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A Recent Survey on French Attitudes Towards Population Dynamics in France and Worldwide

Virginie De Luca Barrusse*, Cécile Lefèvre^{°**},
and Jacques Véron**

Abstract

In 2018, the POP-AWARE survey was administered to members of the ELIPSS panel, a representative sample of the French population. Exploring both their knowledge and opinions of demographic trends in France and worldwide, this survey pursues a two-fold objective: first, it reiterates questions posed decades earlier on the situation in France, providing scope for comparisons over time; second, it introduces new considerations by extending its range of enquiry to include global issues. Almost irrespective of the respondents' sociodemographic profiles and political opinions, demographic questions are seen as important. Respondents also express a preference for population stability over decline, despite an increase in opinions, among young people especially, linking population dynamics with environmental problems. Awareness of population questions is high, thanks to coverage in the media and in school curricula. This is not a recent development: it has been highlighted by numerous public opinion surveys over the last six decades. It would be useful to conduct similar surveys in other countries to identify variations, across space and time, in the expression of this interest in demography.

Keywords

survey, demographic situation, opinions, population trends

The purpose of the POP-AWARE survey,⁽¹⁾ conducted among the French population in 2018, was to analyse the public's awareness and perception of demographic issues. What kind of demographic information do people find most interesting? Which current demographic issues and trends do they consider important? To answer these questions, the survey's introduction begins by specifying that POP-AWARE 'is interested in population questions,

(1) The survey's full title is: *Connaissance et perception des questions démographiques* (knowledge and perception of demographic questions). It was conducted by CRIDUP, the demographic research centre at Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, in association with a team of researchers from CERLIS (Université Paris Cité) and INED.

* CRIDUP centre de recherche de l'IDUP, Université Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne.
virginie.barrusse@univ-paris1.fr

** Institut national d'études démographiques.

° Cerlis, Université Paris Cité.

Translated by Beatrice van Hoorn Alkema



i.e. concerning numbers of inhabitants, their characteristics (sex, age, etc.), their distribution within a particular territory or across the world, and possible future changes that may affect population trends. Demography is the study of these facts'.⁽²⁾ The survey questionnaire (see Online Appendix, <https://doi.org/10.34847/nkl.d9bfbk09i>) alternates between factual questions and those seeking the respondents' opinions on the population of France, the global population, birth rates, life expectancy, and immigration. By looking at both knowledge and opinions on demographic issues, POP-AWARE pursues a two-fold objective: first, it reiterates questions posed decades earlier (see below), enabling comparisons over time; second, it introduces new questions, expanding its scope to include global issues raised by demographic phenomena (De Luca Barrusse et al., 2019).

The survey's first major finding is the respondents' strong interest in population issues that emerges clearly and consistently from their knowledge of key demographic orders of magnitude, their low non-response rate, their detailed answers to open questions, and the post-survey satisfaction ratings. This engagement with population issues, or 'population awareness'⁽³⁾ (Baccaïni and Gani, 2002, p. 5), is not a recent phenomenon—as evidenced by previous surveys—although the issues deemed most important have changed.

In terms of the importance attached to demographic issues, France is somewhat unique: population matters were introduced into public debate by the state from the early 20th century, so the French public is relatively well-informed in this area (Ogden and Huss, 1982; Tomlinson et al., 1985; Rosental, 2003; De Luca Barrusse, 2008; Huss, 1990). An intense pro-natalist propaganda campaign at that time, delivered through newspapers, pamphlets, posters, and even post-cards (Ogden and Huss, 1982; De Luca Barrusse, 2008; Huss, 1990; Véron and Rohrbasser, 2015), drew the French population's attention to demographic issues, particularly the fact that the French birth rate was lower than that of Germany, their major rival. To create a 'pro-family climate'—a widely used expression—and encourage childbearing, the French government introduced a series of policies involving the creation of dedicated institutions alongside a range of financial, educational or symbolic measures (De Luca Barrusse, 2008).⁽⁴⁾ These measures, were enshrined as the *Code de la famille et de la natalité françaises* (French code on family and births) in the decree-law passed on 29 July 1939. The Code was extended and amplified under the Vichy regime (Capuano, 2009).

In 1945, the French Institute for Demographic Studies (INED) was created and charged with the explicit mission of 'disseminating knowledge' about population issues across a wide audience (Drouard, 1992; Girard, 1986; Rosental,

(2) This definition is deliberately lifted from surveys on demographic trends conducted in 1959 and 1965 (see below).

(3) This is where the name of the survey comes from.

(4) Examples of these measures include family allowances, the introduction of Mother's Day in France and the *Médaille de la famille française* (medal awarded to mothers of large families), the implementation of pro-natalist and pro-family education programmes in schools and barracks, etc.

2003). Alfred Sauvy, INED's first director, was personally committed to ensuring broad recognition of the importance of demography. He wrote a number of popular science books on the subject and readily spoke out in the media. His introduction to demography, entitled *La population*, met with great success and was reprinted fifteen times between 1944 and 1992 (Véron, 2015). Today, INED's monthly news bulletin, *Population and Societies*, published in French and English (Longone, 1968), and *INSEE Première*, created more recently by the French Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE)—with certain issues dedicated to demographic trends—also make the results of demographic research widely accessible, particularly through the media. Exhibitions such as '6 milliards d'Hommes' [6 billion humans], held at the Musée de l'Homme between September 1994 and December 1995, and 'La population mondiale... et moi?' [The world population and me], held at the Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie in 2005, proved very popular with the public (Pison and Van Blyenburgh Ninian, 1994; Pison, 2005). More recently, the exhibition '8 milliards d'humains et après' [8 billion humans... and beyond] took place from November 2022 to April 2023, again at the Cité des Sciences.⁽⁵⁾ The INSEE and INED websites also play a part in popularizing demographic knowledge, through specific modules such as the 'All About Population' section on the INED website and the interactive life expectancy calculator and age pyramid on the INSEE website.

Conducted in 2018, the POP-AWARE survey provides a means to assess current levels of knowledge while leaving space for the expression of opinions. After introducing this survey and comparing it with previous ones, this article examines the opinions expressed by analysing two types of questions: first, it draws on the verbatim responses to open questions soliciting opinions on population growth; second, it uses the responses to closed questions, framed as similarly as possible to those of previous surveys, to determine whether opinions have remained unchanged or shifted over time. We observe whether the importance attached to population issues varies across respondents' socio-demographic profiles. We then explore respondents' perceptions of population growth in France and worldwide, and the issues they perceive as paramount. Last, the study looks at the role of the media and schools in shaping this 'culture of demographic awareness'.

I. The POP-AWARE survey: measuring awareness of demographic issues

POP-AWARE is an online survey for use by the research community (Duwez and Mercklé, 2021) conducted in September–October 2018 among members of the ELIPSS (Longitudinal Internet Study for Social Sciences) panel. The ELIPSS panellists, aged 18–79 and randomly selected by INSEE, respond to

(5) See <https://leblob.fr/enquetes/8milliards-humains-et-apres>

different questionnaires every month using a touch-screen tablet.⁽⁶⁾ The POP-AWARE questionnaire was sent to 2,590 panellists of whom 2,148 completed it, giving a response rate of 83% (a response rate of over 80% is considered to be high; Cornilleau and Duwez, 2021, p. 35). The sample is weighted to ensure representativeness.

The questionnaire alternated between questions on opinions and knowledge about key demographic issues in France and across the world. The use of a touch-screen tablet was an innovative way of presenting questionnaires and soliciting responses, enabling respondents to use specific functions such as moving the cursor along a scale (questions on life expectancy or on the ideal age to have a child), linking text zones together (questions on demographic issues by continent), and ranking items (questions on immigration countries), etc. Pop-up windows were also included to provide definitions of certain terms (such as the word ‘immigrant’) or to explain how to read certain graphs (pyramids or distribution charts). These definitions were intended to fill potential gaps in the understanding of certain questions, given that the survey targeted a non-specialist audience. For the knowledge questions, the respondents were asked to respond spontaneously, without attempting to verify their answers. The correct answers were available on request at the end of the questionnaire (and not accessible prior to completion) for respondents wishing to check their knowledge. Of the 2,148 respondents, 74% wanted to see the correct answers after finishing the survey, a sign of their strong interest in these questions; 63% read through them all.

POP-AWARE asked people living in France about the country’s demographic situation, with some questions deliberately lifted from previous surveys conducted by INED between 1947 and 1987 to poll the population on sensitive subjects and nurture public debate (Table 1). However, compared with these previous surveys, POP-AWARE expanded the scope of enquiry to include global demographic issues (international migration, environmental issues, population ageing, imbalanced sex ratio at birth, etc.). In addition, it enabled respondents to rank what they consider to be major issues in order of importance and to express their opinions freely through open questions.

Conducted in metropolitan France over four decades, on a representative sample but at irregular intervals, these previous surveys included questionnaires that evolved in line with the topical concerns of the moment. They were based on samples of between 2,500 and 2,800 individuals and provided a means to assess how certain draft laws would be received, such as those on access to contraception, the change in the age of majority, pension reforms, family allowance entitlements, etc. They also aimed to evaluate the level of public knowledge about demographic trends. The survey designers, notably Alain Girard and his team, repeated certain questions from one survey to the

(6) For more information about ELIPSS, its methodology, its history, and the surveys conducted, see: <https://www.elipss.fr/fr>

Table 1. INED's 'demographic situation surveys'^(a) conducted between 1947 and 1987

Date	Survey title	References
1947	Survey on public awareness of population questions	Bresard, 1948; Bresard, 1950
1949	The population problem and changes in public attitudes	Girard, 1950
1951	Survey on attitudes and behaviour of French people towards immigrants	Girard and Stoetzel, 1953 Girard and Stoetzel, 1954
1955	Attitudes and demographic situation	Girard and Henry, 1956
1956	Survey on public opinion concerning birth control	Girard and Samuel, 1956
1959	Demographic problems and public opinion	Girard and Bastide, 1960
1962	Standard of living, employment, and population growth	Bastide and Girard, 1962
1965	Survey on demographic trends and population attitudes	Bastide and Girard, 1966
1966	Survey of the public on family structure and birth control	Girard and Zucker, 1967
1967	The demographic situation and birth control	Girard and Zucker, 1968
1968	Reasons for birth control in families with one or two children	Roussel, 1969
1969	Attitudes of different generations to family, marriage, and divorce	Roussel and Zucker, 1971
1970	The demographic situation	Roussel and Zucker, 1971
1970–1971	Attitudes of French people towards foreign immigration	Girard, 1971
1974	Attitudes and opinions about fertility and the family	Longone, 1975; Bastide and Girard, 1975
1975	Birth rate and family policy	Girard, 1976; Girard et al., 1976; INED, 1976
1976	Attitudes of French people towards the demographic situation, birth rates and family policy at the end of 1976	Bastide and Girard, 1977
1978	Fertility and the demographic situation: an opinion survey	Girard and Roussel, 1979
1982	Opinion survey on the demographic situation	Bastide et al., 1982
1987	Opinion on demographic policy	Charbit, 1989

(a) *Enquêtes de conjoncture* in French.

next in order to track any shifts. After the 1987 survey, these surveys were abandoned in favour of surveys on practices and behaviours that carried more weight within the scientific field. In 1996, however, nine years after these situation surveys were discontinued, a European survey on knowledge and representations of population questions among final-year high school students was conducted to compare perceptions and awareness of demographic issues among students from five European countries in the last year of secondary school (Baccaïni and Gani, 2002). Its results can be used to determine students'

level of knowledge about French and global demographics, and to test their understanding of population dynamics.

POP-AWARE thus borrows from earlier demographic situation surveys conducted in the general population while emulating Brigitte Baccaïni and Léon Gani’s survey in its ambition to test respondents’ ‘awareness’ of population questions.

II. Population questions: topics that matter

Just as in the late 1950s, the 2018 survey respondents believe that demographic issues are important:⁽⁷⁾ 92% consider these issues to be ‘important’ or ‘very important’ in France, compared with 88% in 1959. If this same question is asked with reference to the global population (a new question in the 2018 survey), the result is very similar, demonstrating that the respondents are also interested in global demographic issues. More than a third of individuals questioned in 2018 believe that global population questions are ‘very important’ (Table 2).

Table 2. Distribution of respondents by degree of importance attached to population questions*

Survey year	French population			Global population
	1959	1965	2018	2018
Very important	32	36	31	35
Important	56	50	61	57
Not very important	} 12**	7	7	6
Unimportant		6	1	1
Total	100	100	100	100

* Percentages calculated on responses expressed.
 ** Aggregate figure as published in Bastide and Girard, 1966.
 Sources: Bastide and Girard, 1966; POP-AWARE survey, 2018 (authors’ calculations).

Is this clear interest uniformly shared? In 2018, in terms of the importance attached to population questions (Table 3), we see very little difference by gender: 93% of men and 92% of women consider them ‘important’ or ‘very important’ in France (and globally 93% and 91%, respectively). Only one slight gender difference emerges for the most affirmative answer category: a slightly larger but significant (at the 1% level) share of men consider population questions to be ‘very important’ (respectively, 35% vs. 28% for France and 38% vs. 33% globally).

Furthermore, appreciation of the importance of these questions increases significantly (at the 0.1% level) with age. Only 29% of under-35s consider global

(7) The exact same question was asked in 1959, 1965, and 2018: ‘In your opinion, population questions such as those concerning the number and distribution of inhabitants and how they may change are: very important, important, not very important, or unimportant’.

Table 3. Proportion of respondents considering population questions to be very important or important (%)

	Globally			In France			Number
	Very Important	Important	Total	Very Important	Important	Total	
Sex							
Man	38	55	93	35	58	93	1,026
Woman	33	58	91	28	64	92	1,122
Age category							
Under 35 years	29	59	88	26	63	89	474
Age 35–59	34	58	92	28	63	91	1,010
Age 60 or over	42	54	96	40	57	97	664
Occupational category							
Farmer	25	67	92	25	71	96	35
Craft worker, trader, business owners	43	53	96	37	60	97	112
Higher-level occupation	44	50	94	30	63	93	354
Intermediate occupation	39	55	94	32	62	94	580
Clerical and sales worker	32	60	92	32	58	90	522
Manual worker	28	65	93	31	64	95	336
Interested in politics							
Very interested	56	42	98	45	52	97	232
Quite interested	44	51	95	28	66	94	763
Not very interested	28	65	93	25	67	92	798
Not at all interested	21	59	80	21	62	83	343
<i>Interpretation:</i> 38% of men and 33% of women consider global population questions to be very important.							
<i>Source:</i> POP-AWARE survey, 2018 (authors' calculations).							

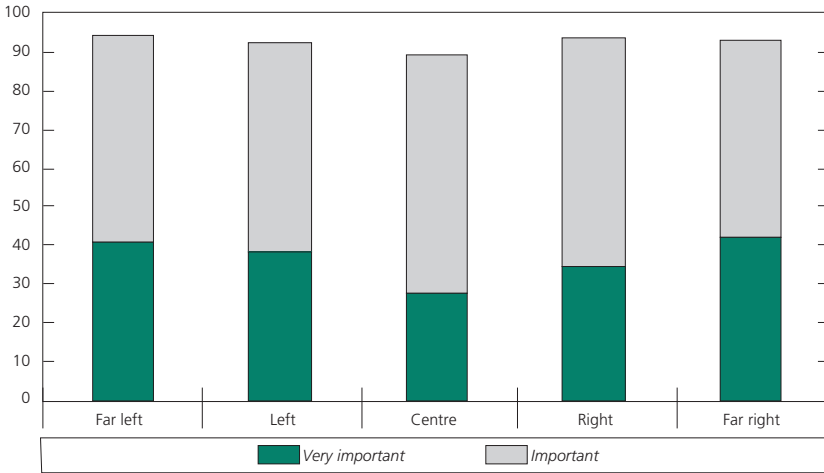
population issues 'very important', compared with 42% of people over 60. Likewise, 12% of the youngest respondents consider these population questions not very important or unimportant, compared with only 4% of the oldest respondents.

Occupational category does not appear to have much effect on responses; in all occupational categories, over 90% of individuals believe population questions are important or very important, whether in reference to the global situation or the French population alone. The only significant difference (at 0.1% level) is in the proportion of respondents answering 'very important' in reference to the global population; this was the case for 25% of farmers compared with 44% of people in higher-level occupations.

The responses show that interest in politics is strongly associated with attaching importance to global population issues (Table 3). No fewer than 98% of those who reported being very interested in politics considered population questions important or very important, versus 80% of those not interested in politics (significant at 0.1% level). Again, the gap is even wider if only the response 'very important' is considered.

Political affiliation, on the other hand, measured by self-reported positioning on the political spectrum, correlates very little with attaching importance to population questions. There is only one notable exception: centrist individuals, or those probably least inclined to report a political affiliation, attach relatively less importance to global population issues than others. Fundamentally, the respondents' answers are more dependent on their interest in public life and public debate in general than on their political affiliation.

Figure 1. Importance of global population questions by political affiliation (%)



Note: Number of positions expressed = 2,100: far left = 285; left = 478; centre = 533; right = 490; far right = 314.

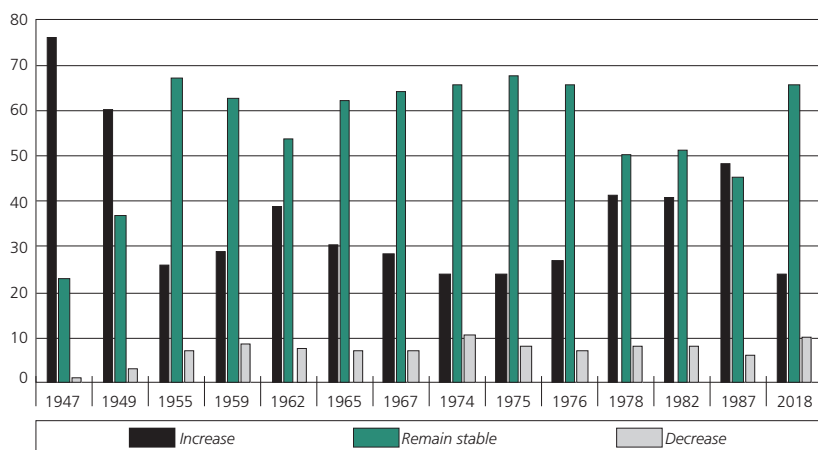
Source: POP-AWARE survey, 2018 (authors' calculations).

III. A clear preference for population stability in France

Since 1947, survey respondents have frequently been asked for their opinion about how the French population should evolve. In 2018, this question was asked once again, phrased in virtually the same terms.⁽⁸⁾ More than two thirds of respondents would like the population to 'remain stable'. This response can be compared with those given in previous surveys (Figure 2). In the post-war period, in the midst of the baby boom, the preference was for a population increase. From 1955 onwards (except, marginally, in 1987), the majority of people questioned were in favour of population stability. Nevertheless, the surveys conducted from 1974 to 1987 show an increasing preference for population growth that can be explained by the end of the baby boom, often presented in the media as a source of concern following the decision in July 1974 to suspend all immigration of foreign workers. The fear of a return to

(8) Question posed in every survey since 1947: 'In your opinion, would it be preferable for the population of France to increase, remain about the same, or decrease?' In 2018, the option 'remain about the same' is replaced by 'remain stable'.

Figure 2. Distribution of reported preferences on population change in France (%)



Sources: INED’s demographic situation surveys (see Table 1); POP-AWARE survey, 2018.

‘depopulation’ haunted the press (De Luca Barrusse, 2020). While we do not know how opinions changed between 1987 and 2018 due to a lack of surveys over this period, POP-AWARE shows that a large majority of respondents now favour population stability in France. Only around 10% of people in 2018, as in 1974, would prefer a population decrease.

Sex and occupational category have very little impact on preference for future change in the French population.⁽⁹⁾ However, an age effect—and probably a cohort effect—clearly emerges: while a large majority in all age categories show a preference for population stability, this is especially the case among the youngest age group (Table 4), who state a preference for population decrease almost twice as frequently as the over-60s (13% of 18- to 35-year-olds vs. 8% of those aged 60 or over), although this remains a minority stance in all age groups. Correspondingly, the over-60s more frequently report a preference for population growth than the youngest respondents (30% vs. 13%). These

Table 4. Preference for population change by age group

	Age 18–34	Age 35–59	Age 60 or over	All ages
Would like the population to increase	13	26	30	24
Would like the population to remain the same	74	63	62	65
Would like the population to decrease	13	11	8	11
	100	100	100	100
Number*	466	1,008	661	2,135

Note: * Thirteen individuals did not respond to this question. According to the chi-square test, there is a correlation between variables at the 0.1% level.
Source: POP-AWARE survey, 2018.

(9) Non-significant chi-square tests.

responses probably reflect differing concerns about the future, from both economic and environmental standpoints. We will review below how these concerns are expressed in the responses to the open questions.

Two other variables (religion and interest in politics) also have a significant impact on responses. Individuals reporting as religious are more likely to be in favour of population increase (27%) than those who do not (19%), and are less likely to support population decline (8% vs. 15%). It is true that the most widely represented religious denominations in France are pro-birth. In addition—and this is more difficult to interpret—the greater a person's interest in politics, the more likely they are to report a preference for population increase: this position is held by 39% of individuals expressing a strong interest, compared with 14% of those expressing none. Conversely, many of those who report no interest in politics express a preference for population decrease (over 16%, compared with 6% of those with a strong interest). Structural effects, by age or occupational category, and varying interpretations of the notion 'interest in politics' may explain these results.

IV. Growth, stability, or decline: how do individuals justify their preferences?

Between 1947 and 1974, eight demographic situation surveys invited participants to express, through an open question, the reasons why they were in favour of French population growth or decline. The results of all these surveys were summarized in a single grid (Bastide and Girard, 1975). During this period, preference for population stability or decline⁽¹⁰⁾ was associated with increasingly frequent expression of concerns about unemployment and standards of living. In 1974, two years after the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, the lack of planetary resources was becoming an important concern, a topic previously overshadowed by domestic economic fears: 21% of respondents mentioned a shortage of food resources for the world population, compared with 7% in 1967. By 1974, both economic and environmental concerns were at play (Table 5).

In 2018, the respondents were again asked about the reasons for their preference, using this open question: 'Why, in your opinion, should the population of France increase/remain stable/decrease?'. The (free) responses of 1,625 panellists were usable.⁽¹¹⁾ They were read, one by one, with close attention paid to their tone, then grouped by one keyword or two, if two ideas emerged. In total, 1,972 occurrences were analysed⁽¹²⁾ and then categorized by type of

(10) Population stability and decrease were combined in the analyses of Bastide and Girard (1975).

(11) A quarter of the data could not be used due to non-response, a response along the lines of 'I don't know', 'Just because' or '?', or even a single keyword response that was not sufficient to determine or categorize the reason.

(12) Of the 1,625 verbatim responses analysed, 347 contained two keywords.

Table 5. Reasons given in 1947–1974 surveys to explain preferences for French population change, analysed by Bastide and Girard (%)

	1947	1949	1955	1959	1962	1965	1967	1974
Preference for increase								
Patriotism, strength, prestige	38	35	9	15	21	12	7	13
To increase national output/wealth	16	14	5	7	11	11	8	8
To avoid foreign immigration	14	16	9	2	2	4	8	2
Preference for stability or decrease								
Fear of unemployment, lack of opportunities	1	12	17	30	22	28	33	29
Maintaining standard of living	0	0	7	13	17	16	4	7
Lack of housing/schools	0	0	9	6	8	9	3	2
Lack of resources (food and global population)	12	5	0	6	3	3	7	21
Other reasons	7	18	27	4	4	5	14	6
Non-response/no comments	12	19	21	17	12	12	16	12
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
<i>Source:</i> Bastide and Girard (1975, p. 737).								

argument (Table 6). This was done by identifying the theme of the respondents' arguments, irrespective of their preference for population growth, stability, or decline. The analysis reveals the dominance of economic arguments, followed by demographic arguments, and, lastly, environmental concerns. Those with a specifically social theme or of a geopolitical nature were less frequent.

Responses with an economic theme are the most frequent (39% of occurrences), and this proportion increases if we add responses with a social theme, which are closely related (8%). Concerns about employment (mentioned 213 times), the economy (187), unemployment (133), pensions (112), housing issues (66) and quality of life (65) dominate the responses. These largely echo the preoccupations of previous surveys.

A second set of responses uses demographic arguments, citing population size and distribution or even migration flows to explain the preferences expressed (31% of occurrences). Population ageing (125 occurrences)—and its corollary, rejuvenation (60 occurrences)—dominate this type of argument, as well as the need for an equilibrium (123 occurrences). When respondents elaborate on their arguments, we see variations across generations and regions of the world. Overpopulation is also mentioned to justify preferences (84 occurrences). Next is migration—and more specifically immigration—generally mentioned in a negative sense (for verbatim responses, see Table 7). In this set of responses, the respondents use demographic reasoning and often refer to concepts from this discipline. This appropriation of scientific terms is a further indicator of interest in population questions.

A third set of arguments, for all preferences, has an environmental theme (19% of occurrences), a tendency already present 1974. In 2018, resources

Table 6. Arguments used by the 2018 respondents to explain their preferences on population change

Argument	Percentage	5 most frequent keywords (number of occurrences)
Economic	39	Employment (213) Economy (187) Unemployment (133) Pensions (112) Working population (51)
Demographic	31	Ageing (125) Balance (123) Overpopulation (84) Migration (67) Rejuvenation (60)
Environmental	19	Resources (150) Environment (78) Food (44) Urbanization (42) Ecology (37)
Social	8	Housing (66) Quality of life (65) Social system (7) Needs (7) Infrastructure (6)
Geopolitics	2	France (39) Peace (2)
Other	1	
Total	100	1,972 occurrences
<p><i>Interpretation:</i> 39% of the arguments put forward by the panellists are economic in nature. The most frequent keywords are ‘employment’ (213 occurrences) and ‘economy’ (187 occurrences). <i>Source:</i> POP-AWARE survey, 2018.</p>		

(150 occurrences), the environment and ecology (78 and 37, respectively), food shortage (44), and urban growth (42) emerge as sources of concern. This environmental theme broadens the perspective, with the growth of the French population—the focus of interest here—being seen as part of a more general concern about the global population.

Lastly, geopolitical factors, mentioned in only a small minority of responses (2%), are no longer expressed in terms of patriotism, strength and prestige—to echo the headings used by Bastide and Girard to analyse the previous surveys (Table 5)—but in relation to France’s position in Europe and the world.

The second part of the analysis includes a review of the types of arguments expressed according to preferences on quantitative population change, using the verbatim responses with the most representative arguments (Table 7).

How do the 24% of respondents who would like to see the French population increase explain their preference? Economic and demographic reasons, and more specifically generational balance, emerge quite clearly as the key reasons put forward (90% of responses). The topics of ageing and pensions, economic competitiveness (already raised in past surveys; see Table 5) dominate this preference for French population growth. On the other hand, few responses (5%) refer to French patriotism, strength or prestige, the terms used by Bastide and Girard (1975).

Table 7. Verbatim examples from the 2018 survey, grouped by preference on quantitative population change and types of arguments used

Preference on growth	Main types of arguments (% of opinions expressed)	Keywords	Verbatim examples
Increase in French population	Demographic argument (46%)	Ageing, rejuvenation, population renewal	'Ageing population, so we need renewal' 'If [the population] doesn't grow, it ages' 'We need young people!' 'To ensure population renewal' 'For replacement of generations'
	Economic argument (44%)	Pensions, competitiveness, working population	'To sustain pension funds' 'To keep the pension system in balance' 'To stay competitive with emerging countries with fast-growing populations' 'Population increase creates growth and influence in Europe' 'Because the share of working-age people is shrinking'
	Geopolitical argument (5%)	French position and identity	'A powerful country is a populous country. It's a way of being influential in the global arena' 'Increase in collective wealth, influence of France within Europe and across the world' 'To achieve the same population as Germany' 'To avoid becoming invisible in Europe' 'To safeguard our identity'
Stability	Economic argument (36%)	Employment, unemployment, competitiveness	'So that everyone can have a job' 'To reduce unemployment' 'Because there are already three million jobless people' 'To address the current economic situation' 'Because of too much debt'
	Demographic argument (27%)	Balance, overpopulation, migration	'To maintain a balance' 'To achieve an urban/rural, births/deaths balance' 'To limit overpopulation' 'Immigration into France needs to be stopped' 'High immigration with higher birth rates than the French'
	Environmental argument (25%)	Resources, environment, food	'For the distribution of resources' 'Growth would be detrimental to nature' 'To stabilize pressure on the environment' 'To avoid the food shortages forecast within the next 100 years' 'To avoid food shortages and famine'
Decrease	Economic argument (40%)	Employment, unemployment, competitiveness	'Not enough work for everyone' 'Maybe to have a job' 'Stop rising unemployment' 'Due to unemployment' 'The French economic situation is incompatible with population growth'
	Environmental argument (28.9%)	Resources, environment, ecology	'To limit the impact on resources' 'Not enough resources' 'Pressure on the environment' 'Carbon footprint' 'The average ecological footprint of a French person is three times higher than the planet's regenerative capacity'
	Demographic argument (22.7%)	Overpopulation, migration, global population	'There are already too many of us' 'To avoid overpopulation. Let's set an example for the world' 'Too much migration' 'Mass immigration is not going to help us' 'If we need the global population to fall, each country must do its bit'
<p>Interpretation: 46.1% of the opinions expressed in favour of French population growth are demographic in nature. Source: POP-AWARE survey, 2018.</p>			

The preference for stability is a key finding of the 2018 survey, but how is it justified? Until 1974, fear of unemployment and lack of economic opportunities were the most frequently cited reasons. In 2018, while employment, unemployment and economic competitiveness are mentioned in 36% of responses, demographic (27%) and environmental (25%) arguments weigh equally. Demographic arguments refer to the idea of a necessary demographic equilibrium; environmental arguments reflect concerns over planetary resources. These arguments had already been presented in 1974 by those in favour of stability or population decline (see Table 5).

Respondents with a preference for a population decrease (10%) primarily use economic arguments (40%) and the reasons given are the same as those given in favour of stability. The environmental arguments cited by nearly one-third of respondents favouring population decrease—the need to limit our impact on resources—are, again, the same. In demographic terms, it is no longer a question of maintaining an equilibrium which, the respondents believe, has doubtless already been lost, but of limiting the risks of overpopulation and immigration.

This analysis reveals a number of findings. First, economic issues appear to be a major concern for all respondents, irrespective of how they view them. The second finding relates to the existence of specific arguments based on the preferences expressed: the geopolitical argument is only used by supporters of population growth, as in the surveys conducted between 1947 and 1974 (see Table 5). Last, and unsurprisingly, the environmental argument is only used by those with a preference for population stability or decline. This analysis reveals a clear opposition between those in favour of growth and all other respondents, a phenomenon also noted by Bastide and Girard back in 1974 (see Table 5). While this finding is not new, we might have expected supporters of population decline to be more strongly represented, given the media popularity of certain movements, such as GINK (Green Inclination, No Kids), that campaign for a reduction in demographic pressure on the environment. Yet supporting population decline remains a minority position. As regards the preference for stability, the verbatim responses testify more to caution than to satisfaction with the current situation.

V. The link between population and the environment: a major concern

The vast majority (91%) of individuals questioned are aware that the global population is increasing,⁽¹³⁾ and when asked, through a closed question, about their perception of this trend, nearly three quarters see it as a

(13) Question posed in 1949 and 2018: 'As far as you know, is the total number of people on Earth currently: increasing, remaining more or less the same, or decreasing?'

risk; only 3% consider it an opportunity, others see it as both a risk and an opportunity (12%) or neither one nor the other (12%).⁽¹⁴⁾ The respondents were then invited to elaborate on their perceptions in an open question. Their explanations were analysed using keywords, revealing, first and foremost, a concern for planetary resources (nearly one quarter of responses) and food (20% of keywords), whether or not the respondent was in favour of global population growth. The responses explicitly citing ecology, climate, the environment and pollution represent just under 20% of keywords. Global population growth is perceived as a risk because ‘the Earth’s resources are not inexhaustible’ or because it poses a threat to ‘delicate balance of the planet’. Overpopulation is also mentioned, with the idea that it ‘leads to the depletion of natural resources and increased pollution’. Famines may be mentioned as a cause of wars, while global warming and environmental risks are associated with population movements. One respondent cites ‘increasing risk of climate or political refugees and lack of water resources’. For the small minority (3%) who perceive global population growth as an opportunity, it is ‘the survival of humanity’ in all its diversity that is at stake. In terms of vocabulary, then, we see that resources and the environment dominate responses on global population change.

Respondents were then invited to select and rank the three issues they considered most important, from a closed list of six: the effects of world population growth on sustainable development; the effects of political and economic circumstances on migration; population ageing; declining births; population movements linked to environmental factors (hurricane, tsunami, drought, etc.) and climate change; and numerical imbalance between men and women (Table 8).

Almost half of respondents, once again with some variation by age (55% of those under 30, 41% of those aged 60–69), considered the effects of world population growth on sustainable development to be the most important current concern. Likewise, while a quarter of respondents selected population movements due to environmental factors as a key issue, 28% of those in their 30s ranked it in first place, versus 14% of those aged 70 and over. Once again, awareness of climate change is greater among the youngest age groups, while older respondents appear more concerned by migration (this theme was ranked most important by 23% of respondents aged 70 and over, while only 7% of those under 30 selected it at all). Between these two extremes, proportions fluctuate without any clear pattern. If the proportions who cite the two most frequently selected issues (47% and 23%) are summed, we find that environmental concerns are most important for 70% of panellists. The other issues attract less attention: the effects of ageing are only cited by 10% of those questioned, which seems particularly surprising given that population ageing is

(14) Question posed in 2018: ‘In your opinion, does global population change represent: an opportunity, a risk, neither one nor the other, or both?’

Table 8. Population issues considered most important (from a list of six options), by sex and age group (%)

Issue considered most important	All	Male	Female	Under 30	Age 30–39	Age 40–49	Age 50–59	Age 60–69	Age 70 or over
Effects of world population growth on sustainable development	47	50	44	55	44	46	47	41	54
Population movements linked to environmental factors	23	22	24	25	28	23	20	25	14
Effects of political and economic circumstances on migration	16	16	16	7	10	16	18	21	23
Population ageing	10	8	13	9	11	11	12	12	5
Declining births	2	2	3	1	2	3	3	1	3
Numerical imbalance between men and women	2	2	1	3	4	1	0	0	1
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Number	2,148	1,051	1,097	272	387	429	397	391	272
<i>Interpretation:</i> 47% of individuals ranked the effects of world population growth on sustainable development as the most significant population issue.									
<i>Source:</i> POP-AWARE survey, 2018 (authors' calculations).									

often mentioned in the open questions. Declining births and imbalance between men and women are only picked as important issues by 2% of respondents.

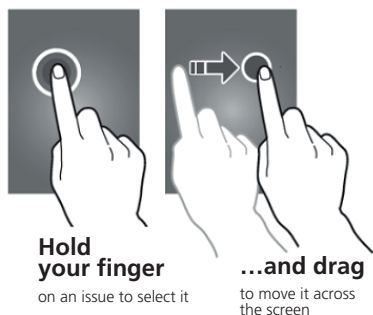
VI. Regional issues

The questionnaire also asked respondents to connect population issues and regions of the world. The question was phrased as follows: ‘In your opinion, what is the major population issue faced by each of the following regions?’ Five were listed: population growth, population ageing, declining births, population movements, male/female imbalance (Figure 3).

For almost 60% of respondents, population ageing is considered the major population issue in Europe; for 50%, population movements rank in first place for Africa, while 44% believe that population growth is the most significant concern for Asia (Table 9). Opinions are less consistent regarding other regions of the world. For example, one quarter of respondents believe that population movements are the main concern in South America, while another quarter selected population growth; for North America, population ageing and declining births are cited by the same proportions of respondents. Note that the non-response rate is high for the Americas in general (22% for North and 25% for South). It is even higher for Oceania (30%). This may be because the demographic

Figure 3. Question on regional population issues: visual provided to respondents (screenshot of the survey on a tablet)

In the next question, you will be asked to associate a population issue with a region. One issue can be associated with multiple regions. Drag and drop an issue onto the corresponding region like this:



The letter associated with the issue should then appear in the box under the region. You can enlarge the images representing the regions by tapping on them once (and tap again to switch off the zoom).



- A. Population growth
- B. Population ageing
- C. Declining births
- D. Population movements
- E. Male/female imbalance

Table 9. Respondents’ opinion on the key population issue for each region of the world

	Europe	South America	North America	Africa	Asia	Oceania
Population growth	8	24	11	26	44	11
Population ageing	59	7	25	2	6	13
General decline in births	14	7	24	7	12	19
Population movements	7	25	8	50	3	13
Imbalance between men and women	3	12	10	5	24	14
Non-response	9	25	22	10	11	30
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

Interpretation: 8% of respondents believe that population growth is the most significant population issue in Europe, while 59% think it is ageing.
Source: POP-AWARE survey, 2018 (authors’ calculations).

dynamics of this continent are very rarely mentioned, either in schools or in the media. For Europe, Africa, and Asia, non-response rates were less than 11%, partly reflecting the importance attached to the demographic situation in these regions, both in school curricula and in public debate.

VII. A culture of population awareness that begins in school

The POP-AWARE survey confirms that the general public has a strong interest in population. Why is this, and how are knowledge and opinions on population formed?

Firstly, school has played and continues to play a positive role in this familiarity with demographic questions. Multiple respondents cite schoolbooks as a source of information when asked to ‘give examples of books from which [they] have learned about population questions’. The acquisition of a ‘culture of population awareness’ was demonstrated by the 1996 survey of secondary-school leavers (Baccaini and Gani, 2002). This demographic acculturation is built up throughout the school career. Lower secondary curricula in history and geography have for decades included topics on population issues, ensuring the transmission and perpetuation of demographic knowledge. This point can be illustrated by a few examples. In 1970, the history textbook published by Bordas for pupils aged 13–14 (modern history module) devoted two pages to population changes in France in the 18th century, introducing the concept of natural increase, breaking down the factors behind mortality decline, and using a collection of baptism and death statistics as a basis for analysis (Dupâquier and Lachiver, 1970). In 1977, the Belin geography textbook for 14- to 15-year-olds (module on France) devoted six pages to demography: it considered population growth, highlighting the new role of family policies, and gave definitions for birth rate, fertility rate, mortality rate, etc. (Prévoit et al., 1977). The following pages focused on internal migration, the rural exodus and urbanization, and then on international migration—particularly immigration into France—with supporting definitions, maps, and graphs.

Nearly 50 years later, these topics still feature in school textbooks but with some shifts in approach. Population issues are often discussed in relation to globalization and the challenges of resource allocation. For example, in the Hatier textbook *Tout savoir* published in 2016 (Joubert, 2016), which provides an overview of the curriculum for 12- to 13-year-olds, two pages are devoted to the topic ‘Population growth, resource management and global change’; pupils are asked to analyse and explore the links between five world maps showing, respectively, population growth, the Human Development Index, global warming, access to water, and malnutrition. Two other pages focus on global population growth more specifically by discussing the United Nations’ population projections and their differences across the regions of the world, before exploring the effects of these disparities. The documents for analysis

include the demographic transition model and a newspaper article on the abolition of the one-child policy in China.

For many decades now, all French schoolchildren have been introduced at age 12 or 13 to the main demographic indicators and tools (rates, models, maps, definitions, etc.). In addition to acquiring basic knowledge of the orders of magnitude of changes taking place in France and globally, they develop analytical reasoning on the causes and consequences of demographic trends and are increasingly encouraged to connect these issues with socioeconomic and environmental challenges across the world. While it is difficult to say how much of this knowledge is subsequently retained, we can nonetheless conclude that the education system establishes a broad scientific awareness which then serves to support discussions (between parents and children, between colleagues, etc.) and aid interpretation of information delivered by the media.

VIII. Media coverage

While young people learn about population questions through school, what about adults? Interest in population issues is associated with a good overall level of general knowledge. When questioned on the most populous countries on the planet, 95% of respondents ranked China first, and 88% India second (which in 2018 was the correct answer). The respondents also showed some familiarity with graphical representations: from three age pyramids, 58% of respondents correctly identified the one for France in 2018. A majority also responded correctly to knowledge questions, but the degree of media coverage on the topics concerned may influence levels of awareness.

While the majority of respondents (53%) know the size of the world's population, a significant proportion (27%) think that the global population as of 2018 exceeded 10 billion, probably because this figure often appears in the press as a population projection. Over 10 years ago, for example, the regional daily newspaper *Ouest-France* (25 October 2011) carried the headline 'Global population. We'll hit 10 or even 15 billion by 2100'. Closer to the survey date, the weekly newspaper *L'Express* (13 November 2017) announced 'Global population: 10 billion mouths to feed by 2050'. In the POP-AWARE survey, 13% of respondents even thought that the population had already reached over 16 billion, echoing fears of a population explosion described by certain books, documentaries, and websites. Likewise, when questioned on which three European countries have the highest average number of children per woman, the respondents chose France (1.8 in 2018), but also Italy and Spain, although fertility is actually far lower in these countries (1.3 in 2018). This shows that knowledge of certain topics can become dated or be supplanted by the force of social representations—in the last example, the traditional image of the large Mediterranean family—when the situation has actually changed a great deal.

But how do respondents get their information on population? The POP-AWARE survey provides detailed answers to this question.⁽¹⁵⁾ From the possible responses listed in the questionnaire, 65% of respondents chose radio and television. Television news programmes reporting on the latest demographic trends are frequently cited. Also mentioned are documentaries and features on society, even if demographic questions are not necessarily the focus of their analysis. The press is cited by 44% of respondents, with a marked difference between men (48%) and women (38%). Daily newspapers—*Le Monde* and *La Croix* in particular—are cited, as well as political weeklies such as *L'Express* and *Le Point*, along with more general periodicals such as *Courrier international*. The inclusion of demographic questions in the media is not new (De Luca Barrusse, 2020), or specific to France. Wilmoth and Ball (1991, 1992, 1995) demonstrated the extent of demographic debate in the press in the United States.

The POP-AWARE survey wanted to test the hypothesis of media influence by looking for traces of recent news reports in the respondents' answers. In order to do so, INED's former documentation service⁽¹⁶⁾ used the Actudoc tool to scan the national and regional press between 30 August and 25 October 2018, i.e. one month before the questionnaire was administered and during the survey period. As no major demographic events were covered by the media during that time, the analysis was not able to show any immediate influence. However, it emerges that extensive media coverage of a past demographic phenomenon may affect a respondent's perception or give them a biased view of statistical reality. For example, the survey responses bear the clear footprint of the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015. Asked about the main countries of origin of immigrants living in France, the respondents mostly—and correctly—cited Algeria and Morocco, but they also named Syria, even though the number of Syrian migrants living in France remains very small. The exodus of almost 4 million Syrians from their country since 2014 and the European migrant crisis in the summer of 2015 contributed to this distorted perception.

In addition to the press, 'discussions' are also cited as a source of information by 34% of individuals, and websites by 26%, with the INSEE website at the top of the list. Among other sources of information, books were selected by only 10% of respondents, and classes and lectures by 6%. Social science authors such as Alfred Sauvy, Hervé Le Bras, Emmanuel Todd and Thomas Piketty were cited and, more unexpectedly, novelists such as Tahar Ben Jelloun, Laurent Gaudé and Amin Maalouf.

In short, individuals draw on a diverse range of sources, not limited to specialist channels. Although a specific desire to be well-informed on population

(15) Question phrased as follows: 'How did you learn about these issues: discussions; classes or lectures; the press; websites; radio and television; or books?'. Then, 'Give examples'.

(16) We thank Dominique Chauvel-Markman and INED's former documentation service for their help with this analysis, as well as Adam Haidar Velar.

issues does not always emerge, the respondents connect varied information, including economic and environmental data, with demographic trends. And whether they are scientifically based or not, these data contribute to demographic awareness.

Overall, the POP-AWARE survey confirms a strong link between an interest in demography and good scientific knowledge, acquired through education and/or curiosity for the topic as an adult. However, some responses reveal the perceptible influence of powerful social misconceptions and, in particular, media coverage of specific topical issues.

Conclusion

The POP-AWARE survey shows that the French population as a whole is consistently engaged with population issues via a range of channels. This interest, born out of concerns about birth numbers and France's position in the geopolitical sphere, is attested since at least the early 1950s, but has shifted significantly over time. With regard to France's future population, preferences on growth are closely linked to global economic and social concerns, along with a more recent focus on environmental issues. The opinions expressed are rarely radical and preferences tend towards whatever minimizes uncertainty about the future and ensures a balance between demographic, economic, and environmental changes.

While there are no obvious differences by sex, age is a differentiating factor: young people are more concerned than their elders by the links between population and the environment. Occupational category makes less difference than expected. This is likely due to the effect of education, with demographic information being disseminated at various levels of schooling. A further finding is that people with an interest in politics, regardless of political persuasion, attach importance to population issues. In short, an interest in public affairs goes hand in hand with an interest in demography.

But this interest, as expressed in the survey, appears weighed down with concerns and worries. The association of population change with risks and problems appears to originate in the way demographic issues are covered by the media. Other researchers have already shown how anxiety-inducing press articles on demography can be; those on overpopulation for example (Wilmoth and Ball, 1991, 1992). However, other sources of information—some rather unexpected, such as novels and travel documentaries—also highlight population issues.

From the analysis of these various questions, it emerges that the French population is interested in demography and is prepared to express opinions on population issues. The low rate of non-explicit refusals to respond (and even 'I don't know' responses) to closed questions (no higher than 5%), and

the fact that three quarters of respondents looked at the correct answers to the knowledge questions after completing the questionnaire, tend to confirm this.

Is this level of demographic engagement specific to France? And how might changes since 2018 have affected perceptions on population issues? To answer these questions, research could be extended in two directions, first, through comparable surveys in other countries, particularly those with differing demographic situations, with different tools for disseminating demographic knowledge, or with varying degrees of government intervention in population issues. To our knowledge, and after discussion with foreign demographers, it appears that no recent, similar surveys exist in other countries. Second, this survey should be repeated: recent events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the news that the global population has reach 8 billion, the war in Ukraine, pension reforms in France, and the increasingly acute issue of climate change may have altered perceptions on population questions since 2018. A repeat survey would shed light on the true popularity of certain ideas—such as the argument that not having children will help ‘save the planet’—and, more generally, on the links between environmental crises and population issues.



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Résumé

Virginie De Luca Barrusse, Cécile Lefèvre, Jacques Véron • **QUE PENSENT LES FRANÇAIS DES DYNAMIQUES DÉMOGRAPHIQUES EN FRANCE ET DANS LE MONDE ? LES ENSEIGNEMENTS D'UNE ENQUÊTE D'OPINION DANS LA LIGNÉE DES ENQUÊTES DE CONJONCTURE DE L'INED**

En 2018 a été menée l'enquête Pop Aware, dans le cadre du panel Elipss, représentatif de la population française. En étudiant tout autant les connaissances que les opinions relatives aux dynamiques démographiques, en France et dans le monde, cette enquête poursuit un double objectif : d'une part, elle reprend des questions posées des décennies plus tôt sur la situation française, permettant ainsi des comparaisons dans le temps ; d'autre part, elle introduit de nouvelles réflexions, en étendant notamment le champ de son questionnement aux enjeux mondiaux. Les enquêtes considèrent les questions démographiques comme importantes, et ce, de façon relativement indépendante des caractéristiques sociodémographiques et des opinions politiques. Ils expriment aussi une préférence pour la stabilité de la population plutôt que pour sa décroissance, malgré une augmentation des opinions liant dynamique démographique et problèmes environnementaux, notamment chez les jeunes. Ce degré élevé de sensibilité aux phénomènes démographiques est entretenu à la fois par les médias et par l'école. Il n'est pas récent. Des enquêtes de conjoncture et d'opinion publique réalisées sur une période de 60 ans le mettaient déjà en évidence. La conduite d'enquêtes similaires, dans d'autres pays comme en France, serait pertinente pour saisir d'éventuelles variations, dans l'espace et dans la durée, des manifestations de cet intérêt pour la démographie.