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THE STRANGE NEGATIVE RELATIONSHIP OF FRENCH PUBLIC OPINION WITH EUROPE

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In a series of recent studies, we (along with Thierry Chopin and Emmanuel Rivière) have analysed in depth the relationship between the French and European integration¹. We described this relationship as ‘French style Euroscepticism’, a mixture of mistrust and ambivalence. While the observation that French public opinion is distrustful and ambivalent towards European integration is not new, it has transformed into a curious paradox since 2017: It is in fact in one of the countries least favourable to European integration that one of the most pro-integration executive powers in the Fifth Republic and in Europe has been elected, and subsequently re-elected. It is true that on each occasion Emmanuel Macron was elected against Marine Le Pen. While the second rounds of the 2017 and 2022 presidential elections can be seen as ‘quasi-referendums’ on the relationship the French entertain with European integration, one cannot draw the conclusion that Emmanuel Macron's victories represent an endorsement of Europe by the French electorate.

We have shown the complexity and multi-dimensionality of France's relationship with the European Union: between the logics of ‘diffuse support’ and ‘specific support’ (support for the principle of European integration for France but dissatisfaction and criticism of the terms and meaning of this integration) on the one hand²; between the logics of national political cleavages (the left-right cleavage and the conservatism-progressivism cleavage) and the logics of the integration-sovereignty cleavage on the other. There is nothing simple about France's relationship with the European Union³.

Nothing can be summed up as a single political cleavage, or only in the social cleavages that so strongly fragment French attitudes to European integration. In one of the research projects conducted with Thierry Chopin and Emmanuel Rivière, we put forward a series of hypotheses to account for this complexity in the French case: the ‘national logic of “projection”’ (the EU seen as an instrument at the service of France or as a distortion of the French exception; ‘France's ‘unitary political culture’ (at odds with compromise democracy promoted by the EU); a ‘socio-economic culture marked by a certain mistrust of, or even hostility to, liberalism’ (despite the fact that free trade and competition are at the heart of the European economic project⁴).

1.
See data in appendix

2.
See data in appendix

3.
See data in appendix

4.
"The French and Europe: between mistrust and ambivalence", *Institut Jacques Delors, Report n°119, May 2020*

Here we take these questions a step further, in search of the causes and explanations of the strange relationship between the French and European integration, highlighted, in particular, by a series of major political events over the last 25 to 30 years. A number of these events demonstrate France's ambivalence towards European integration and the impossibility of summing it up by just one explanation: ratification (by a very narrow majority) of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, Jean-Marie Le Pen's qualification for the second round of the presidential elections in 2002, rejection of the European Constitutional Treaty in 2005, victory of the RN in the 2014 European elections, election of Emmanuel Macron in the 2017 presidential elections (against Marine Le Pen), victory of the RN in the 2019 European elections, victory of Emmanuel Macron in the 2022 presidential elections (again against Marine Le Pen), possible third consecutive victory of the RN in the 2024 European elections.

We will try to understand this 'French strangeness' by comparing France with other EU member states. To do this, we have made two choices: firstly, to give priority to a 'macroscopic' explanation based on data analysed at country level, having dealt with the individual dimensions of French mistrust of the EU in a previous working paper⁵; secondly, we will relate the opinions of the various countries on European integration to the political variables relating to the political and democratic systems of EU member countries. The focus of the analysis is to make a comparison of France with the other EU member countries.

Mapping European attitudes to the EU: France lagging behind?

We shall start by situating France on a 'mental map' of European opinions of the EU. We used one of the most recent waves of the Eurobarometer opinion survey, Wave 99.4, dated spring 2023 to do this. We analyse 13 indicators of 'diffuse support' for European integration using the statistical methods of geometric data analysis (positive or negative image of the EU, confidence in the EU, satisfaction with the way democracy works in the EU, etc.). The advantage of these methods is that they can summarise all the answers given to the 13 selected questions into a few major analytical dimensions.

Two main dimensions emerge: a dimension which basically contrasts all positive opinions with all negative opinions; and then a dimension⁶ which contrasts the most extreme responses (favourable or unfavourable to the EU) with moderate or ambivalent responses (for example, the respondent stating that the fact that their country is a member of the EU is neither good nor bad.)

Graph 1 represents these two dimensions on a plane orthogonal. The first dimension, which is horizontal, runs from the most positive and favourable opinions about the EU (on the left) to the most negative and unfavourable (on the right). For ease of reading, the graph⁷ moves from the bluest area (left), which is the most favourable to European integration, through dark green, light green and orange, to the reddest area (right), which is the most unfavourable. As can be seen at the far right of the graph, France is as unfavourable to European integration as Slovakia and Greece, and almost as unfavourable as the former eastern part of Germany. At the opposite end of the scale (on the left and in blue) are Denmark and Ireland, which all recent analyses of public opinion in Europe show are still the countries most clearly in favour of European integration.

5. Bruno Cautrès, « Comprendre la faible confiance des Français dans l'Union européenne », *Working paper, European elections Élections 2024*, Wave 3 of the electoral survey working paper 2, April 2024, 8 p.

6. This second dimension, that contrasts the modalities of extreme answers to moderate ones is typically observed in this type of analysis. The cloud of points constructed by the first two dimensions of the multiple correspondences analysis then takes on a parabolic shape multiples, known as the 'Guttman effect' linked to strong relationships between all the variables, indicating the presence of a strongly structuring underlying factor (that of the first dimension)

7. In order to realise the colouring and the graph itself we used a "scatter Plot" Python script between the two factors from the factorial analysis of correspondences. We recommend that readers read this paper on screen so that they can clearly see the colour codes of the graph (or that a colour photocopy be used)

8.

On these temporal dynamics, see: Bruno Cautrès, *Les européens aiment-ils (toujours) l'Europe ?* Paris, La Documentation Française, 2014

9.

Bruno Cautrès, « *Les attitudes vis-à-vis de l'Europe en France* », Bruno Cautrès, Dominique Reynié (Ed.), *L'opinion européenne 2000*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2000, p.102

10.

Liesbet Hooghe, Gary Marks "A postfunctionalist theory of European integration. From permissive consensus to constraining dissensus", *British Journal of Political Science*, 2009, 39(1), pp. 1-23

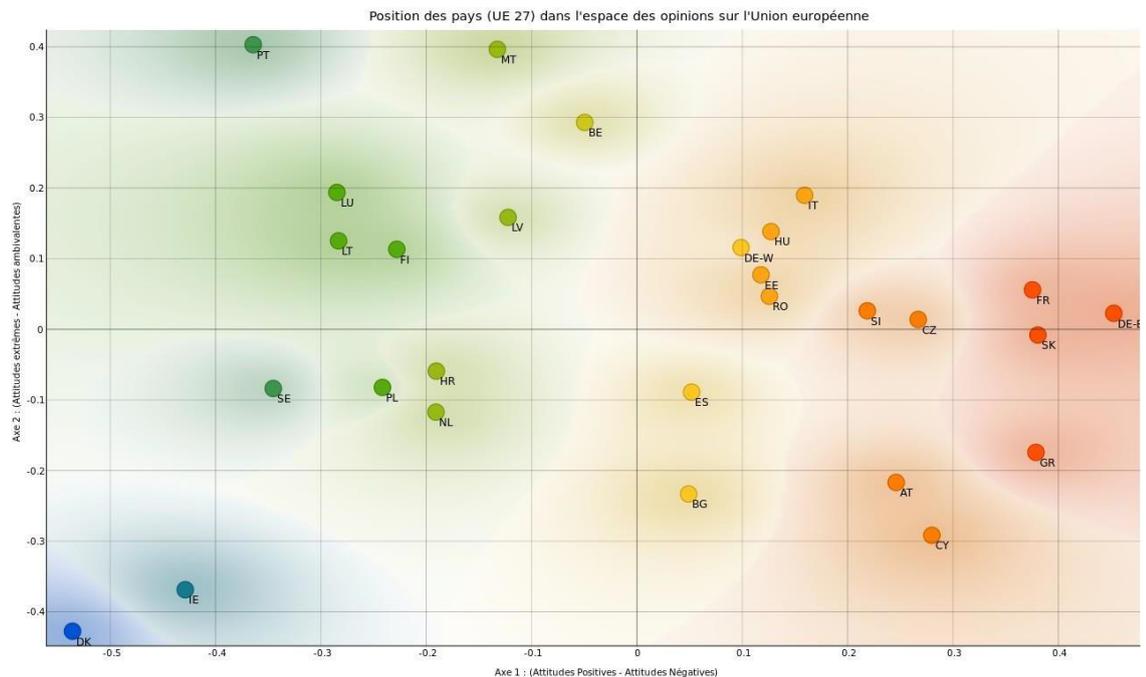
11.

Virginie Van Ingelgom, *Mesurer l'indifférence. Intégration européenne et attitudes des citoyens*, *Sociologie*, 2012, 3(1), pp. 1-20

There is nothing surprising about this map if we follow the trends in public opinion towards the EU. It is fairly stable, but also quite different from that seen before the 'Great Recession' of 2007/2008, when countries such as Greece and Italy were among the most favourable to European integration. As far as France is concerned, several dynamics have of course existed over the last thirty or forty years, without ever placing the country in the group of countries whose opinion was most favourable to European integration⁸. However, France has clearly moved from an 'average' position to a negative one over the last twenty-five years. In 2000, we concluded an analysis of trends in French public opinion on the EU as follows: 'France is exactly at the centre of gravity (...) this central position clearly indicates that the structure of opinion on Europe in France reflects the European average as a whole (...). Neither openly pro-European nor openly anti-European, the structure of European opinion in France is little different from the average structure observed in the Union as a whole'⁹. This shows just how far we have come in almost a quarter of a century.

It would be hasty (and above all incorrect) to conclude that French public opinion has become 'anti-European', a notion that is poor for analysis and does not correspond to the empirical data. Rather, public opinion trends in France about the modalities of European integration are characterised by a series of questions that have arisen in the country. The increased presence of European issues in French public debate and political life has in fact been accompanied by a political polarisation on Europe, with opinions on European integration no longer reduced to their sociological substratum. To borrow the vocabulary of European integration specialists, it is indeed a series of 'binding dissents' on European integration that has replaced (over the last twenty to twenty-five years) the logic of 'permissive consensus'¹⁰, culminating in the 2005 referendum and also the presidential elections (2017 and 2022) and the European elections (2014, 2019 and 2024). In other words, the shift in France's position to the right of Graph 1, compared with its position at the centre of the graph twenty to twenty-five years ago, can be explained in part by the effects of politicisation and ideological polarisation on the issue of national sovereignty, driven by the national-populist right and certain fringes of the governing right. Other aspects of French public opinion towards the EU show a type of indifference and ambivalence very effectively analysed by Virginie Van Ingelgom¹¹ and present in our data as shown by France's position on the vertical axis.

Graph 1: The position of EU countries (EU27) on opinions of the European Union



The “quality of democracy” as a key explanatory factor?

12.

Numerous definitions of ‘the quality of democracy » and its indicators exist in the literature. On the topic of these definitions and measures, see the special issue of the *International Political Science Review*, November 2016 and the synthesising article by: Geissel, Brigitte, et al. “Measuring the Quality of Democracy: Introduction.” *International Political Science Review*, 2016, 37(5), pp. 571–79

13.

<https://democracybarometer.org/> We used the most recent version of this data base (2020). Please note that for France the latest data date from 2017. One could hypothesize that the absence of any major institutional reform since 2017 means that the 2017 data more or less reflect the situation in 2024

14.

Bühlmann, M., Merkel, W., Müller, L. et al. « The Democracy Barometer: A New Instrument to Measure the Quality of Democracy and its Potential for Comparative” Research *European Political Science*, 2012, 11, pp. 519-536

To explain France's position with regard to opinions on Europe, we formulate the hypothesis of a correlation with systemic variables, mainly political and relative to the ‘quality of democracy’¹². Among the possible conceptualisations and indicators of this notion, we have selected the ‘Democracy Barometer’¹³ database.

This database, which measures the ‘quality of democracy’ at country level, is based on three central elements: **Liberty**, **Equality** and **Control**. According to the developers of the Democracy Barometer, ‘a democratic system tries to strike a good balance between the normative and interdependent values of liberty and equality, and this requires control (...). Control is valuable in a democracy because it is the institutionalised control of political authorities that distinguishes democratic systems from autocracies¹⁴. Each of these three central elements (**Liberty**, **Equality** and **Control**) is broken down into three functions, which generates nine major indicators of the ‘quality of democracy’ for which the database has a large number of empirical measurements. An overall ‘quality of democracy’ score is assigned to each country on the basis of the score obtained by each of them in terms of:

- individual freedoms, the rule of law and the public sphere for the **Liberty dimension**,
- (electoral) competition, mutual constraints between institutions (the balance of powers) and the ability of governments to implement public policies that respect the preferences expressed by citizens) for the **Control dimension**,
- transparency (of democratic procedures and institutions), participation and representation for the **Equality dimension**.

Table 1 shows the correlations between these nine democratic functions for all the member countries of the European Union. Almost all the correlations are positive: the more the quality of democracy increases on one of the nine functions, the more the quality of democracy increases on the other functions. If we look only at the most strongly positive correlations (above 0.5), we see that the functions of transparency, individual freedoms, the rule of law, representation and government capability interact and make the greatest contribution to establishing the democratic quality score of EU member countries

Table 1: Correlations between the nine indicators for “quality of democracy” among European member countries

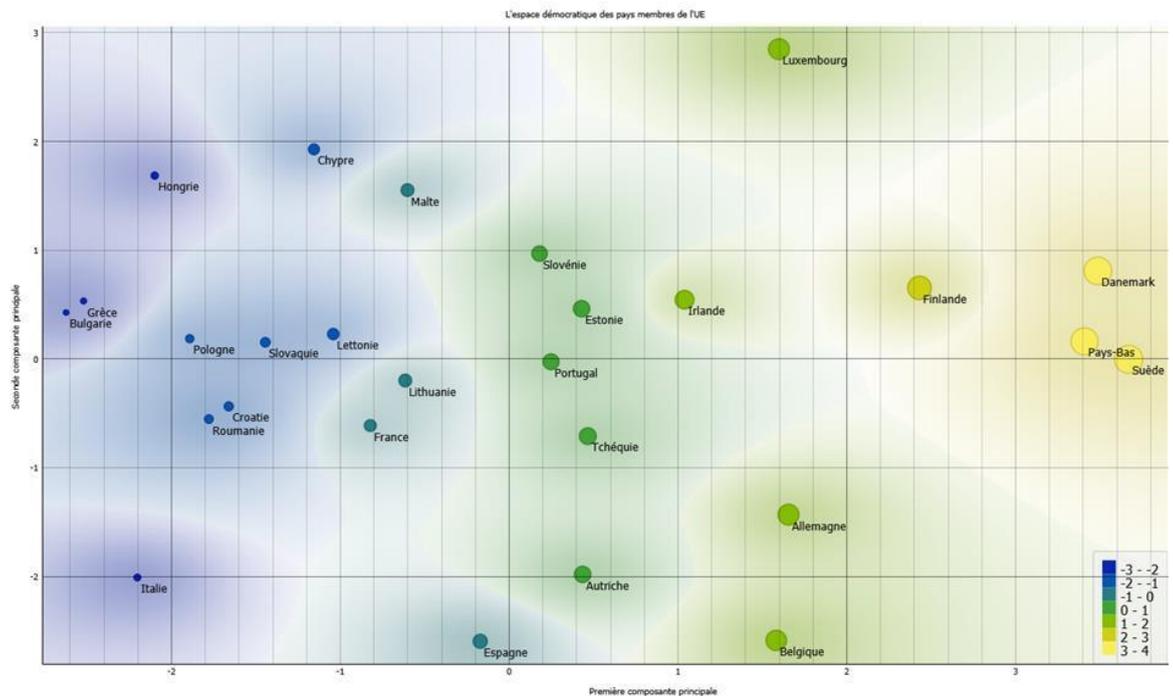
	INDLIB	RULEOFLAW	PUBLIC	COMPET	MUTUCONS	GOVCAP	TRANSPAR	PARTICIP	REPRES
INDLIB	1.000								
RULEOFLAW	0.428	1.000							
PUBLIC	0.251	0.026	1.000						
COMPET	0.420	0.224	0.016	1.000					
MUTCONS	-0.199	0.072	0.020	0.381	1.000				
GOVCAP	0.273	0.613	0.016	-0.071	0.044	1.000			
TRANSPAR	0.582	0.794	0.056	0.351	0.051	0.541	1.000		
PARTICIP	-0.018	0.273	-0.146	0.269	0.468	0.072	0.230	1.000	
REPRES	0.284	0.696	-0.089	0.082	0.065	0.500	0.501	0.426	1.000

France’s ranking in these various categories places it far, sometimes even very far, from many EU member states, particularly those in northern Europe. For the nine major democratic functions, France's ranking among the 27 EU member states is as follows: ninth place (the country’s best ranking) for mutual constraints (the check and balance of institutions) and participation; eleventh place for transparency and representation; fourteenth place for the quality of public space; sixteenth place for the rule of law; twenty-fourth place for the quality of electoral competition, individual freedoms and government capacity. If we aggregate the data for the three main dimensions, France comes eighth in terms of equality, thirteenth in terms of freedom and twenty-first in terms of the quality of democratic control. Finally, in terms of democratic quality (the synthetic indicator that brings all these data together), France is in thirteenth place among all the member countries of the European Union.

15. The analysis has not been reproduced here, it is available by request to the author

All these correlations can be summarised using an analysis of principal components¹⁵ which identifies two main dimensions of analysis that account for most of the information contained in the correlation table. Graph 2 shows these two main dimensions and the correlations between them and positions each EU member country in this map. On the horizontal axis (the first ‘principal component’), the countries are ranked from left to right according to the values recorded on the functions of the rule of law, individual freedoms, transparency, representation and government capacity. On the vertical axis (the second ‘principal component’), countries are ranked from bottom to top according to their scores on mutual constraints, participation and competition (bottom) and according to their scores on individual freedoms, public space and governmental ability (top).

Graph2: Democratic space in European Union member countries



To make this graph easier to see, the background of the graph and the countries¹⁶ have been coloured according to the scores obtained on the first 'principal component', the horizontal axis which is the most important and which best structures the data: on the left is the blue zone, the zone of countries with the lowest scores on the indicators most representative of the 'quality of democracy'; in the middle is the green zone, the zone of countries with average values on these indicators; on the right is the yellow zone, the zone of countries obtaining the best scores on these same indicators. As can be seen, France's position is at the bottom and to the left - in the quadrant of the graph that corresponds to the countries with the lowest scores (blue colour) on the most important 'quality of democracy' indicators, even though its scores in terms of competition, participation and mutual constraints are higher. Although France does not occupy the most extreme position in the blue zone of the graph (in other words, it is not the lowest country in terms of the quality of democracy), it is nevertheless the only founding member of the EU (along with Italy) to belong to this blue zone, which only includes countries from Southern or Eastern Europe. The contrast with the position occupied not only by the countries of Northern Europe, but also by the Netherlands, Germany, Belgium and Ireland, is quite striking, and shows that these results are not related to the length of time the country has been a member of the EU, or to macro-economic indicators. It is democracy that is at the heart of the matter for France and for the group of countries in the blue zone of the graph.

17.

The 2024 edition of this classification was carried out in partnership with the European University Institute. See: <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2024/02/14/four-lessons-from-the-2023-democracy-index>

18.

"France scores close to the OECD average values in stakeholder participation guidance (0.17) and stakeholder participation practices (0.18). However, it scores 0.05, out of a maximum value of 0.33, in stakeholder oversight of infrastructure projects, significantly below the OECD average (0.19)". In: <https://www.oecd.org/publication/government-at-a-glance/2023/country-notes/france-39c22479/>

France's disappointing ranking on indicators of the 'quality of democracy' is in line with other more recent data, those of *The Economist's*¹⁷ annual ranking of democracies, which, in its 2024 edition, ranks France twenty-third in the world, on a par with Spain, but nevertheless puts it in tenth place in the European Union. These data are also consistent with OECD studies, which show that France is frequently below the average for OECD member countries in terms of its ability to involve citizens and the various stakeholders¹⁸ particularly in major infrastructure decisions.

While the relationship between public opinion and the European Union cannot be reduced solely to the major macro-political variables characterising the democratic system, and while we must be wary of inferring causality from simple correlations, these results are nonetheless interesting to examine. The correlation between the 'quality of democracy' scores and the scores obtained on the first dimension of opinions on the EU (the horizontal dimension in Graph 1) is negative and moderately strong (-0.39). If we disaggregate the overall 'quality of democracy' score into its three main pillars, we see that the correlation exists mainly between the dimensions of Freedom and Equality and opinions on the EU. If we break this down further and go back to the nine main democratic functions, the correlation becomes stronger with the functions of transparency, respect for individual freedoms and the rule of law, three democratic functions on which France obtains average or lower scores than many other European countries.

It would therefore be tempting to conclude that France's position in Graph 1 can be reasonably well explained by its position in Graph 2, in other words that the country's position among the group of countries least favourable to European integration can be explained by its lower 'democratic quality'. But caution in the interpretation is needed, insofar as this analysis does not reason 'all things being equal', by comparing the macro-political explanation with other explanations: in particular, the hypothesis can be made that macro-social rather than macro-political dimensions need to be taken into account.

Social spending, quality of democracy and opinions on the EU

19.

Laurie Beaudonnet "A Threatening Horizon: The Impact of the Welfare State on Support for Europe", *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 2015, 53: pp. 457-475

20.

Adam P. Brinegar & Seth K. Jolly, Location, Location, Location: National Contextual Factors and Public Support for European Integration. *European Union Politics*, 2005, 6(2), pp. 155-180

Other research has highlighted the powerfully structuring role played by levels of social spending and national welfare state models in people's relationship with Europe. Laurie Beaudonnet has shown that 'the better the protection provided at national level, the less support there is for European integration'¹⁹. This alternative hypothesis, that is somewhat complementary to that of the effects of 'democratic quality' is worth considering. Indeed, might it not be at least as much, if not more, the fear of seeing the European Union call into question 'national social achievements' that could explain public opinion trends towards it? In some countries, Europe could be seen as a 'social low-water mark', while in others it could be the opposite, given national situations in terms of social protection? This is a hypothesis that Brinegar and Jolly proposed almost twenty years ago²⁰.

Let us return to the terms of this explanation of public support for European integration as a function of welfare state regimes. Analysing variations in support for the European Union both at the contextual level of Member States 'welfare regimes and at the level of citizens' individual socio-economic status, Laurie Beaudonnet concludes that 'the context of high protection leads individuals to be more concerned about the EU's external influence (...). When the national system works well, there is no room for improvement through European integration. This process is most often perceived as threatening to the national welfare state through the delegation of competences and indirect pressures on social benefits and other aspects of the status quo. Given the risk of a race to the bottom in social protection standards, the cost of the opportunity of economic integration is much higher for individuals living in highly protective regimes, where national solidarity is extensive and forms a central part of national cohesion and identity. On the other hand, when social protection systems function poorly or provide only residual protection, the influence of integration is not as difficult to overcome'²¹.

21.

Laurie Beaudonnet, op. cit.

This effect applies in particular to individuals who, within the most protective social protection systems in Europe, are objectively in a situation of greater dependence on social benefits and subjectively the most anxious and worried about any changes in this area. In order to test the hypothesis of a contextual effect linked to national

22.

<https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/5347777#tableau-figure1>

It should be noted that for several countries the data available are indicated as "provisional" by INSEE

social protection models, we have introduced social expenditure as a percentage of GDP²² for 2021 into our analyses. In order to better reason 'all other things being equal', we have conducted a very simple statistical model (a linear regression model), comparing the explanatory weight of the synthetic indicator of 'quality of democracy' and of social spending as a percentage of GDP per capita to explain variations in support for the EU. The two effects are simultaneously significant (although it is the quality of democracy that has the most significant effect) and opposites: when democratic quality increases, support for European integration increases, and when social spending increases, support for European integration decreases. These are, of course, only 'average effects': some national cases escape this rule, such as Denmark, which occupies a high position in terms of social spending and 'democratic quality' and is at the top of the league table for opinions in favour of European integration. However, in the case of France the rule applies very well: France is number one in the EU in terms of social spending, number 13 in terms of 'democratic quality' and second to last in the ranking of opinions in favour of European integration.

As can be seen, it is undoubtedly France's dual particularity that explain its position among the group of countries least favourable to European integration: high levels of social spending (as a % of GDP) and a lower level of democratic quality with respect to several important dimensions of this quality. It should be reiterated here that no hasty conclusions should be drawn, as other explanatory factors undoubtedly need to be taken into account. Furthermore, the effect of 'macroscopic' variables (democratic quality, social spending) is mediated within each member state by specific national trajectories and histories in terms of their relationship with Europe and the accession process, and by endogenous sociological factors. The weight of 'national narratives' and collective mental frameworks²³ weigh heavily in the relationship between countries and Europe, a relationship that is always complex as it creates tension between important elements of national, social and political identity. The politicisation of European issues, the alternatives proposed by national political forces and the ways in which they incorporate European questions into their national political agendas obviously also play a role.

23.

As Sophie Duchesne, Florence Haegel, Virginie van Ingelgom and Elizabeth Frazer show in their book *Citizens' Reactions to European Integration Compared: Overlooking Europe*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. Or even: Juan Diez Medrano. *Framing Europe*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2003

Conclusion

The European elections on 9 June are less than thirty days away now. If the results confirm the available pre-election polls, the *Rassemblement national* will have achieved the rare feat of winning a similar election three times in a row. If this result is confirmed, the conclusion should not be drawn that France is 'anti-European' or against the EU, but rather that the result speaks to the country's national democratic malaise. France is undoubtedly one of the countries where dissatisfaction with European integration should be seen as another facet of a wider democratic dissatisfaction. A number of narratives in French political life are in contradiction with each other on this question: for President Macron, 'European sovereignty' is the key to preserving the comparative advantages of the French social model; for the opposition, it is sometimes the 'restoration' of national sovereignty and border control, and sometimes the assertion of different European choices (on social justice, climate or EU democracy) that would prevent the reduction of these comparative advantages. Whatever the outcome of the next European elections might be, a huge amount of work will remain to be done: deepening democracy in France and broadening a more inclusive citizenship

Annexe

Note¹ : Bruno Cautrès, Thierry Chopin, « *Élections européennes : répondre aux attentes d'une opinion publique fragmentée dans un 'nouvel âge des incertitudes'* », Paris, Institut Jacques Delors, Policy Paper 297, 29/02/2024, 26 p. <https://institutdelors.eu/publications/elections-europeennes-repondre-aux-attentes-dune-opinion-publique-fragmentee-dans-un-nouvel-age-des-incertitudes/>

Bruno Cautrès, Thierry Chopin, Emmanuel Rivière, « *Un euroscepticisme à la française entre défiance et ambivalence le nécessaire 'retour de l'Europe en France'* », Paris, Institut Jacques Delors, Rapport 119, décembre 2021, 48 p.

Note² : See notably work done by Céline Belot and Sylvie Strudel, notamment : Belot, Céline, Bruno Cautrès, and Sylvie Strudel, « L'Europe comme enjeu clivant. Ses effets perturbateurs sur l'offre électorale et les orientations de vote lors de l'élection présidentielle de 2012 », *Revue française de science politique*, 2013, 63(6), pp. 1081- 1112 ; et notre chapitre fondateur : Belot, Céline, et Bruno Cautrès. « L'Europe, invisible mais omniprésente », in: Bruno Cautrès, Nonna Mayer (dir.), *Le nouveau désordre électoral. Les leçons du 21 avril 2002*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2004, pp. 119-141.

Note³ : Researchers working on the relationship of France with the EU show that historical (and cultural) dimensions must be taken into account and that it is imperative to go back in time to the IVth Republic to better understand this relationship. Research carried out by d'Helen Drake is fundamental to understanding these dimensions.

Voir : Helen Drake, Chris Reynolds (dir.), *60 Years of France and Europe*, Londres, Routledge, 2018.

Helen Drake (dir.), *French Relations with the European Union*, Londres, Routledge, 2005. On peut également se reporter à plusieurs chapitres du *Oxford handbook on French Politics* : Robert Elgie, Emiliano Grossman, Amy Mazur (dir.). *The Oxford handbook of French politics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017.

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