

Integration Challenges in France: Examining Policies and Xenophobia Impacting East Asian Communities

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ABSTRACT

This study examines French integration policies and their impact on cultural diversity and the prevalence of xenophobic attitudes within society. Through a literature exploration and review of historical, sociocultural, and policy-driven dimensions, the study investigates the integration challenges confronted by immigrants and their descendants in integrating into French society. The review highlights the deficiencies inherent in current integration strategies, highlighting disparities in employment, healthcare access, and the perpetuation of discriminatory attitudes, notably targeting the East Asian community. Despite claims of colorblindness, the French legal system tacitly endorses xenophobic laws that prioritize a homogeneous society, expecting uniformity in religious observances and language among citizens. Regrettably, these policies have hindered the ability of many immigrants and their progeny to flourish within French society, evident in educational and employment statistics. Drawing parallels with successful integration models such as Canada's multicultural approach, this paper advocates for a fundamental shift in French policies, stressing inclusivity and cultural diversity over a push for homogeneity. By addressing systemic disparities, recognizing and valuing cultural distinctions, and implementing more efficacious integration measures, France can strive toward a more cohesive and harmonious society that benefits immigrants and the indigenous population alike. This can align with the global trend towards embracing cultural diversity as an asset, offering a promising path towards a more unified and equitable French society.

French Integration Policies: An Overview

The phenomenon of national homogeneity and the perpetration of xenophobic acts often stem from a collective desire for societal and national security. Individuals subscribing to these beliefs highly value their nation's cultural heritage and take pride in their native language. Consequently, immigrants perceived as not assimilating into the predominant culture might be viewed as a threat to the established cultural fabric. Integration policies are designed to mitigate these challenges by facilitating immigrants' assimilation into the dominant culture. This approach aims to transform immigrants from perceived foreign influences into integral members of French society. However, the inadequacies in these measures, coupled with France's ostensibly colorblind policymaking approach, have proven ineffective in mitigating xenophobic sentiments prevalent within French society.

The global landscape has witnessed a marked increase in cultural and ethnic diversity, particularly notable in France. This influx of diversity has triggered significant challenges. Persistent notions of national homogeneity and ineffective integration policies have significantly impeded the cohesiveness among French citizens. Notably, individuals of East Asian descent have borne the brunt of racist and discriminatory attitudes within France. The purportedly colorblind stance adopted by France toward its culturally diverse populace has

failed to foster a unified society. An in-depth examination of French policies and cultural dynamics over recent decades could yield valuable insights into the adversities faced by immigrants.

Among the many challenges faced by immigrants in France, difficulties in integrating into the labor market and accessing healthcare services pose the most formidable hurdles. Statistical data indicates that immigrants in France encounter substantial hurdles in securing employment and healthcare opportunities compared to non-immigrants. Studies, such as those conducted by INSEE in 2012, reveal stark disparities in unemployment rates between immigrants (16%) and non-immigrants (9%), along with their descendants (15% vs. 8%). The disparity worsens among youth immigrant descendants, with an unemployment rate of 18.3% for those under 25, surpassing the national average of 7.3% in 2022. Persistent challenges in securing stable employment for immigrant descendants threaten the financial stability of immigrant families, exacerbating socio-economic divides within society. These disparities in economic status between immigrants and native French citizens contribute to a palpable social schism.

Employment Rate in France by Immigration Background, 2015-2021

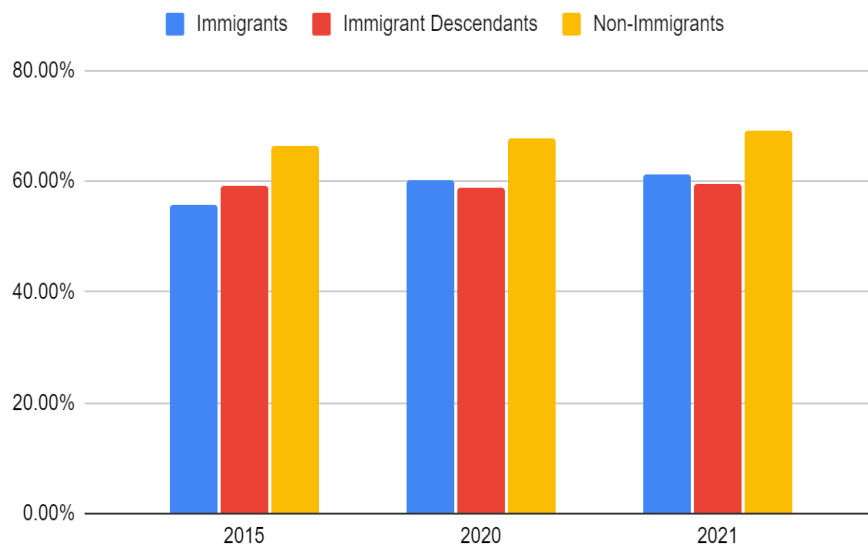


Figure 1. Employment Rates in France by Immigration Background. The distribution in employment rates based on status as an immigrant or French person.

To address these challenges, several policies and initiatives have been implemented in France. For instance, the Youth Commitment Contract (CEJ), operating under the European "Youth Guarantee," endeavors to provide professional integration opportunities for individuals under 25. Supported by the European Social Fund, the CEJ has registered 225,400 contracts since its inception in March 2022. This program spans six months to a year, offering a monthly allowance of up to 500 euros and encompassing various activities such as apprenticeships, internships, and training. Similarly, programs like EPIDE, E2C, and Service Militaire Adapte (SMA) aim to facilitate youth employment through specialized training and military integration.

Undocumented migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees in France possess equal rights to access medical services through State Medical Aid (AME), which provides financial assistance for those lacking legal documentation. However, despite eligibility, accessing medical aid remains challenging for an estimated 20% of

qualified individuals. AME's yearly budget is 943 million euros, catering to approximately 300,000 beneficiaries. This aid encompasses medical and dental costs, medications, hospitalization, vaccinations, and contraception/abortion expenses. Additionally, France's social protection system covers healthcare, but disparities between employed and unemployed individuals hint at differential health outcomes. While efforts toward universal healthcare coverage are underway, disparities persist, primarily tied to employment status. The socio-economic challenges faced by immigrants in France, particularly in labor market integration and healthcare access, underscore the pressing need for more comprehensive and effective policy measures to foster inclusivity and address systemic disparities.

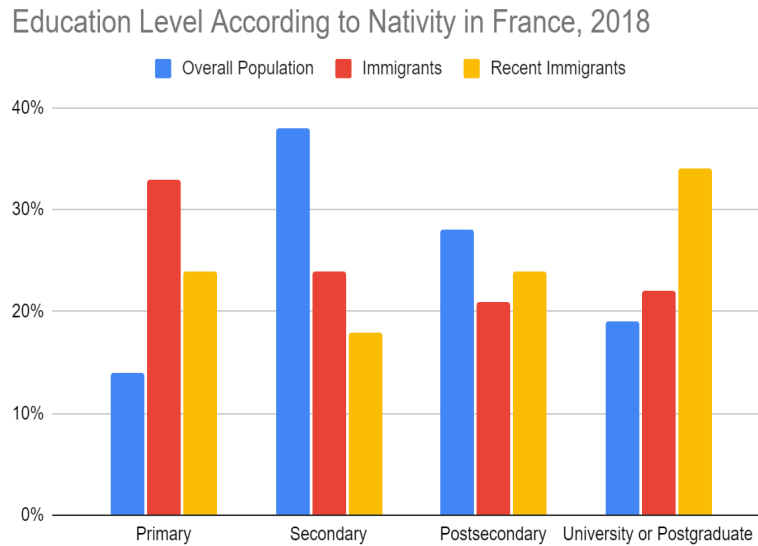


Figure 2. Education Level According to Nativity in France

This figure represents the level of education attained by French citizens according to whether they are immigrants or not.

Perceptions of National Homogeneity

National homogeneity is closely tied to cultural pride and a shared sense of belonging among citizens who share common backgrounds. Media often reinforces a dominant culture, encouraging migrants to assimilate into the prevailing cultural norms. The increasing influence of global markets might render ethnic identity policies obsolete, potentially reducing associated conflicts (Jamali, 2015). This trend toward homogeneity could potentially undermine ethnic identity policies while bolstering dominant ethnic narratives. Societal security, rooted in cultural homogeneity, often perceives immigrants as threats to cultural uniformity, as exemplified by the 2005 Paris Riots, serving as poignant reminders of historical discrimination against immigrants (Jamali, 2015). France, while officially upholding a color-blind policy to avoid racial or ethnic distinctions, has faced criticism for measures like the 2011 burqa ban, interpreted by many as discriminatory (Gardner, 2022). French nationalism, intertwined with legislation, may inadvertently suppress non-majority cultures and religions.

Despite France's professed color-blindness, certain cultural aspects contradict this stance. Media portrayal of East Asians in France often perpetuates stereotypes and biases, as evidenced by instances like the 2016 racist comedy sketch on M6 that mocked Chinese culture (Zhao, 2018). Moreover, the conflation of diverse

East Asian identities into a singular Chinese stereotype showcases a pervasive racial profiling issue, especially evident during politically charged times like the COVID-19 pandemic. The French expression "c'est du chinois" (meaning "it's Chinese to me") reinforces the perception of East Asians as enigmatic or foreign, contributing to societal divisions and differential treatment. French identity, often associated with behaviors and ideals central to French culture, emphasizes values like *Liberte*, *Egalite*, and *Fraternite*, promoting a unified populace devoid of ethnic distinctions. However, France's increasing diversity, influenced notably by immigrant groups such as Muslims, has significantly impacted French cuisine and literature.

French society leans towards individualism, prioritizing personal and familial interests over interactions outside one's immediate circle. Proper etiquette and formalities hold great importance, with social missteps ("faux pas") viewed as socially inappropriate and embarrassing. The French language, intrinsically linked to French identity, garners immense pride among the populace. Immigrants and aspiring French citizens are expected to attain a minimum proficiency in French, emphasizing its significance in cultural assimilation while largely disregarding regional dialects and foreign languages.

In contrast to France, Canada can stand as a model for successful integration policies. Canadian immigration prioritizes skill-based criteria, alongside promoting ethnic diversity and abolishing race-based restrictions (Griffith, 2019). The Canadian approach emphasizes integration services and refugee resettlement, eliminating racial selection criteria in 1962 and assessing immigrants based on their potential to integrate into the labor force. Unlike France's emphasis on national homogeneity, Canada champions multiculturalism through policies like the 1988 Multiculturalism Act. This legislation not only recognizes and celebrates cultural identities during integration but also fosters relationships between immigrants and local communities (Griffith, 2019). By acknowledging and embracing cultural diversity, Canada encourages integration without pressuring immigrants to abandon their cultural heritage. In conclusion, France's shift from a color-blind approach to one acknowledging cultural diversity could potentially mitigate xenophobic issues stemming from national homogeneity. By implementing policies aimed at immigrants while respecting cultural differences, France could facilitate more effective integration of foreigners into society.

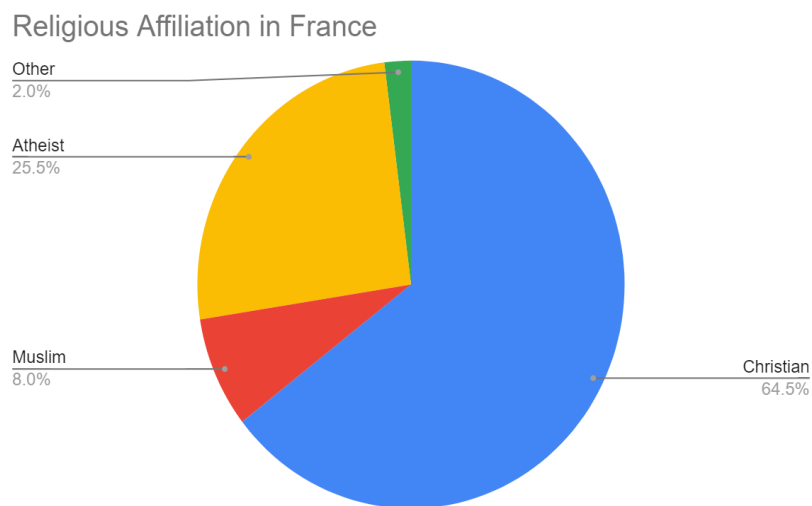


Figure 3. Religious Affiliation in France

This figure displays the spread of religious affiliation in France. It includes the percentage of Christianity to Islam and Atheism.

Xenophobic Tendencies in the General Population

France has a long history of discrimination against its East Asian community, a sentiment that has been further exacerbated by the recent challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. The surge in racism within France over the past decade has been a notable concern. Notably, the National Front, advocating for the mass expulsion of non-European immigrants, has gained substantial support, with nearly 30% of expressed opinions backing their ideology (Weil, 1991). Dissatisfaction with immigrant presence often stems from perceived threats to public unity and order, specifically within educational institutions and low-income housing, believed to be adversely affected by foreign populations. These negative sentiments, originating from perceived administrative inefficiencies and inadequate policy responses, have contributed significantly to the rise of racism (Weil, 1991).

Three core factors underscore the correlation between immigration policy and the perpetuation of racism. Firstly, the decentralized nature of immigration policy across various French administrative departments and sectors renders coordination challenging, resulting in a low priority for cohesive policy frameworks. Additionally, underfunding and inadequate training of immigration staff further exacerbate these challenges. Historically, between 1945 and 1974, immigrants were primarily viewed as a source of cheap labor, leading to a lack of significant investment in their integration. Subsequently, between 1974 and 1981, allocated funds for immigrant housing were redirected, offering substandard living conditions rather than integrating immigrant families into French neighborhoods.

France's deep-rooted racism can be traced back to its colonial history as a significant empire. Despite this historical legacy, there is a significant reluctance within France to acknowledge the enduring impact of French colonialism. In a telling instance, the government under Jacques Chirac attempted to enact a law in 2005 mandating schools to emphasize the positive effects of French colonialism (Godwin, 2023). Politically, racism has been exploited to expand state power, notably evident during the 2016 terrorist attacks, leading to the declaration of a state of emergency. This allowed the government to deploy armed forces and curtail protests, contributing to an anti-immigrant narrative. The concept of *laïcité*, emphasizing secularism and conformity to societal norms in public spaces, often justifies discriminatory laws targeting religious attire. For instance, laws banning religious headwear find justification under this principle (Godwin, 2023).

Instances of racially motivated attacks against East Asian communities in France have been on the rise. Reports of discrimination, violent crimes, and ethnically/religiously motivated incidents have surged in recent years, particularly since the start of 2020 (THEISE, 2021). Statistical data from SSMSI in France indicates a concerning increase in ethnic or religion-based crimes. However, conviction rates for such crimes remain disproportionately low, contributing to a lack of trust in law enforcement among victims (Richardot, 2023). Incidents of violence and hate speech targeting Asians in France have been reported, ranging from physical assaults to verbal abuse and discriminatory behavior (Bourmont, 2016). Several personal accounts highlight the pervasive nature of racism against East Asians in France. Anecdotes include physical assaults, verbal abuse, discriminatory remarks, and experiences of cultural isolation and stereotyping (Grace Ly, Sacha Lin Jung, Mai Lam Nguyen). These narratives underscore the deeply ingrained and pervasive nature of discrimination experienced by individuals of East Asian descent in France.

Cross-Examination of Policy Effectiveness

France's public policy theoretically advocates for a level playing field without granting any ethnic or religious groups special privileges or protection. However, concerning trends in academic performance and dropout rates among children of immigrants prompted the introduction of various programs, notably the Zones of Education

Priority (ZEP). ZEP designations offer increased financial aid and resources, often based on the ethnic composition of an area. Yet, evidence suggests the limited success of the ZEP program (Prügl & Thiel, 2010). Legislation banning discrimination in employment and housing was enacted in France from 2001 to 2002, yet an active anti-discrimination agency, the High Authority against Discrimination and for Equality (HALDE), was not authorized until 2004. HALDE received over 2,000 complaints in its inaugural year, with nearly half concerning employment discrimination. Immigrant unemployment rates in France were significantly higher in 2006, and dropout rates among immigrant descendants remained alarmingly high (Prügl & Thiel, 2010).

France's ban on race data collection results in ambiguous diversity statistics and ethnic distribution. This lack of information has been exploited by some politicians to inflate ethnic population numbers, fostering xenophobic sentiments. Moreover, the absence of accurate data collection impedes the proper tracking of racial discrimination, particularly in workplaces. A survey in Seine-Saint-Denis revealed that over 80% of participants identified racial discrimination in employment and police cases.

France's historical colonial legacy and reliance on recruited laborers from other countries have shaped its international relations. However, French society has exhibited reluctance to embrace the diverse cultures immigrants bring, often attributing societal issues to multiculturalism and ethnic diversity. This stance has contributed to the rise of far-right political parties like the National Front (Sanchez, 2019). Following the 2008 financial crash, France's immigration policy took a more stringent turn, aligning public sentiment with a "French first" narrative, viewing immigration solely as an economic tool.

Despite France's increasingly restrictive immigration policies, immigrant influxes have continued to rise. The country's approach to integration has historically leaned towards cultural assimilation, rooted in its colonial history aimed at spreading French culture. However, recent shifts in France's assimilation model lean towards suppressing immigrants' cultural and ethnic practices, exemplified by the ban on hijabs, considering Muslim practices as a threat due to their foreign status (Sanchez, 2019). These integration policies face substantial challenges, with the suppression of immigrants' cultural practices posing one of the most concerning issues.

Conclusion

The analysis and review of French integration policies and their implications on cultural diversity and societal harmony uncovers a complex landscape characterized by persistent challenges and deep-rooted xenophobic attitudes. The pursuit of national homogeneity, combined with ineffective public policies and media influence, has significantly impacted the East Asian community within France. France's cultural penchant for homogeneity undermines its professed colorblind approach, evident in the 2011 burqa ban, the insistence on religious observances, and the pressure to conform to the dominant language (French). These factors have created an environment that stifles cultural diversity and religious practices. Moreover, attempts through public programs like the ZEP to address unemployment and financial instability have largely failed, exacerbating the economic divide between immigrants and native French citizens. These circumstances have led to an increase in crimes against the East Asian community, as recent distressing cases have highlighted.

A departure from the color-blind policy model towards a more inclusive approach, similar to that of the US and Britain, may yield better success. Implementing policies that directly confront racism in France, coupled with more comprehensive integration strategies, holds the potential to foster a more cohesive society. The ineffectiveness of the French model, pressuring immigrants to assimilate into French culture, necessitates a shift towards embracing and respecting immigrants' ethnic and cultural identities. This approach, resembling Canadian policies, could prove more effective than enforcing homogeneity, which has inadvertently fostered tension and xenophobic sentiments.

Essential steps involve the implementation of robust integration measures prioritizing inclusivity, equitable opportunities, and the celebration of diverse cultural identities. Addressing disparities in employment,

healthcare access, and social inclusion requires proactive policies that acknowledge and honor cultural diversity. A reevaluation of historical legacies of national homogeneity and social norms as well as a revision of integration policies can promote inclusivity and tolerance to minorities of France, leading to a future for both immigrants and French citizens.

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