pro-independence parties, undermining its legitimacy. Despite this referendum sequence, the core issues remained unresolved. Persistent inequalities, combined with the failure of both local and national leaders to advance an inclusive nation-building process during the 25 years of the Nouméa Agreement, created growing tensions. These culminated in deadly riots in May 2024, which devastated the economy and further weakened the fragile political framework. It is now essential to draw lessons from the shortcomings of this process.

Keywords: Kanaky-New Caledonia, referendum, emancipation process, France, split society

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Introduction

New Caledonia is a French territory in the southwest Pacific Ocean, located to the northeast of Australia. It is an archipelago consisting of a large main island, called *Grande Terre*, as well as the Loyalty Islands and several other smaller islands. The total land area of New Caledonia is 19,100 km², and its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) covers more than 1.7 million km² of ocean, representing over 15% of France's EEZ. Moreover, the French government considers New Caledonia to be of particular geopolitical interest, as it occupies a strategic position within the Indo-Pacific axis (French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2025). According to the 2025 census, New Caledonia has a population of 264,596 inhabitants, compared with 271,407 in 2019.

New Caledonia was first settled several thousand years ago by the ancestors of the present-day Melanesian inhabitants, known as the *Kanak*. It was annexed by France in 1853 and became a French colony. In 1887, Indigenous peoples throughout the French colonial empire became subject to the *Code de l'indigénat*, a statute that imposed restrictions on movement and established an authoritarian system of local governance, denying fundamental rights to Indigenous populations (Muckle, 2025). This system remained in place until 1946, when the territory became an 'overseas territory' (*territoire d'outre-mer*, or 'TOM'). This change gradually allowed the Kanak to obtain French citizenship and the right to vote, enabling

increasing participation in local politics. From the late 1960s onward, demands for greater autonomy from France progressively evolved into a broad-based Kanak independence movement.

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, as the French government began to roll back the autonomy it had previously granted, the independence movement intensified, eventually leading to civil war (Campbell, 2009). In 1983, the Nainville-les-Roches discussions between the French government and both separatist and pro-autonomy representatives marked an important step in New Caledonia's self-determination process. These discussions resulted in an agreement recognising, on the one hand, the innate right of the Kanak people to self-determination and, on the other hand, affirming the participation of other communities that had settled in the territory in future self-determination referendums. These communities included the descendants of European settlers ('Caldoches'), people from Wallis and Futuna (another French territory in the Pacific), and several smaller communities from the wider Pacific and Asia. Since 1853, immigration from France and other colonies has turned New Caledonia into a settler colony, laying the foundations for a deeply divided society (David, 2019). In 1988, the Matignon Agreement was signed to end the civil war. This agreement, reached between the French government and local leaders from both the pro-independence and autonomist camps, established a framework of autonomy. It committed New Caledonia to a process of gradual political emancipation and provided for a referendum on self-determination ten years later, in 1998.

Nevertheless, the assassination of Jean-Marie Tjibaou, the pro-independence leader, by a Kanak extremist in 1989 led Jacques Lafleur, the autonomist leader, to propose postponing the 1998 referendum, fearing a resurgence of violence. A new agreement was subsequently signed in Nouméa on 5 May 1998 (*Accord sur la Nouvelle-Calédonie*) (Chappell, 1999; Fisher, 2024).

The Nouméa Agreement provides for:

- A high degree of autonomy within the French Republic, including a parliament with legislative powers and a multi-party government, as well as the territorial division of New Caledonia into three provinces to ensure the sharing of political power. The institutional design reflects a consociational arrangement (Choudhry, 2008).
- Not one, but three, self-determination referendums, allowing the population to vote on New Caledonia's accession to independence, which could be held from 2014 onwards.

The referendum process finally began in 2018. It ultimately resulted in a deadlock. It is therefore worth examining why the referendum process failed to conclude the question of self-determination and what lessons can be drawn from this outcome.

The referendum process

The referendums were organised within a framework defined by the Nouméa Agreement and statutory law. While the first two referendums resulted in a stalemate between supporters and opponents of independence, failures in the management of the third referendum – and the events that followed – plunged New Caledonia into chaos, culminating in the insurrectionary crisis of May 2024.

The referendum process framework

The Nouméa Agreement established both a restricted electorate and a strict timetable. Not all French citizens residing in New Caledonia were eligible to participate in the consultations. The electorate for the referendums was restricted to persons of Kanak customary

civil status (corresponding to most Kanak people), natives of New Caledonia, and individuals who had resided in New Caledonia since no later than 31 December 1994. The negotiators of the Nouméa Agreement reached consensus on requiring a minimum residence period of twenty years by the time the first referendum could be held, i.e., early 2015 at the earliest. Because the electoral roll was 'frozen' on 31 December 2014, this ultimately led to the exclusion of people who had been living in New Caledonia for up to 27 years by the time of the third consultation. Approximately 30,000 people were excluded from the electorate.

As New Caledonia is a deeply divided society (Lijphart, 1984) along politico-ethnic lines, it is essential to understand the demographic distribution of the various communities living in the archipelago. Voting behaviour on independence is strongly correlated with community affiliation: Kanak people vote overwhelmingly in favour of independence, whereas most other communities are broadly opposed. Based on the 2019 census, it is estimated that roughly half of New Caledonia's population is of Kanak origin. While 41% identified as 'Kanak', others of Kanak descent identified with multiple communities as mixed-race. The European community represents about one-quarter of the total population. This group is heterogeneous, comprising both long-established families known as 'Caldoches' and more recent arrivals from mainland France. Among the latter, some were not eligible to vote in the self-determination referendums because they did not meet the residence requirement. People from Wallis and Futuna – another French overseas territory in the South Pacific – make up about 8% of New Caledonia's population. Historically autonomist, the Wallisian and Futunan community has become increasingly diverse in its political views. This diversity is reflected in the position of the 'Éveil océanien' party: "yes, but not now". The party, which emerged during the 2019 provincial elections to provide political representation for a largely invisible Wallisian and Futunan community, quickly defined itself as a "third way", promoting an Oceanian perspective beyond the binary divisions surrounding New Caledonia's independence. Many smaller communities, mainly from other Pacific islands or Asia – generally considered unlikely to support independence – also contribute to this human mosaic.

In an innovative approach, the Nouméa Agreement did not provide for a single referendum at the end of the process but instead allowed for up to three successive referendums, each spaced at most two years apart. The mechanism was as follows: a first referendum was to be held between 2014 and 2018. If the vote favoured independence, the process would end, and the French Republic would be required to support the transformation of the territory into a sovereign State. If the result was negative, one-third of the members of the local assembly could request a second referendum to be held within two years. The same rules would then apply; a second rejection could trigger the organisation of a third and final referendum. After this last consultation, the Nouméa Agreement provided that New Caledonia would either become independent, if the vote was favourable, or that political partners would reconvene "to examine the situation thus created".

The course of the referendum process

Three referendums were eventually organised in 2018, 2020 and 2021. Until the second consultation, the self-determination process in New Caledonia was considered exemplary. Nevertheless, the French government's change of position from early 2021, and its abandonment of the role of neutral arbitrator, compromised the smooth running of the process.

Following a highly polarised campaign, the first referendum was held on 4 December 2018 (David, 2019; Maclellan, 2019). While the polls predicted a clear victory for the NO vote, the result was much closer than expected: 57% for NO and 43% for YES, with a high – though common for this type of consultation – participation rate of 81%.

As provided for in the Nouméa Agreement, a second referendum was held two years later, on 4 October 2020, asking exactly the same question: "Do you want New Caledonia to accede to full sovereignty and become independent?". With an even higher participation rate of 85.7%, the result was also tighter: 53% for NO and 47% for YES. The increase of around 4% for the YES vote can be explained by the change in strategy of a small separatist party, the Parti Travailliste (Brouard and Gorohouna, 2021). Having encouraged abstention in 2018 in protest over the electoral rolls, the party campaigned for a YES vote in 2020. The increase in the YES vote therefore cannot be interpreted as a shift of part of the electorate from the autonomist to the pro-independence camp. Voting remained strongly aligned with ethnic divisions, with most Kanak people voting for independence and other communities voting against it.

It had already become clear by then that a third referendum would not resolve the issue, as it was likely to produce similar results and reconfirm the status quo: almost half the population wanted independence, while the other half did not. One lesson is evident: in a deeply divided society – especially along ethno-political lines – a binary consultation such as a YES/NO referendum is ineffective, as people tend to vote in line with their community identity.

Why, then, continue asking the same question? Although the statutory law provided for three referendums on the same question, the Nouméa Agreement, incorporated into the French Constitution, did not require this. Considering the results of the first two referendums, and with a third already requested, it would have been possible to ask a different question or propose an alternative institutional arrangement, such as an 'associated state' on the model of the Cook Islands or Niue: an approach that might have been considered a 'third way'. Only an amendment to the statutory law was needed to enable this (David, 2020). Nevertheless, this possibility was not even considered – neither by the French government nor by local political leaders – each side believing it was about to win the third referendum and refusing compromise.

The organisation of the third referendum ultimately confirmed the failure of the process to reach a lasting solution for New Caledonia. The change of government in France in July 2020, during the COVID crisis, involving the departure of Édouard Philippe – Prime Minister since 2017 and who had handled the 'Caledonian issue' skilfully – resulted in a significant shift in the French government's position. A series of political missteps undermined the process begun in 1988 with the Matignon–Oudinot Agreements.

The main point of contention concerned the timing of the third and final consultation provided for in the Nouméa Agreement (David, 2022). Autonomist leaders and the French government wanted to organise the vote as soon as possible, fearing further gains for independence. Separatist leaders, on the contrary, called for adherence to the previously agreed schedule. In 2019, the date of the second referendum had been set with reference to the national electoral calendar. It was then agreed that the third referendum would not be held between mid-September 2021 and the end of August 2022, as presidential and legislative elections were scheduled from April to June 2022. The third consultation was therefore expected to take place in the last quarter of 2022. As Prime Minister Édouard Philippe noted in 2019: "It seemed to us collectively that it was preferable to clearly distinguish between national electoral deadlines and those specific to the future of New Caledonia" (Smith, 2022, July 26). Two years later, however, the French government decided to schedule the final vote for October 2021, and the electoral campaign began in August 2021 despite separatist objections.

In September 2021, COVID-19 entered New Caledonia for the first time, ending a year and a half without the virus. As many Indigenous people refused vaccination, they were the first victims of the epidemic. Separatist leaders then requested a postponement of the referendum to allow for mourning, as in Kanak culture the passage of a deceased person from the world of the living to the world of the dead must occur peacefully for both the departed and the living

(Ogier-Guindo, 2011). Unresponsive to these requests, the French government kept the date. The Minister of Overseas Territories, declared that "in a democracy, elections are held on time", while autonomist leaders accused Kanak leaders of instrumentalising culture and bereavement to delay the vote (Kowasch et al., 2022).

Convinced that the referendum could not be held under appropriate conditions, and that campaigning would be impossible while families were conducting traditional mourning rituals, separatist leaders called for non-participation. They urged supporters to stay home. As a result, turnout fell below 44%, and 96.5% of votes were against independence. Although legally valid, this third referendum had no political legitimacy. It merely reconfirmed the profound division within Caledonian society over its relationship with France and the need to develop a consensual solution somewhere between independence and the status quo—perhaps in the form of an associated State. However, the questionable decision to hold the referendum in December 2021 despite the pandemic was followed by further regrettable actions by the French executive, deepening the political crisis and blocking negotiations that were meant to examine "the situation thus created", as specified in the Nouméa Agreement. In this context, it is clear that most of the difficulties encountered before, during, and after the third consultation stemmed from a fundamental misunderstanding of time.

A misconception of time

"To be able to say that we are wasting time, we must be in a system where gaining time is recognized as a value", said Jean-Marie Tjibaou, the Kanak independence leader assassinated in 1989 (Tjibaou et al., 1976). This statement partly explains the misunderstandings that marked the conclusion of the process set out in the Nouméa Agreement. Beyond the French government's misguided handling of the final stages of the Caledonian emancipation process, it appears that the inability of political actors to take the necessary time to prepare the referendum sequence and its aftermath was central to the failure to bring the Nouméa Agreement to a successful close.

The misconception of time before and during the referendum sequence

A key factor in the obvious failure of the *day after* clearly stems from the wholly unproductive approach to time adopted by both national and local authorities throughout the transition period. The lack of preparation for the *day after* (David et al., 2017) is striking. When the Nouméa Agreement was signed in 1998, it was established that it would conclude between 2014 – when the first possible referendum could be held – and 2022 – the latest possible date for a third referendum. The timetable had thus been known since 1998, and its long duration should have made it possible to work on the *day after*, at least by developing scenarios grounded in a shared vision for Caledonian society. The Nouméa Agreement states this explicitly: "The past was the time of colonisation. The present is the time of sharing, through rebalancing. The future will be the time of identity, in a shared destiny" (Preamble, Point 4). The message is clear: the period of implementation was meant to lay the foundations for a future that combined respect for each community's identity with the construction of a shared way of life: of a "We, the people." This necessarily implied anticipating the pathways toward that nation-building goal (Muckle, 2009).

The absence of political debate in the years preceding the referendum sequence is therefore all the more striking. Combined with the refusal of both local and national political actors to encourage citizen participation in developing a societal project, the failure of public authorities resulted in a complete lack of preparation for the *day after* (David, 2017). Neither the 2018 referendum nor the 2020 consultation led the French government or local political

forces to initiate any work on a societal project that could underpin a new institutional status. No serious forward-looking work was undertaken even after the third and final consultation.

With hindsight, it becomes clear that such referendums are counterproductive, as they deepen divisions between communities and hinder nation building, given that the entirety of political life becomes focused on the binary question to be decided. The New Caledonian case illustrates this perfectly: political debate remained centred on the issue of the relationship with the French Republic throughout the implementation of the Nouméa Agreement, to the detriment of discussions on a societal project and nation building.

Beyond this collective failure by political actors – and their lack of interest in citizen-led initiatives – the period following the second consultation of 4 October 2020, and extending to the present, highlights the French government's persistent failure to consider the importance of timing in managing the exit from the Nouméa Agreement.

First, as mentioned above, there was a clear timing error when the French government decided in 2021 to press ahead with a third and final referendum. The refusal to take into account Oceanian perceptions of time led New Caledonia into an impasse from which it has yet to emerge. As Jean-François Merle noted at the time: "The relationship to time is also a fundamental characteristic of Oceanian societies, and the time of mourning takes precedence over that of politics" (Merle, 2021). This difference in temporal perceptions between Western and Oceanian cultures is essential and appears to have been ignored by the French authorities after 2021 (David, 2025b).

Timing was again poorly handled when, in July 2022, Emmanuel Macron and his new prime minister, Élisabeth Borne, appointed the leader of the pro-France movement, Sonia Backès, to the French government. This decision was particularly ill-advised: ironically, she was made Secretary of State for Citizenship and placed under the authority of the Minister of the Interior and Overseas Territories, who was responsible for negotiations on New Caledonia's future status.

Later, in December 2023, despite negotiations finally making slow progress, the French government decided to unilaterally reform the electoral body for local elections, against the will of separatist leaders. Arguing that discussions were not moving quickly enough, the government justified the reform on the grounds that delays would prevent the organisation of the May 2024 local elections with a more open electoral roll: one of the most sensitive issues under negotiation. Despite countless warnings about the risks to public order posed by a non-consensual reform, the President and his government persisted. Blockades across the territory escalated into violent and deadly riots in Nouméa, resulting in 14 deaths, numerous injuries, enormous material damage, and profound social and societal consequences (Belanyi & David, 2024; Tevahitua, 2024). The riots ultimately forced the withdrawal of the reform.

By refusing to allow sufficient time for a comprehensive agreement once tripartite negotiations resumed, the balance of power imposed by the national executive reopened old wounds and set New Caledonia back decades: politically, socially, and economically.

Consensus takes time

One might have thought that a lesson would be learned from this waste and that the need to take time would now be accepted. The riots of May 2024 are indeed the violent but obvious consequences of the failure of the Nouméa agreement to seal the common destiny. In such a context, one might therefore have expected that electoral reform and holding of provincial elections would no longer be the be-all and end-all of the negotiation process.

However, still refusing to separate statutory negotiations and the organisation of provincial elections already postponed three times (from May 2024 to November 2024, then to November 2025, then to June 2026), the French government locked himself into a method that, unsurprisingly, resulted in a lack of consensus. By pushing too hard for an agreement within a timeframe that became untenable as the negotiations dragged on, the French government appears to have definitively ended the consensus-based approach that had prevailed since the 1980s. Indeed, if the government managed to secure a draft agreement signed on 12 July 2025, in the city of Bougival, near Paris (David, 2025-1), it was ultimately not ratified by all parties, as activists and leaders of the FLNKS, representing a significant portion of the Kanak population, refused to validate the agreement in August 2025. Nevertheless, two member parties of the FLNKS withdrew from the movement and approved the Bougival agreement, in a version amended in January 2026.

By revisiting what had been agreed in Bougival – namely, that what had been signed was not a final agreement but a draft agreement that the signatories undertook to defend before the activists and leaders of their respective political parties for validation – and by refusing to resume negotiations in light of the FLNKS political bureau's refusal to finally validate the Bougival agreement, the French government once again imposed its perception of time on the process and refused to take into account the perception of time of Kanak people. By urging the discussions, in opposition with the Oceanian culture of consensus, this led the negotiation process once again at the standstill.

The agreement thus obtained was not consensual and no one knows to what extent it reflects the will of the Caledonian population, the content of which no one knows as the campaigns for the three referendums focused on the relationship with France, to the detriment of the proposal by the different political currents of a societal project. In the absence of a participatory process for building such societal project, it cannot be otherwise. It is evident that, despite the obvious necessity to facilitate a participatory process in the construction of New Caledonia's future status, the time factor is once again being employed as a means to supersede popular sentiment, given the temporal demands inherent in such processes.

Nevertheless, the constitutional bill intended to ratify the Bougival Agreement was rejected by the National Assembly on 2 April 2026, following a vote by both left-wing and far-right MPs. There were two main reasons for this rejection. The first relates to the content of the Bougival Agreement. For the left-wing parties, a non-consensual agreement, which did not include one of the historic partners—and, moreover, one representing the indigenous people—could not be implemented, and it was therefore necessary to reopen negotiations. For the far-right MPs, the Bougival Agreement went too far in the autonomy granted to New Caledonia and was therefore unacceptable. The second reason for the rejection of the constitutional bill lay in the introduction of an article proposing a fourth postponement of local elections, until the end of 2026, even though the French Constitutional Council had ruled in November 2025 that such a decision would undermine the constitutional principle of periodicity of elections.

The logical response from the French government should have been to acknowledge the National Assembly’s disagreement, and then organise local elections before the end of June 2026 and restart a round of negotiations to try to reach a new agreement.

This was not the case. The French government, led by Prime Minister Sébastien Lecornu, refuses to accept the consequences of the National Assembly’s vote and to abandon the electoral reform on the one hand, and the forced implementation of the Bougival Agreement on the other.

Faced with the refusal of the most radical pro-government political parties to engage in talks with the FLNKS, the government has set up discussions taking place with two separate groups. In this highly fragmented context, Sébastien Lecornu proposed three scenarios to New Caledonian political actors on April 10, 2026.

The first two scenarios aim to try to override the disagreement of parliamentarians and the FLNKS. The first scenario would amount to a forced push-through, posing a threat to civil peace in New Caledonia. The Prime Minister is in fact proposing to call provincial elections by June 28, 2026, the deadline set by the French Constitutional Council, but with the electorate body defined by the Bougival agreement. Fortunately, this scenario remains theoretical, as any significant change to the electorate body requires a constitutional reform, which is now impossible before June 2026 elections. In the second scenario, the provincial elections would also be called by June 28, 2026 but within the framework of a 'small transitional agreement', according to the terms used in the document released by the Government. This "small agreement" would formalise the "consensus provisions" arising, in particular from the Bougival Agreement. An adjustment to the electorate would also be formalised, which the government believes, in a highly controversial move, can be achieved without constitutional reform. The proposed measure would open up the electorate to around 15,000 people, representing approximately 8.5% of the current electorate. New Caledonians would be consulted on this "small transitional agreement", and a new round of political discussions would begin, leading , hopefully, towards a comprehensive agreement. Finally, the third scenario is one in which nothing happens: no implementation of the Bougival Agreement due to the lack of constitutional reform, an end to negotiations on the Bougival project and no consultation with New Caledonians. Provincial elections would anyway be held by the end of June 2026.

At present, all the propositions are falling on deaf ears. The FLNKS refuses any substantial reform of the electorate body outside of a global agreement. They only agree to the inclusion of New Caledonian natives, around 10,000 people, i.e. 5% of the electorate. On the other side, the radical autonomist parties refuse to negotiate in the absence of an electoral reform. In the centre of the political arena, the more moderate parties – both separatists and unionists – are watching, helplessly, at this fruitless political struggle.

Conclusion

Recent events have made it abundantly clear that the three referendums held in 2018, 2020 and 2021 were of no practical use. In a divided society, the results of such consultations are not only consistent with, but serve to reinforce, pre-existing societal divisions. The 2026 consultation on the Bougival Agreement, if it takes place, will not be any more conclusive, as it would once again impose a binary choice to New Caledonians. In light of the intransigence exhibited by local representatives on both sides and the French government, it appears that the only means of arriving at a consensual and enduring solution is through the initiation of a participatory process, with the objective of achieving a status that reflects a vision for a Caledonian society, which remains to be formulated. While it appears evident in the present day that a consensual resolution may be found in an associated state status, such as that of the Cook Islands, it is imperative to invest time in identifying a consensual method to achieve this.

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