



FRANCE STRATÉGIE

BRIDGING THE RIFTS IN FRENCH SOCIETY

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A recent France Stratégie report confirms that France today stands as a house divided. Issues such as wealth inequality, stalling social mobility and a lacklustre job market have driven a wedge through its society. What's more, French citizens' tendency to perceive the predicament as worse than it actually is reflects a growing distrust of the institutions that form the backbone of the country.

There is no doubt Western liberal capitalist democracies have become more divided and fractious since the turn of the 21st century. Against the backdrop of historically high inequality, many countries are turning inward, with the question of identity becoming more and more contentious. Immigrant newcomers and the descendants of immigrants - and especially those who are Muslim - are increasingly being scapegoated for society's ills.

The situation is on the surface more critical in France than in other Western democracies. For what has emerged since the 2005 riots shook the immigrant housing projects in the Paris suburbs is a picture of a deeply divided nation. The atrocities that have taken place in the past two years, which are on a scale not seen on French soil since the Algerian War, have only served to exacerbate the malaise pervading all layers of French society.

In the wake of the January 2015 attacks, many in a country profoundly attached to equality of all before the law rightfully began to question how deep the rifts ran - and, more importantly, how they could be bridged.

France Stratégie's recently published *Fault Lines: Bringing a Society Together (Lignes de faille. Une société à réunifier)* is one of the most thorough attempts yet to answer these questions.

Pall of pessimism

The image that emerges from the report is striking both in the degree to which France is actually split and the extent to which French citizens imagine it to be.

Take poverty. A full 87% of French respondents in a 2014 EU survey felt anyone could fall into poverty during their lifetime. This was more than in Germany, the UK, Italy and Spain, though all these countries have poverty rates higher than France's 13.3%.

At the same time, far more French citizens were found to perceive strong tensions between the rich and the poor in a 2012 EU poll than in Germany, Italy, the UK and Spain. And this is despite less income inequality in France than in the aforementioned countries, according to Eurostat, the EU's statistics arm¹.

A similar trend can be found in the country's success in integrating newcomers. From 2005 to 2014, the number of people who felt integration wasn't working in France rose from 37% to 72%, according to a 2014 poll. Yet despite this a 2016 study found 97% of those with an immigrant parent felt French and 89% of those whose mother and father were both immigrants also considered themselves French. What's more, at 11.8% the percentage of mixed marriages in France is the highest in Europe.

Six fault lines

This is not to make light of the very serious divides the 150-page report examines in depth. The policy institute brought together representatives from government and civil society with experts such as historians, sociologists and geographers to explore six issues that act as fault lines splintering French society: income and wealth inequality; social mobility; employment; the generational gap (young adults versus other adults); the divide between large urban areas and towns and villages; and immigrants and integration.

Despite relatively low income inequality, since the 2008-09 financial crisis the bottom three-quarters of incomes have declined, while the top quarter has been stable. At the same time, wealth inequality is much higher than income inequality: the wealthiest 10% of the French population owns half the national wealth. Moreover, this inequality has worsened substantially since the mid-1990s due to an almost doubling of real estate prices from 1997 to 2008.

1. The top 20% of income earners in France takes home 4.3 times more than the bottom 20% versus 5.1 times in Germany and the UK, 5.8 times in Italy and 6.8 times in Spain.



As to the equal opportunities the country offers its citizens, while overall upward social mobility is more frequent than the opposite, social reproduction is still widespread in French society. For example, in 2015 a full 72% of the students at the elite *grande école* for civil servants ENA were the daughters and sons of white-collar professionals or teachers

When it comes to employment, it appears the grim image French citizens harbour of the job market is somewhat justified. Eurostat figures show that while unemployment has gone down across EU countries, in France it has stayed at around 10%, compared to less than 5% in Germany and the UK.

On top of this, the number of fixed-term contracts of less than a month has increased exponentially from just over 1.5 million in 2000 to over 4.0 million 2015, according to government statistics. This has reinforced a two-tier job market, with on the one hand workers with stable permanent contracts and on the other workers with short-term contracts, mainly young people and unskilled individuals.

The predicament of young people in the job market is also feeding into the sentiment that people under 30 in France today have it harder than previous generations. Figures from the national statistics office, Insee, show that in 2012 on average a young French person landed their first steady job at the age of 28 - eight years later than in 1960. It is perhaps not surprising then that a 2011 poll confirmed 70% of the population feels today's younger generation has it worse than previous post-war generations.

To be sure, the French youth are faced with many of the same problems as their peers in other countries, including a warming climate, excessive national debt and increasingly costly pensions in an aging society.

The divide between large urban areas and towns and villages also mirrors developments in other advanced countries. High value-added activity and skilled workers are found concentrated in French cities. Insee figures show 15 metropolitan areas alone generate half the country's GDP and file 70% of its patents. Nevertheless, according to Eurostat, regional differences in per capita income are not as significant as in Germany, Spain, Italy and the UK.

Lastly, with respect to integration, while, as mentioned above, France has had real success in bringing newcomers and their children into the national fold, there is still rampant discrimination in the workplace. A 2015 study by a French think tank revealed that a Muslim man has to send no less than four times as many CVs as a Christian man to land a job interview.

Faltering institutions

Though the report does show French citizens have an overly gloomy perception of the state of their society, it doesn't hold that this belittles the very real problems the country faces. Rather, for France Stratégie it reflects how French citizens feel about the private and public institutions that make up their country, i.e. companies, schools, public services, national health insurance and the core democratic institutions that represent them.

Specifically, rather than seeing these institutions as inclusive, mobilizing, empowering and protecting them, they feel ignored and mistreated by them - not to say often completely excluded by them².

Government services have become more fraught with conflict, finding it difficult to satisfy citizens' expectations. France's welfare state is also on shaky ground, seen as costly and inefficient and providing little incentive for those on benefits to look for work. Moreover, as with elsewhere, the country's demographics and job market bode for difficult times ahead for the French social model.

Schools, for their part, are not living up to their goal of providing equal opportunity to all; on the contrary, social reproduction persists. As for companies, unionism has weakened, dialogue between workers and employers is lacking and shareholders' weight has increased, making people increasingly wary of the private sector.

2. North D. (1991), "Institutions", *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 5(1), 97-112; Acemoglu D. and J. Robinson (2012), *Why Nations Fail*, Crown Books, New York; Guiso, L., P. Sapienza and L. Zingales L (2010), "Long-term persistence", *Journal of the European Economic Association*.

The same sentiment of wariness pervades among citizens when it comes to their elected representatives, whom they perceive as both impotent and dishonest. This can be seen in the substantial drop in voter turnout over the years. Lastly, French citizens distrust the state's ability to protect them. This sentiment was already pervasive before the 2015 attacks: in 2013 a survey showed 64% of the population agreed with the statement "you're not safe anywhere", compared to 43% of Germans.

Bringing France together

How can these institutions regain the trust of citizens? And how can the rifts in society be bridged and all of France's people brought together to collectively face the future? The report lays out some pitfalls to avoid in addressing these issues. One lies in technocratic solutions, consisting of a succession of targeted and compartmentalized measures. Another is the trap of falling prey to clientelism and placating different interest groups. Banking on an increase in GDP as a salve for society's problems is also illusory, as is rallying people around a fixed national identity or proposing solutions that weaken democracy and heighten authoritarianism. What is necessary is a frank and sincere political debate, clear and accepted rules, institutions built on them and accountable leaders.

France Stratégie suggests three possible paths forward for French society. One is fully accepting individualism and citizens' desire for individual freedom by diminishing the role played by the state in daily life, making it less costly and more efficient and accepted. A second path is decentralizing the state and strengthening local government, which is better equipped to deal with differences on the ground. A third path involves the opposite, reinforcing the rule of law that all citizens are subject to, scaling down measures catering to regional specificities and ensuring uniform public services across the entire country.

Regardless of the path taken, one thing is sure: all of France's people must take part in coming up with solutions to redress the country's ills, not simply the political class. There is no cure-all. It befalls to the citizens in the end to collectively redefine the social compact and decide what justice means in the French Republic of the 21st century.

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