

Opinions in France and Germany on European Demographic Challenges: Ageing, Birth Rate, Intergenerational Solidarity

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An IFOP survey conducted at Alliance VITA’s request, (published by Atlantico) reports similarities in both France and Germany for dealing with the challenge of ageing populations, but very different viewpoints on birth rates.

Just a few weeks prior to the European elections in May 2019, Alliance VITA decided to query French and German citizens on their viewpoints concerning the major demographic issues. The survey results show that French and Germans have similar opinions on ageing, but their respective views on natality are very different.

Which Solution is best to Avoid Exclusion and Isolation of the Elderly?

Question: In many European countries, the fact that elderly persons are socially excluded and/or isolated is becoming a serious problem. By 2050, the number of those aged 80 and over is due to almost double.

In your opinion, following the May 26th elections, how should Europe cope with this situation? Which of the following option do you think is the most important? Which is your first choice? And your second choice?

All Germans	First choice	Total answers
Measures to assist dependant persons should be developed.....	37	62
Encourage and promote intergenerational solidarity	23	50
Recourse to euthanasia should be possible for the elderly people who request it	14	29
Increase the birth rate	9	20
Encourage immigration of younger non-European population.....	6	16
You do not know.....	11	14
TOTAL.....	100	(*)

(*) Total greater than 100, since participants could choose up to 2 responses

Jérôme Fourquet: Regarding the issue of isolation, both the French and the Germans give the same priority to the options in the survey, and are overwhelmingly in favor of measures based on solidarity (over 50% declare that “measures to assist dependent persons should be developed” and “intergenerational solidarity should be encouraged and promoted”) rather than developing options to achieve demographic equilibrium (less than 30% in favor of “Recourse to euthanasia for the elderly people who request if”; less than 20% chose the options “encourage immigration of younger non-European populations" and "increase the birth rate"). Thus, the majority in both countries favor intergenerational solidarity as their first choice to care for the elderly. It is noteworthy that for both the French and the Germans, the option of “encouraging immigration from a younger non-European population” (suggested by the European Commission, particularly during the migrant crisis which began in 2015) was chosen only as a last resort.

However, beyond the similarities in ranking, each country voices different levels of commitment to the options. In France, 62% of those responding are more attached to measures “promoting

intergenerational solidarity”, compared to 50% in Germany, representing a difference of 12 %. The French were slightly more reluctant compared to the Germans, on euthanasia (respectively 24 % vs. 29%) encouraging immigration from a younger non-European population (respectively 11% vs. 16%) as well as increasing birth rates (respectively 16% vs. 20%). The differences between the 2 countries on intergenerational solidarity is most likely due to retirement funds in Germany, which certainly goes with preferring more individual solutions to deal with the ageing population.

Which Reason is Perceived as the Primary Reason For Renouncing to Having More Children?

Question: On average, European couples have one child less than they would like. What do you think is the primary reason for the discrepancy between a couple’s desire to have a child and the actual number of children? Which is the primary reason? And which is the second one?

Summary: Total of answers

	Total French April 2019 (%)	Total Germans April 2019 (%)
Difficult living conditions for families	52	46
Anxiety about the future.....	52	36
Entering workforce later in life.....	38	25
Individualism	19	25
Inconsistent family policies and insufficient assistance for families with children	16	46
Overall decline of the European continent	13	7
You do not know.....	5	8
TOTAL.....	(*)	(*)

(*) Total greater than 100, since participants could choose up to 2 responses

Question: On average, European couples have one child less than they would like. What do you think is the primary reason for the discrepancy between a couple’s desire to have a child and the actual number of children? Which is the primary reason? And which is the second one?

Total French	Primary reason	Total answers
Difficult living conditions for families	31	52
Anxiety about the future.....	25	52
Entering workforce later in life.....	20	38
Individualism	8	19
Inconsistent family policies and insufficient assistance for families with children	6	16
Overall decline of the European continent	5	13
You do not know.....	5	5
TOTAL.....	100	(*)

(*) Total greater than 100, since participants could choose up to 2 responses

Jérôme Fourquet: Albeit that French and Germans have fairly close viewpoints on ageing despite some slight differences, their respective opinions on birth rates are very different. Since France has a more

vigorous family policy and one of the highest birth rate in Europe, any discrepancy between a couple's desire to have a child and the actual number of children is mainly perceived as being due to economic and psychological factors. In equal numbers the French cited: "difficult living conditions for families" (52%) and "anxiety about the future" (52%) as the main reasons for the discrepancy between the desire for children and the number of births. If the survey also found "difficult living conditions for families" at the top of the German rankings (46%), in this case it corresponded with "inconsistent family policies, and insufficient support for families with children (46% in Germany vs. only 16% in France). This illustrates the disparities in measures for assisting families on either side of the Rhine: more frequently, German women have to stop working to raise their children, mainly due to insufficient childcare facilities. Although in recent years Germany has significantly improved its family policy (while simultaneously in France the policies have become more stringent), the statistics obviously show contrasting opinions between the two countries, which have an impact on the demographic dynamism in these two countries.

Apart from this major difference, there is also a particular anxiety in France for the outlook on the future (52% vs. 36% in Germany) - and the feeling that French youth enter the workforce later in life than Germans (which postpones their ability to raise children). In France, 38% gave this answer compared to only 25% of those surveyed in Germany.

Do you agree that Europe has become too focused on economics and finances prejudicing humanity?

Question: The social crisis and the protest movement by the "Yellow Vests" in France show that some Europeans feel they are in a precarious situation, and do not benefit from the economic development. Some believe that nowadays, Europe has become too focused on economics and finances and not enough on humanity and social issues.

Personally, do you totally agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree or totally disagree with this opinion?

	Total French April 2019 (%)	Total Germans April 2019 (%)
TOTAL AGREEMENT	78	71
. Totally agree	39	30
. Somewhat agree	39	41
TOTAL DISAGREEMENT	16	17
. Somewhat disagree.....	12	14
. Totally disagree	4	3
You do not know	6	12
TOTAL	100	100

Jérôme Fourquet: Obviously, despite very different economic and social situations such as unemployment at 3.2% in Germany vs. 8.8% in France, both countries are pessimistic in their viewpoints on consolidating Europe, which they criticize as being too focused on "economics and finance, and not enough on humane and social issues ". This viewpoint was confirmed by 78% of the French and 71% of the Germans; nevertheless only 30% of the Germans adamantly agreed vs. 39 % of the French. Over and beyond this consensus, it is interesting to note some slight differences in opinions according to age groups. In France the youngest generation is equally critical as the elderly (76% for those under age 35, compared to 79% for those over 35 years), whereas in Germany the generational gap is slightly more pronounced, (reporting 65% for those under age 35 versus 73% for those over 35).

On the contrary, regarding politics, France is more divided (86% on the left vs. 77% on the right) compared to Germany (77% on the left vs. 72% on the right).

Atlantico: Why conduct an opinion poll on European demographic challenges just one month before the elections?

Tugdual Derville: With the upcoming European elections, we wanted to assess the opinion of the inhabitants of the 2 most populated countries of this “old continent” on these essential issues. Our help lines and listening services receive statements, which are increasingly worrying, on individualism as an undeniable threat to the "vulnerable generations": those facing birth and those facing death. On the one hand, a large number of elderly individuals are increasingly isolated, experiencing a form of social euthanasia that alienates them from society. And on the other hand, the young generations who are old enough to start a family are finding it more and more difficult to establish the stable living conditions, necessary for planning projects for the future. The ageing of the population and the declining birth rate are not solely demographic issues. Indeed, they are humanitarian issues that concern all of us.

What is the ‘take-home’ message of this survey?

Tugdual Derville: It is essential to realize that citizens expect European policies to focus more on "human and social" aspects rather than on "economic and financial" ones, as stated by the vast majority of those polled in France (78%). Most French and Germans believe that facing the challenge of ageing means both "developing supportive measures for dependency" (68% in France) and "increasing intergenerational solidarity" (62% in France). Nonetheless, a sizeable minority believes that euthanasia can be an answer to the problem: (29% in Germany vs. 24% in France). Quite naturally, this is deeply worrisome for Alliance VITA. Society is being asked to choose between genuine intergenerational solidarity vs. suicide and/or euthanasia. Regarding generational renewal, the differences in opinions on either side of the Rhine is striking. In France the demographic winter is already a serious problem, and the birth deficit keeps increasing in connection with the growing inconsistency of family policies. Compared to the Germans, the majority of the French report that "difficult living conditions for families" (52%) and "anxiety about the future" (52%) are the reasons they renounce having another child.

What comes after his survey?

Tugdual Derville: Alliance VITA has launched an awareness campaign with 10 proposals, to actively promote intergenerational dynamics in support of our "vulnerable generations". Our leaflet, which is handed out throughout France, show that our society’s future depends on acting immediately to encourage and support intergenerational solidarity.

IFOP Survey conducted for Alliance VITA

Population Surveyed: *The opinion poll queried individuals aged 18 and over, representative of each country’s population: 1003 in France and 1005 in Germany.*

Method: *The quota method was used for the survey, to ensure having a representative population (sex, age, profession) categorized by region and size of the town.*

Data Collection: *The interviews were conducted from April 9 to 15, 2019, by having participants fill out questionnaires online.*