

Public narratives and attitudes towards refugees and other migrants

France country profile

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Key messages

French immigration policy is driven by an assimilationist approach that seeks full integration of the migrant population into French society. This approach has influenced public attitudes and narratives, sparking debate around who gets to be French and contributing to further segregation rather than integration.

Immigration is generally not a key issue in public opinion polls, despite being a hot topic politically. It spiked in importance following the arrival of large numbers of refugees in Europe in 2016, but quickly decreased in line with trends in other European countries.

In 2018 positive attitudes towards immigration surpassed negative attitudes in France for the first time since surveys began in 2002, though they remain more negative than in other European countries. The biggest concern continues to be whether refugees and other migrants will effectively integrate into French society.

The key public narrative in France has been one of ‘us against them’, which sees immigrants as an ‘out group’ that is unwilling to adapt to the French way of life. This framing has been strengthened with the conflation of ‘immigration’ and ‘Islam’, terms often used synonymously in political debate on the issue.

About this publication

This briefing presents an overview of the key features of migration and asylum policy in France, recent trends in migration patterns and public perceptions and political narratives on refugees and other migrants. It is part of a wider project supported by the IKEA Foundation aimed at supporting public and private investors interested in engaging with migration and displacement.

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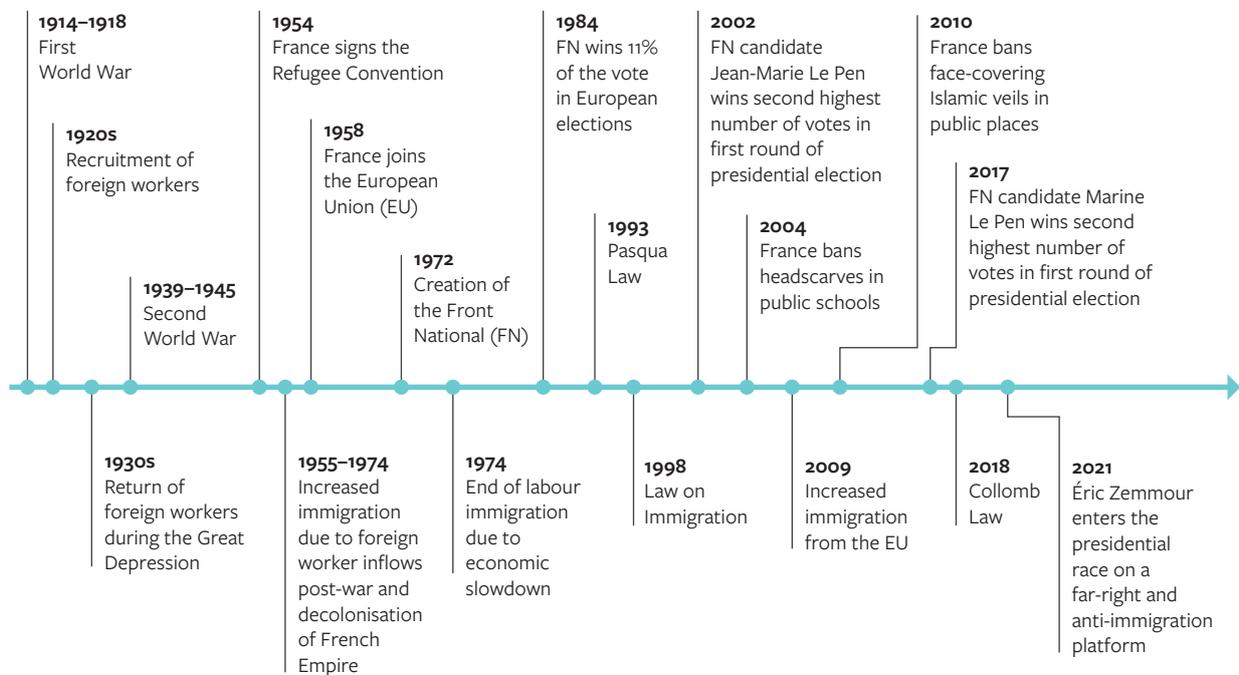
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1 History of immigration in France

Immigration into France in the twentieth century is a repeating story of war, increased economic migration and decreased migration following an economic downturn. Following the First World War, France recruited workers from other countries – namely Armenia, Czechoslovakia, Italy, Poland and Portugal – as well as its colonies, particularly Algeria, to fill the labour shortages created by the high mortality rate of the war. Between 1921 and 1930, for example, France’s Polish population went from 45,000 to 500,000, the majority of whom worked in mining (Kaya, 2002). With the economic crisis of the 1930s, many of these immigrants were forced to leave (see Figure 1). By 1936, half of foreign workers are estimated to have returned home, following growing public hostility and the introduction of policies favouring French workers (Koser, 2009).

Between 1955 and 1974, France again welcomed workers from Poland, Germany, Italy and other countries to help sustain post-war economic growth. Others came to France because of the wars of independence of the 1950s and 1960s, particularly from the French colony of Algeria (Hamilton et al., 2004). When the Algerian War of Independence ended the recruitment of Algerian workers to France, Moroccan immigration increased (de Haas, 2014). Unlike other European countries, France encouraged migrants to settle permanently (Guiraudon, 2001).

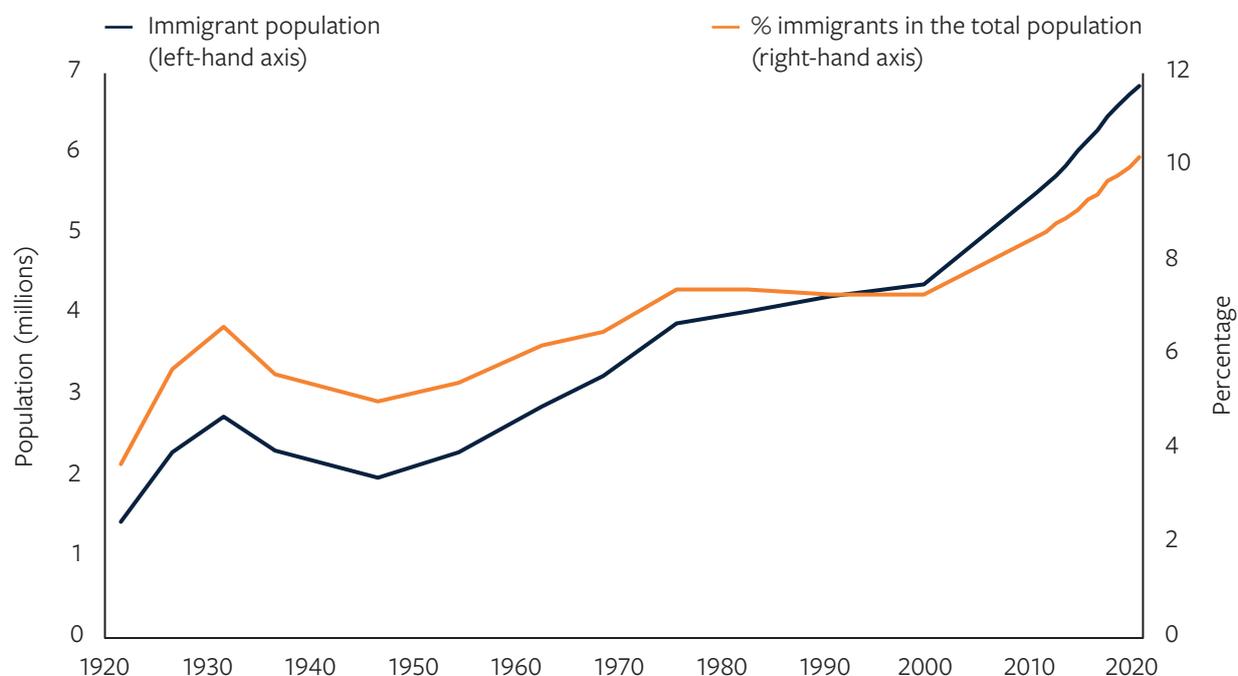
Figure 1 Timeline of immigration to France



Following the 1973 oil shock and the slowing of the economy, immigration numbers dropped significantly, similar to trends across Europe. From the mid-1970s to 2000, the immigrant population essentially flatlined (see Figure 2), a result of both increasingly restrictive migration policies and growing public hostility (Koser, 2009). For example, in 1974 France closed its borders to migrant workers from North Africa, who previously had been able to work in France for several years before returning home and being replaced by other workers (Bertossi, 2020). The early 1970s also saw the establishment of the xenophobic and anti-immigration Front National (FN). Support for the FN has never dipped below 5% at any national election (ibid.). In 2002 and 2017, the FN won the second highest number of votes in the first round of the presidential election, but lost to Jacques Chirac and Emmanuel Macron respectively in the second round. Since 2018, the FN has been known as the National Rally (Rassemblement National).

Between 1990 and 1999, France was the only European Union (EU) member state to experience a decrease in its foreign population, with one out of four immigrants who entered since 1990 leaving by 1999, in part due to the weak economy (Guiraudon, 2001). The right-wing coalition elected used the principle of ‘zero immigration’ to create policies – the Pasqua Law in 1993 – that stemmed legal immigration flows to France in multiple ways, including extending the waiting period for family reunification and denying spouses residence permits if they had been in France illegally before marrying (ibid.). The 1998 Law on Immigration reversed some of these restrictions for students, highly skilled professionals and some highly qualified temporary workers (ibid.).

Figure 2 Growth of the immigrant population in France, 1921–2020



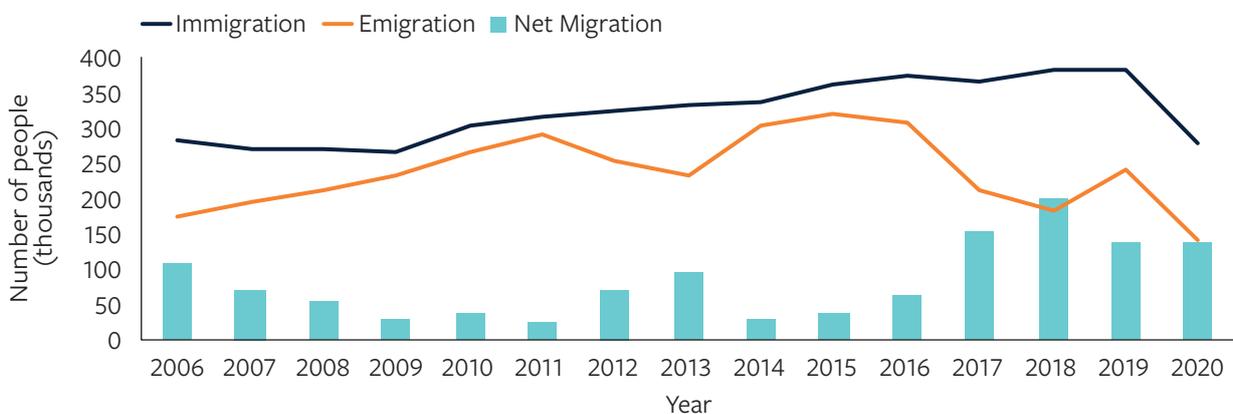
Note: In France the definition of ‘immigrant population’ includes those who have come to France and acquired French nationality as well as non-nationals. Figures for 2019 and 2020 are provisional.

Source: INSEE, 2022

Between 2006 and 2016, net migration remained steady, with similar numbers of people entering and leaving the country (Brutel, 2014; INSEE, 2022; see Figure 3). After the 2008 economic crisis through to at least 2014, the majority of people entering France were European, particularly from Portugal, Italy and Spain (SudOuest.fr, 2014). France did not experience the same peak of refugees as seen in Germany or Sweden, which implemented more open policies (Holloway et al., 2021b; 2021c). Moreover, immigrants arriving in France were not reflective of the political turmoil in the Arab world; in 2017, most asylum-seekers were from Albania, whereas Syria ranked only sixth in terms of the nationality of asylum-seekers in France at the time (Le Bras, 2019). In 2020, the largest immigrant populations in France were from Algeria (12.7%), Morocco (12%), Portugal (8.6%), Tunisia (4.5%), Italy (4.1%), Turkey (3.6%) and Spain (3.5%) (INSEE, 2021). As of 2021, France is home to a smaller proportion of immigrants than almost all of its neighbours, and immigration flows to France have increased at a slower pace than to the rest of Europe over the past decade (Onishi, 2021). However, in the context of falling birth rates since 2015, with births only slightly higher than deaths, migration is the main driver of population growth in the country (Papon and Beaumel, 2021).

In recent years migrants have gathered in northern France, near Calais, before attempting to reach the United Kingdom (UK) (Bajekal, 2015). Between 1999 and 2002, the French Red Cross ran an official camp inside a former Eurotunnel factory in Sangatte, which was repurposed to accommodate 200 people but ended up holding 2,000 (Bouchaud, 2014). When it closed, migrants relocated to a makeshift camp, known as ‘The Jungle’. Migrants have continued to assemble there over the past two decades, despite frequent attempts by the government to clear the area. Another official migrant centre opened in Calais in 2014 to respond to a sudden increase in refugees in the area (ibid.). The latest iteration of the camp was dismantled in 2016, displacing more than 8,000 people (BBC, 2016). Calais remains a temporary home for those seeking to make the Channel crossing to the UK; as of October 2021, around 2,000 migrants were living in makeshift encampments there, with several hundred more in a forest near Dunkirk, facing weekly, and sometimes daily, threats of eviction (Human Rights Watch, 2021). How to deal with the situation in Calais is a point of tension between the French and UK governments.

Figure 3 Recent migration trends in France



Source: INSEE, 2022

2 Current French immigration system and approach

The current immigration system and approach in France is based on decades of legislation, with 21 laws passed between 1986 and 2018. This is reflective of the political importance of immigration policy in France, with every new Interior Minister drafting a new law to demonstrate their commitment to protecting France's borders (Haguenau-Moizard, 2018; Skorpis, n.d.). Some of this legislation, such as the Pasqua Law and the Collomb Law, are referred to by the name of the Interior Minister at the time.

The Collomb Law, passed in 2018, shortened the deadline for asylum applications, doubled the time migrants could be detained and introduced a one-year prison sentence for anyone found to have entered France illegally, in an attempt to speed up the asylum process and make the deportation system more efficient (BBC, 2018; Haguenau-Moizard, 2018). Critics argue that the law treats migrants, including children, as criminals, and that shortened deadlines prejudice the most vulnerable migrants (BBC, 2018).

With an election looming in April 2022, the French government is once again stepping up its rhetoric and making immigration policies more restrictive. In September 2021, the government announced it would reduce the number of visas for Algerian and Moroccan nationals by half, and those for Tunisian nationals by almost a third, since these countries have been unwilling to accept irregular migrants deported from France (Protard et al., 2021). Yet, a recent survey found that immigration ranked as only the fourth most important issue in the lead-up to the election, behind the cost of living, the healthcare system and the environment (Gallard and Teinturier, 2022).

France's approach to integration is one of cultural assimilation. This 'assumes that a common foundation is needed for social and national cohesion' (Kaya, 2002: 37). The idea that one can become French by adopting French values and culture is rooted in French colonial rule (Dennison and Taló, 2017). An assimilationist approach often results in a liberal naturalisation policy (see Box 1), since giving immigrants the same rights and responsibilities as nationals is seen as the best way for migrants to successfully integrate in their local communities (Kaya, 2002). During the Covid-19 pandemic, French naturalisation policies became more liberal for key workers who had 'proved their commitment to the country', shortening the time needed in country from five years to just two (Noland, 2021: n.p.). This policy also determines the type of data held by France, as the government does not collect statistics on race as doing so would be 'an obstacle to both integration and national solidarity' (Hamilton et al., 2004: n.p.; Onishi, 2020). Data collection instead captures country of birth, nationality at birth and current nationality (INSEE, 2019). However, these alternative measures do not reflect the diversity of France's population as directly as approaches used in other countries.

Box 1 Overview of French immigration and asylum policies

French naturalisation policy

Immigrants who wish to obtain French citizenship must be at least 18 years old and have lived in France for a minimum of five years. The duration is reduced in certain cases, for example if acquiring citizenship through marriage to a French citizen. It is necessary to have a valid residence permit and not be subject to a deportation order. Applicants must prove assimilation into French society by adhering to the fundamental values and principles of the Republic, displaying a sufficient knowledge of French history, culture and business and speaking French. They must also show employment, sufficient and stable resources, have good morals and must not have been convicted of a crime (French Government, 2021c).

French asylum policy

People who come to France seeking asylum must contact the border authorities upon arrival or at the prefecture where they arrived or where they live. Upon application, the prefecture issues an asylum-seeker certificate, and the asylum application is submitted to the Office Français de Protection des Réfugiés et Apatrides (OFPRA), which examines the file for asylum or subsidiary protection and summons the applicant for an interview (French Government, 2021a). While waiting for their application to be reviewed, asylum-seekers have the right to accommodation in a reception centre or in temporary accommodation, to work after the first six months, to receive an allowance, to access healthcare and to enrol their children in school (French Government, 2021b).

In practice, accommodation is only provided when there is capacity, and a substantial number of asylum-seekers – roughly 50% – remain without accommodation every year (Delbos and Tripier, 2021). To enter the labour market, an asylum-seeker needs a temporary work permit, which requires a job offer or contract. To benefit from healthcare, an asylum-seeker must first reside in France for three months. For asylum-seekers whose children do not speak French, specialised language training is limited, if provided at all (ibid.).

The assimilationist approach has led to additional requirements for naturalisation and restrictive policies that curtail religious expression. In 2003, the government introduced an ‘integration contract’ requiring migrants to follow French values and norms, and from 2011 applicants for French citizenship have been required to take a citizenship test (Dennison and Taló, 2017). Headscarves (and other religious symbols) are banned in public schools, and face-covering Islamic veils (e.g. burqas and niqabs) and, more recently, ‘burkinis’ are prohibited in public places (ibid.; see Box 2).

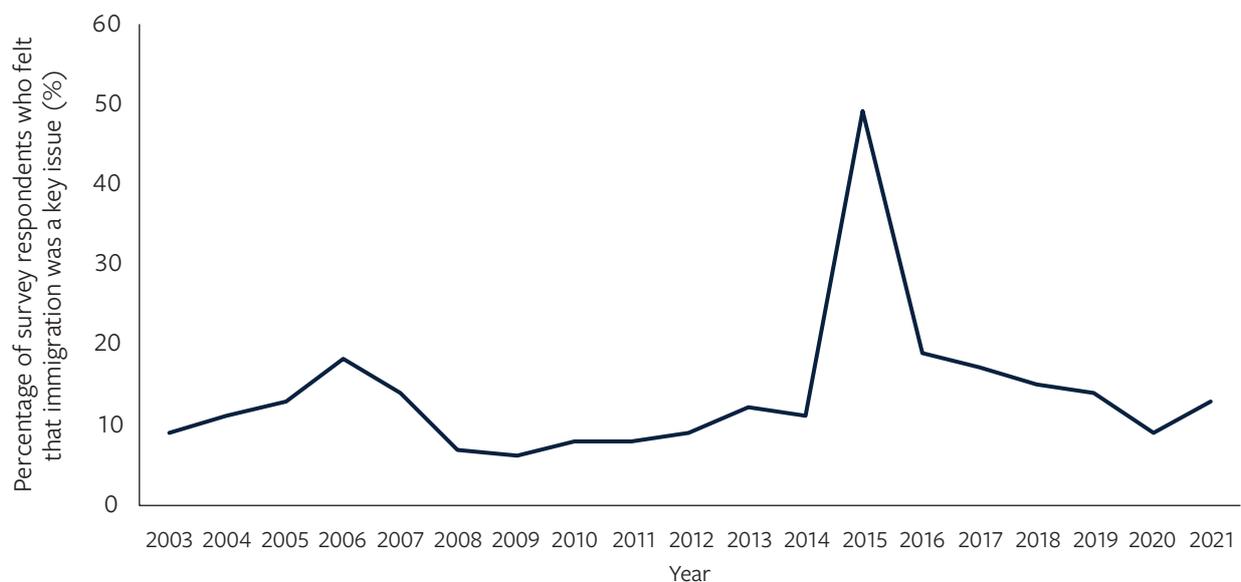
Box 2 In focus: French integration approaches – rhetoric versus reality

Although France's approach to immigration has been one of integration, immigrants continue to live quite segregated lives. A high proportion of immigrants often live in low-income housing outside of major cities, known pejoratively as banlieues – 'a euphemism for the racial other' (Misra, 2017: n.p.). Children of immigrants are 'more often directed towards the least prestigious streams of [high school], or indeed towards other kinds of qualifications', and schools have been accused of taking a discriminatory approach towards boys in particular, based on their ethnicity (Ichou, 2018: 1; AFP, 2016). Migrants, particularly non-European migrants, have less access to employment due to hiring discrimination, and work is concentrated in low-skilled sectors, or what are known as 'brown-collar jobs' (Tsfai, 2019). In 2019, 13.1% of France's foreign-born population were unemployed, compared to 8% of the native-born population (OECD, 2022a; 2022b). Second-generation immigrants face similar discrimination and segregation, even if they were born in France, speak French and adhere to French cultural norms (AFP, 2016).

3 Public attitudes towards refugees and other migrants: what do we know?

The salience of immigration as a key issue spiked in France in parallel with the large number of Syrian refugees entering Europe in 2015 (see Figure 4). However, unlike Germany and Sweden, the spike in salience did not mirror a spike in actual immigration (Holloway et al., 2021b; 2021c). Concerns around immigration were driven by a fear that France would see large numbers of Syrian arrivals. When this did not happen, the salience of immigration among the French public receded, though the topic remained a key issue in political discourse and public narratives (Eurobarometer, n.d.).

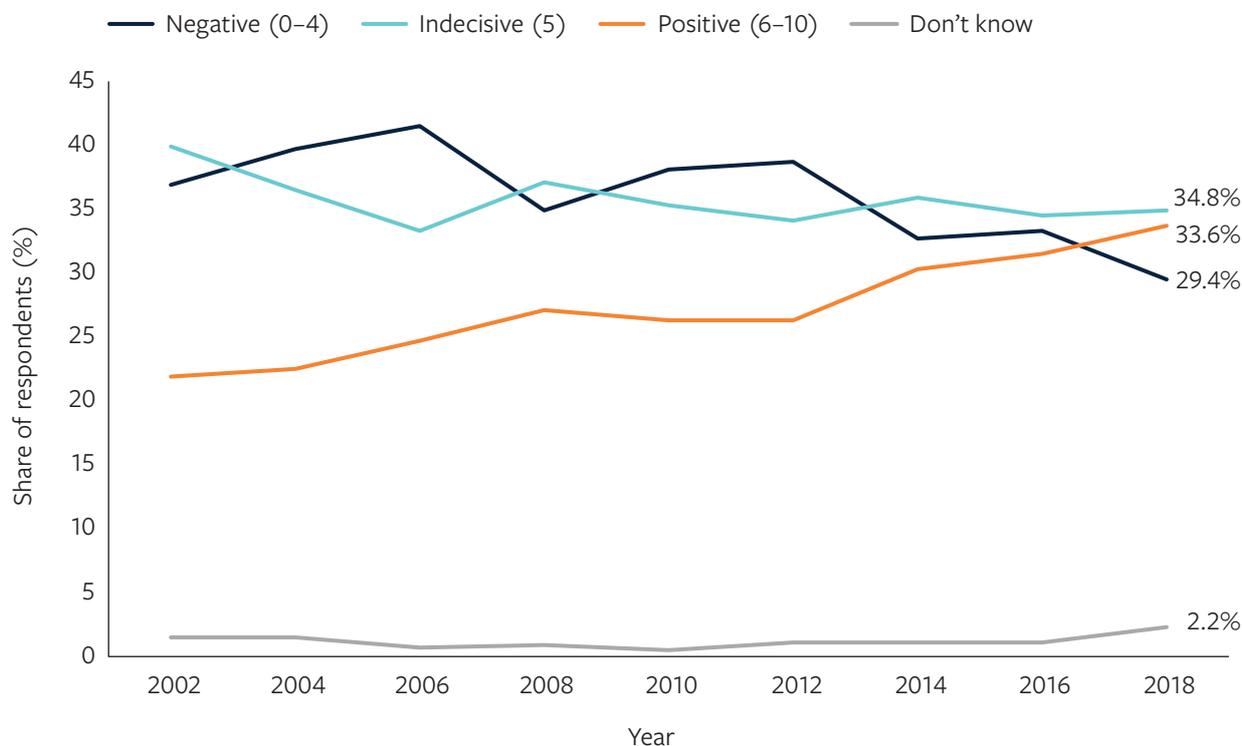
Figure 4 Salience of immigration as a key issue in France



Note: This graphic shows the percentage of people answering ‘immigration’ to the question ‘What do you think are the two most important issues facing France today?’ Data is taken mainly from autumn surveys, though the Eurobarometer surveys were delayed due to Covid-19, with the autumn 2020 survey shifting to winter 2020–2021. Data for 2021 is taken from the latest survey (spring 2021).

Source: Eurobarometer, n.d.

That immigration is not a priority concern for a majority of French respondents does not mean the French hold overwhelmingly positive attitudes towards immigration. In the early 2000s, more people held negative attitudes or were undecided about whether immigration made France a better place to live (see Figure 5). This has only shifted recently, with positive attitudes overtaking negative ones for the first time in 2018 (European Social Survey, n.d.).

Figure 5 Attitudes towards immigration: does immigration make France a worse or a better place to live?

Note: This data has been extracted from each wave of the European Social Survey. The survey scores respondents from 0–10 only and records ‘don’t know’ answers. We have classified survey respondents who scored 0–4 in their answers to the question ‘Does immigration make France a worse or better place to live?’ as holding ‘negative’ views, those scoring 5 as being ‘indecisive’ and those scoring 6–10 as holding ‘positive’ views. Source: European Social Survey, n.d.

This rise in positive attitudes over negative ones is more recent than in other European countries. In Germany, Spain and the UK, for example, positive attitudes towards immigration became dominant around 2008, 2010 and 2016 respectively (Holloway, 2021c; 2021d; Kumar and Faures, 2021). Like their counterparts in other countries, French survey respondents overestimate how many immigrants there actually are in France. According to a 2017 Eurobarometer survey on the integration of immigrants in the EU, French respondents on average estimated the proportion of non-EU immigrants in France at 18.1%, whereas the actual figure was 8.9% (European Commission, 2018).

Given France’s preoccupation with assimilation, a large share of survey respondents is worried about immigrants not integrating into French society. Only one in four respondents to a 2021 survey agreed either very much or somewhat that refugees would successfully integrate into society – the second-lowest response rate in the survey, behind only Japan (Ipsos MORI, 2021), and down from 34% in 2017 (Ipsos MORI, 2017). In 2014, French respondents overwhelmingly believed that it is important for immigrants to speak French, even more so than to have work skills (Dennison and Taló, 2017). In 2016, 97% of respondents to a Pew Research Center survey said it

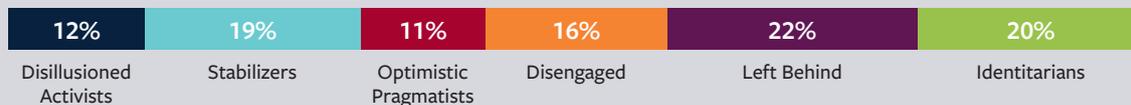
was either very or somewhat important to speak French in order to be truly French; in 2020 this percentage was 93%, though other aspects, such as sharing the country's customs and traditions, had fallen more significantly (83% in 2016 and 71% in 2020) (Silver et al., 2021).

Alongside doubts that refugees and other migrants can assimilate successfully, the French population also questions the motives of refugees. In 2017, 75% of French respondents believed that terrorists pretended to be refugees in order to enter the country to cause violence, while 61% believed refugees were not really refugees at all, but had come to France for economic reasons or to seek welfare services (Ipsos MORI, 2017). The second question resulted in the same percentage (61%) in 2021 (Ipsos MORI, 2021). These percentages are similar to Germany, Italy and the UK, but contrast sharply with more welcoming countries, such as Spain and Sweden (Ipsos Mori, 2017; see also Holloway et al., 2021a; 2021b; 2021c; 2021d; Kumar and Faures, 2021).

Unlike Greece, Italy and Spain, France has not seen large numbers of sea arrivals, nor has it opened its doors to large numbers of refugees, as Sweden and Germany have. These debates are still relevant, however, since France is part of the EU and subject to the Dublin regulation and the 2020 New Pact on Migration and Asylum, which attempts to ensure that no member state shoulders a disproportionate responsibility for hosting asylum-seekers (European Commission, n.d.). Monthly surveys asking 'Are you in favour or against dispatching migrants who arrive by tens of thousands on the coasts of Greece and Italy, between all EU-countries, including France' showed minor, short-lived fluctuations based on current events. In June 2015, 64% of respondents were against sending immigrants throughout the EU, but this number fell to 51% following the publication of the picture of Aylan Kurdi, the Syrian boy who drowned when the boat he was travelling in capsized near Bodrum in Turkey in September 2015. It rose again to 62% after the terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015, before falling again to 58% two months later (Le Bras, 2019: 112–113). These trends mirror those reported by Dennison and Taló (2017: 3), who find that French attitudes, like most European attitudes, have remained stable since 2000, and suggest that this stability is due more to 'country-specific histories, cultures and social structures' than to an 'anti-immigration tide in Europe'.

Since 2011, researchers have been using polling data to separate populations into groups based on their attitudes towards various topics, such as migration, rather than by demographic composition (Lowles and Painter, 2011). The first segmentation data in France was completed in 2017 (Purpose Europe and More in Common, 2017). In the newest segmentation analysis, undertaken in 2020, the French population can be grouped into six categories according to their beliefs and values around identity, belonging and their place in the world (see Box 3).

Box 3 Segmentation of the French population and attitudes towards immigration



Source: Demoures et al., 2020a; 2020b

Disillusioned Activists: people who mostly support migration and the rights of minorities. They tend to be educated, cosmopolitan, progressive and not religious. They are pessimistic about the future of society and are more likely to be discouraged and depressed than the average French person.

Stabilizers: people who feel sympathy and benevolence towards migrants and minorities and who do not advocate closing borders, but also feel it is not possible to accommodate everyone who wants to come to France. Only 35% of Stabilizers believe that France has an obligation to welcome migrants because it has the financial means to do so. They tend to be moderate, engaged, established, rational and compassionate. They are likely to participate in civic life and value compromise.

Optimistic Pragmatists: the only group convinced that France is going in the right direction and that their children will have better lives than them. They believe in an open economy and society, being benevolent towards minorities and that migrants culturally enrich France. They tend to be individualistic, pragmatic, confident and entrepreneurial. They also tend to be younger, more male and more urban compared to the other groups, and there are twice as many people with immigrant backgrounds represented in this group than the others.

Disengaged: people who are profoundly disengaged with politics and civic society, who do not have strong values and whose concerns are largely personal. They worry about racism and discrimination more than other groups. They tend to be young, detached, individualistic and lacking in confidence.

Left Behind: people who are disengaged from politics and distrustful of decision-makers, who have few social ties and who are more likely to feel lonely than other groups. They tend to be angry, defiant and feel abandoned, and this anger often results in feelings of resentment towards 'others' who they see as more privileged than them, including migrants and elites. They are the least educated group.

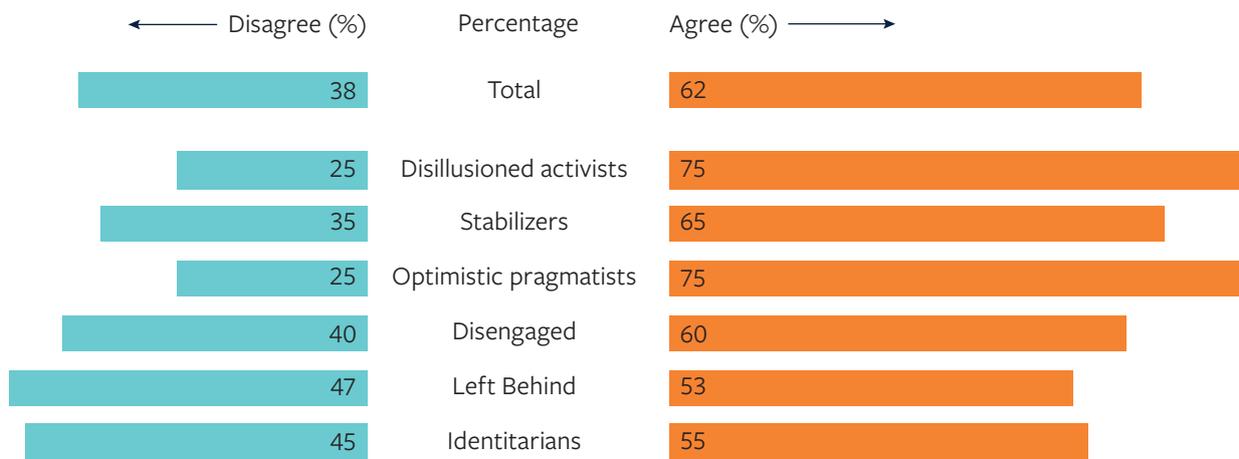
Identitarians: people whose opinions towards immigration are driven by views of France as a uniform nation, increasingly threatened by the outside world. Immigration is their top concern (50% of the group, versus 27% on average). They overwhelmingly support the closure of borders to migrants and are highly distrustful of Muslims. They tend to be older, conservative, nativist and uncompromising.

Overall, Demoures et al. (2020b: 142) find that ‘immigration is viewed more negatively in France than in other countries’. Only two groups – the Disillusioned Activists and Optimistic Pragmatists – record a majority that feel the impact of immigration has been positive. Overall, slightly more respondents (54%) believe that France should close its borders completely to migrants, compared to 46% who disagree with this (ibid.). However, as with other immigration questions, there is nuance within each group’s responses: even 17% of Identitarians and 31% of the Left Behind, for instance, do not agree with closing borders completely (ibid.).

Segmentation analysis also finds some areas where there is more agreement and less polarisation between groups. For example, ‘62% of French people are concerned about a growing climate of hostility towards Muslims’ (Demoures et al., 2020a: 5). As shown in Figure 6, these concerns are shared across all six segments, including Identitarians (55%), and those with the most closed views.

Figure 6 Segmentation of the French population and perceptions of hostility towards Muslims

Q: Today in France there is a climate of hostility towards Muslims which concerns me



Source: Demoures et al., 2020b

These six segments also form three overarching groups: Settled France (30%, Stabilizers and Optimistic Pragmatists); Polemic France (32%, Disillusioned Activists and Identitarians) and Forgotten France (38%, Left Behind and Disengaged) (Demoures et al., 2020a; 2020b). The two segments that Demoures et al. (2020a) see as part of ‘Polemic France’ – Disillusioned Activists and Identitarians – have dominated narratives around immigration by speaking loudest. France is not the sharply divided country that is portrayed by the media or on Twitter, but rather ‘the shouting simply reflects how much of the public conversation is hijacked by this loud and polarized Polemic France. While they are the main (and often the only) protagonists of these debates, they do not reflect the views of the majority of the French population’ (Demoures et al., 2020a: 12).

By contrast, the groups that comprise ‘Forgotten France’ – the Disengaged and the Left Behind – are more likely to be ‘vulnerable to “Us versus Them” narratives that provide them with a sense of belonging by narrowing membership in the national community on the basis of specific ethnic and cultural attributes’ (Demoures et al., 2020a: 14). Although they have different end goals, the Left Behind often share similar opinions on immigration with Identitarians because their anger towards the system can be easily channelled towards groups that do not represent them, and who are painted as a threat to their interests, including migrants and refugees (ibid.).

4 A dividing, and dominating, narrative

The main narrative that divides and dominates debate in France centres on national identity and integration. Narratives in other European countries, such as competition for jobs or the refugee crisis, rarely appear in these debates; instead, ‘French attitudes to immigration are largely addressed through allusions to the French Republican identity and multiculturalism’ (Dennison and Taló, 2017: 1). As Parikh (2019) notes, the focus of France’s immigration debate is often what is in the integration policy and how it is implemented, not whether to have a policy in the first place. Moreover, as noted in Box 2, the issue of integration does not disappear with second-generation immigrants. Tesfai (2019: 2741) claims that ‘social mobility between immigrant generations in France does not exist’. This is attributed more ‘to the degree that “they look French”’, rather than their nationality, ability to speak French or adherence to French cultural norms and values (AFP, 2016: n.p.) – even though these are the characteristics that are required, on paper, for integration into French society.

The national identity narrative has been used by Marine Le Pen’s FN, with Le Pen positioned ‘as the defender of the French nation and her references to immigration ... mainly identitarian’ (Dennison and Taló, 2017: 1). In doing so, Le Pen positions the French “‘people” (as an in-group) and immigrants (as an out-group) who are considered “unwilling to adapt” and pose a threat to the French traditional way of life’ (ibid.). Young men are labelled ‘aimless delinquents’ or ‘imminent terrorists’, while women are seen as ‘in need of liberation’ (Misra, 2017: n.p.). This narrative remains key in the run-up to the 2022 elections, as candidates on all sides harden their positions on the issue (Onishi, 2021). This shift to the right has occurred in large part because of the emergence in 2021 of Éric Zemmour as a presidential candidate. Zemmour has split the far right, occupying much of the same ground as the National Rally but going even further, with strong anti-immigration rhetoric – so strong, in fact, that he has been fined by a Paris court for hate speech for calling unaccompanied child migrants ‘thieves’, ‘rapists’ and ‘murderers’ (BBC, 2022).

This rhetoric, however, does not match reality. France is ‘not a country overrun by immigration’; as noted above, fewer immigrants (by percentage of population) live in France than almost all of its neighbours (Onishi, 2021). Yet, in some ways, the small proportion of immigrants in the French population help drive this narrative, as it is particularly uppermost in the minds of those who do not interact with immigrants in everyday life. Le Bras (2019: 107) found that, without frequent contact, people tend to fear immigrants – ‘largely for irrational reasons’ – because ‘they rely on media-information and on narratives, which are largely rumours, told by those closest to them’. This is not unusual given what is known from wider research on contact theory. According to this theory, people who have the opportunity to communicate with people who are different from themselves are more likely to understand and appreciate diverse viewpoints and harbour less prejudice towards those groups (Dempster and Hargrave, 2017). Whereas in the early years of the FN, the number of votes gained by the party increased as the number of immigrants in France born in Muslim countries increased, more recently this correlation has disappeared, and ‘xenophobia is thus no longer rooted in direct encounters [with immigrants from Muslim countries], but rather in voters’ perception’ (Le Bras, 2019: 105).

In France as elsewhere, ‘the terms “immigration” and “Islam” are used synonymously in much of the political debate’ (Parikh, 2019: n.p.). The association between these terms is connected to a narrative that arose as France experienced waves of immigration from former French colonies and other European countries during the 1970s and 1980s. This narrative presented European immigrants as successfully able to integrate (even if, in fact, their experience was difficult and characterised by hostility and racism), in contrast with Muslim immigrants, whose integration was perceived as problematic (Bertossi, 2020). This conflation of immigration and Islam is also evident in the banning of headscarves in schools, face-covering Islamic veils in public places and burkinis on beaches; ‘both “immigration” and “Islam” have been constructed as a single “problem” that needs to be addressed through a centralized policy of integration’ (Parikh, 2019: n.p.).

Immigration does not sit easily beside other social problems in France. For example, the recent *Gilets Jaunes* (Yellow Vests) protests touched on tax policy, the cost of living and unemployment, but made little to no mention of the role immigration plays in these issues or, indeed, of how immigrants are often disproportionately affected by them (Parikh, 2019). The only official position appears as one of the movement’s 42 demands – ‘that a real integration policy be implemented. Living in France means becoming French (courses on French language, the history of France, and civic education with certification at the end of the course’ (ibid.: n.p.). Thus, rather than use a social protest movement to advocate on behalf of those who are largely marginalised in French society, the message continues to be that refugees and other migrants must become French, even if they may never be seen as truly French.

Where dominant narratives have perhaps been challenged most successfully is in French cities, where local government leaders have been proactive in promoting more tolerant and open attitudes towards immigrants. This was particularly notable with the response to the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan in August 2021. French mayors quickly adopted public stances in favour of supporting and welcoming asylum-seekers from Afghanistan, many offering refuge in their city, with particularly strong interventions from the mayors of Bordeaux, Grenoble, Lille, Lyon, Marseille and Strasbourg (Cittone, 2021; Dimitrova, 2021; Garnier and Boutin, 2021). These offers of help were frequently accompanied by public challenges to the national government’s position, after Macron publicly warned that France would need to protect itself against large-scale irregular migration flows as a result of the crisis (Garnier and Boutin, 2021).

This was not the first time that local leaders had opposed the national government. In 2016, the mayor of Paris successfully pressured the national government to address the lack of emergency shelters for asylum-seekers (Ahad and Banulescu-Bogdan, 2019; Eurocities, 2021). Paris has its own mobilisation plan for refugee reception and has used its ‘participatory budget’ (voted on by residents) to finance a refugee centre (Eurocities, 2021). Inspired by the ID scheme in New York, Paris introduced an ID card (the *carte citoyenne-citoyen*) after the terrorist attacks of 2015. The card is provided free to all residents over the age of seven who live, work or study in Paris irrespective of nationality and migration status, enabling access to municipal services and events (Wood, 2018; Council of Europe, 2019).

5 Conclusion

Immigration to France during the twentieth century was largely driven by pragmatic concerns, increasing when more labourers were needed and decreasing when that demand disappeared. However, immigration and immigration policies were also ideological, tied up in French colonialism, driven by the empire and wars of independence, and debates have culminated in what it means to be French. These ideas underpin the assimilationist approach that has prevailed in France over the past several decades and, paradoxically, the segregation that remains, as those who do not 'look French' struggle to fully integrate, particularly in relation to access to decent housing, education and work.

Since the early 2000s, immigration flows have been steady, often matched by similar levels of outflows, and generally at lower levels than France's neighbours. Nevertheless, immigration policies have grown increasingly strict as each successive government creates its own (often more restrictive) legislation. Public attitudes are growing more positive, but this shift has not yet appeared in political discourse and public narratives around migration at the national level.

The French population does not hold homogenous views on migration, and as seen in the segmentation data, a majority of respondents in all categories are concerned about a growing climate of hostility towards Muslims. With the understanding that many public narratives conflate immigration and Islam, this becomes more significant – going beyond one religion to potentially encompass all refugees and migrants. Yet the 'us versus them' narrative remains prominent in national politics and will likely be further exacerbated in the April 2022 elections due to the arrival of Zemmour.

In order to engage with the French population and shift public narratives towards recognising the benefits of migration and diversity, the threads of national identity and immigration need to be disentangled, so that any conversation on immigration does not invoke discussions on what it means to be French (Semountik, 2018). Conversations around immigration should move away from ideology and return once again to pragmatism, with an emphasis on the benefits refugees and other migrants bring. In doing so, perhaps France can 'leave behind the 20th century notion of a national identity based on one ethnic origin' and embrace 'a more modern conception based on diversity and inclusiveness' (ibid.: n.p.). Civil society, employers who need migrant workers and local leaders all have key roles to play in encouraging people to be more welcoming of refugees and other migrants.

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