



Discussion on the return of “denatality” in France and its perception between 1974 and 1981

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Received 1 June 2020 ♦ Accepted 4 July 2020 ♦ Published 25 September 2020

Citation: De Luca Barrusse V (2020) Discussion on the return of “denatality” in France and its perception between 1974 and 1981. *Population and Economics* 4(3): 33-56. <https://doi.org/10.3897/popecon.4.e55519>

Abstract

The article is devoted to the discussion on the decline in fertility – “denatality” (dénatalité) in France between 1974 and 1981 and society’s reaction to it. The article discusses the question: did the widely reported media debate affect public opinion or did it not go beyond discussion by a narrow range of demographics specialists? The first part shows how new trends in fertility dynamics were reflected in the press, analyses the content of 705 articles published in a newspaper with a wide range of readers. An attempt is then made to understand, based on sample surveys examining respondents’ awareness of demographic processes in France and their views on their trends, whether or not the above-mentioned discussions had had an effect on public opinion. The article shows that between 1974 and 1981 public opinion changed and preferences for changes in demographic processes prevailing in society were quite close to the position expressed in the media.

Keywords

birth, demography, mass media, perception, public opinion

JEL codes: J11, J13, J18

From 1956 and up until at least the early 1980s, French media presented birth control as a public problem. This interpretation is the result of the activities of the social movement participants, which will later become the French Movement for Family Planning. Its activists demanded a review of the 1920 law prohibiting the use of contraception and dissemination of information about it (Pavard 2006; Pavard 2012). After the adoption of the Neuwirth Law in 1967, which legalized contraception – even though under certain, rather strict conditions – birth control advocates remained active and continued the fight, this time for the right to abortion. The law of January 17, 1975, known as the Veil Act, gave women the right to abortion at will; the law was “experimental”, limited to five years since acceptance. At the end of this period, after a fierce debate, on December 31, 1979,

abortion was legalized, this time without limits on the duration of the law. The problem of birth control has been analyzed in a number of works (Pavard et al. 2012; Pavard 2012; De Luca Barrusse 2018).

Throughout these years, both supporters of planned parenthood and its opponents have used the demographic argument, drawing in their disputes on different kinds of reasoning about the nature of the population as a phenomenon of collective life. Both have tried to assess the demographic impact of the legalization of contraception and then artificial abortion from the time the Neuwirth Law came into force in 1967 until the final revision of the Veil Act in 1979. The topic of birth control has always attracted the attention of the national and regional press; on television it at first held a rather modest position, but since the mid-1960s it has become more discussed (De Luca Barrusse 2018).

Since 1974, the debate on birth control has taken on an unprecedented scale when the end of the baby boom became fully apparent. In particular, in 1975, the number of births in France fell below the 800 thousand mark (the value that quantified the baby boom phenomenon) and the total fertility rate went below the symbolic threshold of 2.1 children per woman. This was the starting point of a new media campaign that from 1974 to 1981, during the presidential term of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, revived the spectre of "denatality" (*dénatalité*), i.e., declining fertility. The term, which appeared during the inter-war years, began to appear in the media again (De Luca Barrusse 2008; Ogden and Huss 1982). It was used by people of a wide variety of views, resorting to different arguments to draw attention to the negative effects of changes in fertility trends. To prevent these consequences, it was proposed to abolish the Veil Act and/or to reinvent pronatalist family policies.

The purpose of the article is to analyze this discussion and the attitude of society to the "denatality" problem between 1974 to 1981, namely, to show the fear of the decline in the number of births that marked the end of the baby boom. It shows how changes in fertility trends were perceived, whether media attention reflected public opinion on the demographic problem in this area, to analyze whether the entire society was concerned about the problem or it attracted the attention of experts and scientific elites only. In other words, the article determines whether public opinion gave the same importance to demographic issues as scientific community or political elites. All these questions boil down to one thing: how were demographic arguments used in the public sphere at the time? To some extent, the article continued research focused at demographics in public sphere, particularly in the media (Wilmoth and Ball 1991, 1992, 1995; Stark and Kohler 2003, 2004; Brown and Ferree 2005; Krause 2001; Krause, and Marchesi 2007; Valarino and Bernardi 2010). These studies reflect the impact of national and historical context, as well as current demographic trends, on the manner of media coverage of demographic issues. In addition, a number of studies have shown that the media's attitude to the situation always influences society's attitude to it (Gamson and Modigliani 1989; McCombs and Shaw 1972; Katz 2001). Indeed, the media draws attention to certain topics, and the coverage of the topic forms a view of it among people as a priority (McCombs and Shaw 1972). As Jean Charon points out, the media is "guiding our opinion" (Charon 1995:82).

The article makes and tests the assumption that there is a causal relationship between the importance that the media recognize behind demographic problems and the perception of these problems by society. In some ways, the public adjusts its view of the relative importance of topics discussed in the media, depending on the importance that the media itself recognizes behind these topics (Charon 1995: 73). But media attention does not depend

on the objective “severity” of a situation or event (Hillgartner and Bosk 1988): journalists and media experts rely on materials that they themselves select and sort (Brown and Ferree 2005). In doing so, they sort of construct the value attributed to demographic indicators and demographic development and provide the reader with methods of interpreting the indicators used in the academic environment. It is in this historiographic tradition that the extent to which the debate of elites about births and birth rates in the media influence public opinion will be examined.

France is an exclusive object to study the issue. Beginning early – in the last third of the 19th century – the decline in fertility caused alarm and concern. As part of aggressive pronatalist propaganda, information about demographic trends and problems was disseminated through newspapers, pamphlets, leaflets, posters and postcards (Ogden and Huss 1982; De Luca Barrusse 2008, 2013b; Huss 1990; Veron and Rohrbasser 2015). Pending discussion of demographic issues into the public sphere has raised society’s concerns (Ogden and Huss 1982; Tomlinson et al, 1985; Rosental 2003; De Luca Barrusse 2008, 2013a; Huss 1990). Subsequently, the Vichy regime continued to operate in the same direction and reinforced it (Capuano 2009; Muel-Dreyfys 1996).

Pronatalist policies are multifaceted: in addition to financial and tax measures that improve the situation of large families, they rely on an intensive propaganda for awareness of the dangers which population reduction bears (De Luca Barrusse 2008). Its goal is to create a family-friendly climate by choosing different ways: for example, the declaration of Mother’s Day or the introduction of pronatalist and family education in schools and the Army barracks (De Luca 2005a, 2005b).

The creation in 1945 of the French Institute for Demographic Studies (INED), designed to study demographic issues, was a turning point in France’s pronatalist politics in part thanks to the influence of its director Alfred Sauvy (Drouard 1992; Girard 1986; Reggiani 1996; Rosental 2007, 2016; De Luca Barrusse 2008, 2013a). The new institute, distancing itself from pronatalist activists to maintain its scientific authority, has become a major source of demographic information, even though the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE) created a year later was responsible for the performance of censuses (Drouard 1992; Girard 1986; Rosental 2003). Alfred Sauvy set out to raise public awareness of population issues. He published numerous newspaper articles until at least the late 1960s; in the 1960s and 1970s other demographers from INED followed his lead. This specific activity of demographers, as well as the fear of depopulation caused by media campaigns, created a special demographic sensitivity of French society, expressed in constant and increased interest in demographic issues (Rosental 2007; De Luca Barrusse 2008, 2013a, 2018). Thus, the demographic argument, which has been widely used by the press since 1974, fits into a context of society’s concern with fertility issues, which has a long history.

In order to analyze this discussion and the attitude towards it in society, we will focus on print media that provided information throughout the country. In those years, the French press still flourished, despite a slight decline in activity compared to the interwar period. Prior to the Second World War, there were 6.5 million daily newspapers in France; in 1945–1946 – 6 million. Circulations began to decline: 4.3 million in 1959, 3.1 million in 1975 and 2.9 million in 1985 (Jeanneney 2011:212). The regress is obvious, but the press still retains its influence. *Le Monde*, which is “the most influential newspaper in the media sphere”, had a circulation of 400 thousand copies in 1970 (Jeanneney 2011). This study is based on the publications in this newspaper: all articles concerning France and containing the

words "decrease in births" (dénatalité) and/or "birth" (naissances) and/or "demographics" (démographie). A total of 705 articles were selected, published between December 1, 1972 and February 1, 1983. The search and collection of articles was conducted by Adam Haidar Veila in preparation of his master study.

Le Monde set the tone of demographic discussions, but the same topics, the same plots, which excite society, appeared at this time and in other newspapers and magazines. After the key dates of discussions at Le Monde were identified, a search was conducted in other newspapers and magazines of the same period to verify whether there was a different manner of presenting demographic problems in the media. In addition, our study relies on press reviews from several archives (INED, French Movement for Family Planning, High Council for Sexual Information, birth control and family education) and supplemented by papers from the Marie Monique Huss archive for 1974-1979 (Huss 1980). These materials provide insight into the extent of media coverage of population issues and population information being disseminated. Data from four sample public opinion surveys conducted by INED between 1974 and 1982 are used to examine population responses to "demographic problems". In 1974, 1975, 1978 and 1982 the knowledge and opinions of respondents about demographic trends and their changes were studied based on a representative sample. Questionnaires of all four surveys vary; nevertheless, some questions are repeated, allowing one to understand the dynamics of changes in knowledge and opinion, and to see if the discussion is affected by demographic concerns in the media on the formation of public opinion.

Relayed or fabricated by the press

An alarmist analysis of changes in fertility trends, which has appeared in the press since 1974, is present in it until 1981, but the frequency of media coverage of demographic problems during this period does not change linearly (Fig. 1). Indeed, a selection of articles from Le Monde mentioning births, their declining numbers and demographics in France show that this topic has been present in publications since the end of 1973, and in 1974 the number of articles rises to 92. The frequency of publications then decreases, but the topic still remains among the relevant ones and is covered in about 50 articles per year. Since the late 1970s, the demographic topic has again been frequently discussed: after 83 articles in 1978 devoted to selected topics (birth, fertility decline, demographics), the number of publications increases to 156 in 1979, and a year later Le Monde publishes 85 articles on the topics of our interest. The number of publications then declines markedly.

The timeline shows that discussion of the problems of French demographics is accompanied by discussions in parliamentary assemblies over the Veil Act to legalize abortion at the request of a woman under certain conditions. The law was adopted on January 17, 1975 for a period of 5 years, and on December 31, 1979 it was renewed without time limit. Thus, the issue of the effect of legalizing abortion on the birth rate and ways to increase it is proving central. In addition to describing the media campaign in France, the article will analyze its chronology as well as the content of the publications in more detail. Since it is a test of how much public opinion is attentive to demographic problems, it is also necessary to take into account the information and proposed solutions to the problem that have been circulating in society. What do the elites and experts say about it? This is the first question the article answers.

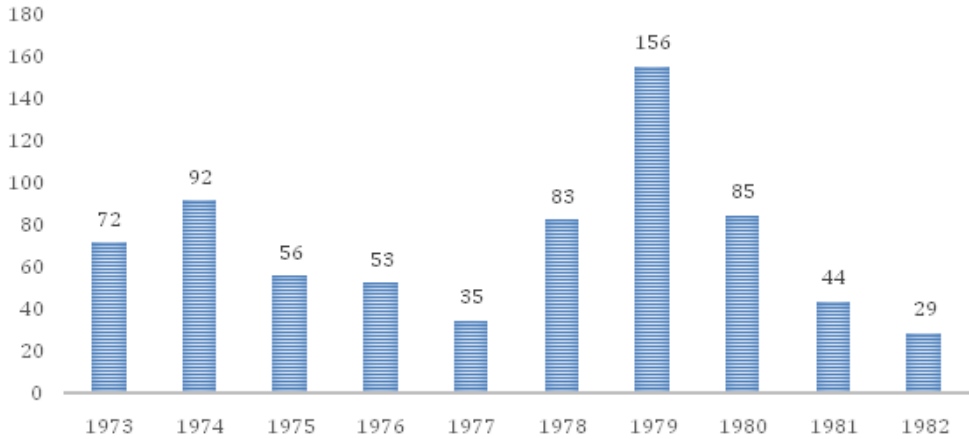


Figure 1. Annual number of articles published in *Le Monde* containing the words “decrease in births, births, demographics” (relative to France)

1974–1978: Press discussion

Discussion of changes in fertility trends began in the second half of 1973. Data from current statistics on marriages, births and deaths are already available, but are not yet accompanied by any comments. There is also a debate on the subject in expert circles, marking the end of an era of high fertility, as evidenced by the publication of an article in *Population* by Chantal Blayo on the decline in the birth rate in France (Blayo 1972).

But in the press, the tone of the publications changed at the beginning of the school year. On September 5, 1973, in *Le Monde* an article appears noting the decline in primary school enrollment as a consequence of the decline in births in the respective cohorts. In particular, the problem of reducing the number of births was raised in an article of November 13, 1973. It mentions that in 1972 the number of births decreased by 8,600 compared to the previous year. The decline was not so great, but it has caught the attention of demographers, as the proportion of women of reproductive age had been increasing at the same time, at the expense of more numerous generations of the first baby boom wave. INED’s annual demographics report, which showed no signs of alarmism, confirmed a slight decline in births in 1972 relative to 1971 (after the adoption of the Neuwirth Law on 28 December 1967, INED was to prepare a “Report on the Demographic Situation in France” for the government; according to section 8 of the law, the publication of the report was mandatory so that the government could take into account key demographic indicators) (*Démographie: ralentissement* 1973).

Since the end of 1974, the discussion had become even more lively. On October 8, *Le Monde* published an article entitled “The fertility rate has collapsed in Western countries”, which led to different perspectives on the decline in birth numbers: “INSEE estimates that in France there will be 100,000 fewer births this year than two years ago (770 thousand instead of 875 thousand)... Maintaining the current birth rate after 30 to 40 years would lead to stagnation, then lead to ageing and decline in the French population. Special fertility rates (ratio between the number of births and the number of women of reproductive age), which are more indicative than overall ratios, in France, as in other developed countries, are collapsing” (*La natalité* 1974).

In November of the same year, the topic of declining births, defined in the press by the term "denatality" (*dénatalité*), began to be discussed. *Le Monde* published an article signed by politician Michel Debré, known for his pronatalist views, who would then find himself at the centre of the discussion. By 1974 Debré's political career was already quite long (Perrier 2010). An approximate of General de Gaulle, Debré was Prime Minister of his government from 1959 to 1962, Member of Parliament and Senator, and later served as Minister of the Economy and Finance (1966–1968), Foreign Affairs (1968–1969) and National Defence (1969–1973). After leaving his last post, he joined, just established in 1976, Rally for the Republic (*Rassemblement pour la République*), and again became a Member of Parliament, which explains his participation in the debate on the Veil Act. In 1981, he ran for president, but because of a lack of strong support, he suffered a crushing setback. Michel's father was paediatrician Robert Debré, who worked with Alfred Sauvy to create INED and co-wrote the book "French for France" (*Des Français pour la France*) (Debré and Sauvy 1946). Such a "pedigree" has undoubtedly had a strong influence on Michel Debré, who became one of the leading figures of the pronatalist movement in the 1970s.

Of the 120 articles selected for our study that mention "denatality," 38 (32%) are either signed or quoted by Michel Debré. The term "denatality" appeared in *Le Monde* on March 14, 1973, first from under the pen of the priest Marc Oraison, who used it to explain how the adoption of laws on contraception and abortion took place in the interwar period. Oraison did not address the current situation, however, unlike Michel Debré, who used it to stigmatize the current state of things at the time. Michel Debré constantly addressed the demographic argument in his press appearances as well as before the National Assembly, with an obsession he later showed in his presidential campaign. Debré's proximity to Alfred Sauvy certainly helps him to be very aware of recent demographic trends. On November 1, 1974, he wrote:

"After the Second World War, the leaders of the country and, I think, a large part of the population realized the dramatism of the decline in births (*dénatalité*), that is, its consequences for national security... The Fifth Republic emerged as a symbol of revival... New-found trust in government improves under universal ovation the performance of our demographics... But at the end of 1974, the question arises: Has the reverse process begun?... Our curve of birth numbers goes down sharply. At this dramatic moment, the government, preoccupied with its draft law to legalize abortion, is speechless. This turning point is dangerous. This turning point is disgusting. It is time to warn the ruling circles and public opinion of the danger" (Debré 1974).

Debré, who introduced the bill in favour of mothers opposing the abortion law, explains his position on November 19:

"When we are presented with a law on termination of pregnancy that leads to induction to an abortion or to the production of abortion for personal convenience, it is normal that those who have a different perspective who protects the right to life and the national interest, refuse to vote for the law. The French must remember what we dared not say aloud in the interwar period and what we dared to acknowledge prior to the Second World War, namely that the decline in births in France was the cause of our insecurity" (Michel Debré 1974).

The words are spoken, and they will become the leitmotif of Debré's sentences. Ten days later, on 29 November, *Le Monde* again addressed one of his speeches on the same issue to the National Assembly: "Legalizing abortion in itself is not the cause of the decline in births, but contributes to a further decrease in the number of births. Moreover, we cannot say that

this decision will have no consequences” (Le débat 1974). Marc Lauriol of the group “Union of Democrats for a Republic” expressed his concern: “Abortion will serve an objective function of a means of birth control” (Le débat 1974). The bill was eventually passed by Parliament for a period of five years. Opposition to the passage of the law and concerns about its effect on the birth rate, as evidenced by debates in the National Assembly, explain the temporary restriction. So, Bourson explains: “I am in favour of a review of this problem in five years as things are changing and we cannot currently anticipate the exact consequences of the law we are about to accept. The risks of “denatality” are undoubted, but it should be noted that the decline in birth rates is already an international phenomenon” (Par 284 voix 1974).

After the National Assembly, it was the Senate’s turn to pass the bill and formulate the same arguments about the birth effects of legalizing abortion. Even Simone Veil, who introduced the draft of this law, takes the demographic argument: “In the face of such a disturbing phenomenon as declining birth rates, Ms. Veil acknowledges that it is primarily the responsibility of the authorities to respond to this” (Veil: L’Avortement 1974). Having children is still a value shared by all (De Luca Barrusse 2018). INED experts, most notably its director Gérard Calot, who succeeded Alfred Sauvy, are invited to comment on the subject, but he remains cautious in his remarks: “The decline in fertility may be raising concerns about the future” (Démographie: baisse 1974).

The Veil Act was adopted in early 1975; since that time, the opposition to “denatality” consisted in the introduction of measures to support birth rates. Discussions move into a plane of reinforcing family policy measures. Articles calling for the strengthening family policies are replaced, followed by specific proposals of measures. For example, in June of that year Alfred Sauvy, speaking at the Academy of Medicine, responded to the question: “Is the decline in the birth rate that is currently seen in most western countries inevitable?” as follows: “No, but it’s time to respond to a situation that risks turning ‘catastrophic’: the government had to accompany the recently passed laws on contraception and abortion with measures to support families with children” (Baisse 1975). A few days later, “Panorama of the Doctor” publishes Sauvy’s words: “No children today – no pensions tomorrow” (Sauvy: Pas d’enfants 1975). On 25 July Debré once again expresses his concern: “In fact, we are missing a third child, and precisely because there is none, France has embarked on a path of demographic decadence... Whether the public is convinced or not, it’s time to inform and act. It is the duty of executive policy and legislation. At stake is the fate of France and the French” (Debré: un favoritisme 1975). In an interview with *Le Point* magazine, justifying the need for a strong family policy, he said: “Who does not care about fertility does not perform his duty” (Michel Debré 1975).

The situation seems so alarming that in March 1975, after a meeting on this issue in the Central Planning Board, Labour Minister Michel Durafour asks INED to prepare a report on the effectiveness and acceptability of a number of demographic measures (Calot and Leridon 1975). This report was published on October 1, 1975. The first part assessed the impact of population policy measures on fertility trends. The second presents the results of a survey on “attitudes towards different measures that can affect fertility” conducted in May–June 1975 (INED 1976). For at least 6 months, media publications referred to the report, and the decline in birth rates continued to be scrutinized. On November 5, 1975, the newspaper *Aurora* announced that France had the lowest birth rate since 1938, and three days later “*Evening France*” ran with the headline “Over the year – almost 50,000 fewer births” (Le niveau 1975).

The discussion owes much to the participation of Debré, who served as its chief moderator. The fears he expressed, the urgent calls for a thoughtful fertility policy formulated by him with the support of A. Sauvy, rarely encountered objections. By taking this position, they at the same time contributed to the discussion of the issue in the media. Thus, on March 3, 1975, writer Renouard expressed his protest as follows:

"Left-wingers will dream only about sex, right-wingers – only about childbirth... If couples obsessed with the birth process have a dozen children – great! But if couples next door don't want it, why should they be frightened by the specter of declining births? According to some, it is time to decide on a year's leave, during which all normal French people will be willing to fill our maternity wards as a matter of urgency. In fact, proselytizing both abortion adepts and hyperbirth propagandists is equally annoying" (Renouard 1975).

A number of articles mention the positions of some "pronatalist extremists," but before 1975 few condemned the family policy that was to be put in place.

The year 1976 began with the publication of a report on the demographic situation in France in 1974 in the first issue of the INED review *Population*. It was widely discussed in the media, which stated "a significant reduction in births." Some indicators confirmed the resilience of the fertility decline, and this raised concerns:

"In the medium term, the instability of the annual number of births to some extent disrupts the fueling of the base of the age pyramid and leads to gaps in "demographic investment" in future. The increasingly spreading birth control is exposing it to increasingly visible cyclical fluctuations that... may in the future lead to new implications for the demographic development regime" (Rapport 1976:56).

From that time on, the 1976 report will be an argument for all discussions on the demographic situation in France. On January 23, 1976, *Le Parisien* was issued under the headline "INED sets off the alarm" (*L'INED tire 1976*). At this time, family sizes are decreasing, third children are becoming increasingly rare. Drawing, like others, on this report, Michel Debré argues that "three children per family is the minimum necessary to contain the drop in fertility that condemns the French nation to ageing and threatening its very existence" (Debré 1976). He is not alone in his attempts to promote the idea of a family with three children. On June 11, 1976, Catholic newspaper *La Croix*, also drawing on the INED report, expresses concern about the "allergy to a third child". The model of the three-child family, presented as ideal because it provides generational reproduction, also arises from time to time in the media, similar to the topic of the declining number of births. It is thus about a revival of the concept of the "normal family" put forward under the Third Republic (De Luca Barrusse 2008, 2010).

The INED director, Gérard Calot, who was a regular participant in the discussion explaining the main demographic trends, always remained very cautious in what he said. "Of course, the position of a statistician who observes and analyzes developments is uncomfortable. When he produces and, of course, distributes new information, he puts himself at risk of being borne by the part of society that this information is not acceptable... But the birth rate says a lot about the state of civilization: it seems to us that over the last decade European societies have lost some hope and self-belief" (Calot 1976). However, by the last quarter of 1976, the number of births increased, which the press did not miss as a chance to mention, referring to the words of the Director of INED and the President of the Republic expressing their satisfaction with that fact. To the demographer Gérard-François Dumont, this optimism seemed exaggerated. He criticized the director of INED for "focusing on the number of births, not the birth rate needed to replace generations, which has not yet been achieved" (*La reprise 1977*). Demographers, despite press appearances demanding their professional

experience, are keeping out of the discussion even more than in previous years, especially during the debate on legalizing contraception (De Luca Barrusse 2018). They see their main task in recalling that fluctuations in birth numbers cause distortions of the age pyramid and that fertility affects generational substitution. As Gérard Calot points out, “if the state cannot manage fertility trends in the long-term, it would gain a great advantage by mitigating, as much as possible, the annual fluctuations in birth numbers” (Calot 1976). Through their press appearances, demographers draw attention to the discussion about fertility and contribute to the spread of demographic knowledge.

Birth rates rose until 1980, then there was a new fall. However, the debate continued even though there were fewer articles on the issue of fertility. In 1977, *Le Monde* published 35 articles, the topic of which was the rise in birth rates and its resilience. The articles asked this question: is the growth in the late 1970s a temporary deviation or a steady trend? The authors of some articles insisted that the observed rise in birth numbers does not guarantee replacement of generations (e.g. *Le nombre* 1977).

This year is also marked by the publication of a book by Pierre Chaunu and Georges Suffert. Suffert, a Catholic journalist, spoke with Pierre Chaunu, a Protestant professor of history at the Sorbonne, who had at one time openly and categorically opposed abortion; together with Jérôme Lejeune, he founded several pro-life movements fighting against abortion. Chaunu and Suffert’s book is called “The White Plague? Suicide of the West” (Chaunu and Suffert 1976). It condemns “a dramatic decline in birthrate in the ‘white world’... The age pyramid that is now forming is unacceptable. We cannot force society to live on the forefront,... we are creating ourselves a powder keg” (Chaunu 1977). The release of this book has been widely reported in the right-wing press, notably *La Croix* and *Le Figaro*, as well in the left-wing media, e.g. in *L’Humanité*.

In 1978, family politics became the subject of discussion and revived the discussion. Despite the rising birth rate, Michel Debré continued to denounce “insidious denatalist propaganda” (Debré 1978). President Valéry Giscard D’Estaing remained concerned about the “danger of declining birth numbers for the future” and reiterated his attention to family concerns: “A society that is largely unable to provide generational replacement is doomed” (Et le premier 1978). Family policy was seen as a possible means against declining birth rates, and issues of stimulating it were discussed. Oppositional political parties also had to mark their position. Socialist François Mitterrand, the main opponent of the President of the Republic, believed that “fertility policy should be one of the main activities of the government” (Le candidat 1978). Another socialist, Jacques Delors, also called for a review of family policy. Objections to this position were rarely raised and mainly came from feminists who believed that such a debate contributed to stigmatizing women who refused to perform their maternal duty.

The voice of the opposition was Yvette Roudy, secretary of the Socialist Party, condemning the patriotic, authoritarian and sanctimonious nature of the alarmist discourses on the decline in births: “On the face of it, the arguments are strong and frightening. But there are a few things you forget about. I thought that we had entered a new era for mankind, that we had forever left behind a period of obscurantism, when we followed the fantasies of nature and produced children by the dozens, thus struggling with the quasi-metaphysical fear of people – the fear of extinction. The call for a third child promoted by family policy leads to a rethink of women’s rights” (Roudy 1978). Looking at family policy as a means to increase fertility leads to increased assistance for families with at least three children (Damon 2008).

1979: The culmination of the discussion

The discussion reached its culmination in 1979, marked by the revision of the Veil Act on abortion; *Le Monde* published 156 articles on demographics and fertility. The content of these articles has not changed much, mostly the very same arguments were used, and the very same persons expressed themselves. In a television interview also mentioned in *Le Monde*, the President Giscard D'Estaing identified the demographic problem as one of the four major challenges facing France, along with the economy, European politics and defense (Entretien 1979). Also widely discussed in the articles was the book by J.-F. Dumont, J. Legrand, P. Chaunu and A. Sauvy's *Wrinkled France (La France ridée)* (Chaunu et al. 1979). The book examines the decrease in the number of births and the ageing of the population in a discursive manner that calls for emotion: the decline in the number of births is nothing less than "voluntary collective death". As we can see, Pierre Chaunu found himself with Michel Debré in the media spotlight.

To "explain the dramatic drop in birth rates that all industrialized countries faced at the same time", he questioned the "grand conspiracy against life orchestrated by North America immediately after the Second World War", and the inevitability of the "contraception-abortion-sterilization sequence" (Debré 1979). On the same day, the deputy director of *Le Monde*, Jean-Marie Dupont, joined the ranks of those concerned: "At the very beginning, demographic regression is painless, during the crisis it even acts as a favorable factor – fewer children means less burden on families and society, less potential unemployed" (Dupont 1979). But the future is at stake.

The revision of the Veil Act revived the debate in the press again. Disputes between Robert Debré and Simone Veil at the National Assembly resumed. The latter expressed her opposition to pronatalist policy advocate Debré arguing that abortion law affects the birth curve:

"In France, we saw a decline in fertility rates long before the adoption of the abortion law, and in 1977 there was even a slight increase in the number of births. I really believe the law has absolutely no impact. I would also like to recall what the birth rate in France was between 1920 and 1940, when contraception and abortion laws were extremely repressive, not to mention how they were applied. Here is what demographers who have seriously studied the issue say: there is no connection..." (La révision 1979).

Discussions over the effect of legalizing abortion on the birth rate have been held for months. In June, Michel de Saint-Pierre, president of the anti-abortion association *Credo*, expressed his concern: "If we are satisfied by only observing the current demographic trends, if we heed even for a moment the official warnings of Sauvy or Chaunu, what do we see? At the end of the second millennium, in 20 years, there will be 30–35 million inhabitants in France, Germany and England" (de Saint-Pierre 1979). However, demographers involved in the discussion, including Gérard Calot, do not consider the link between abortion legislation, contraception, and birth rate significant (Calot 1979).

Le Figaro-Magazine, a conservative magazine, on November 28, 1979, wonders: "Why is the birth rate declining?" At the same time, Michel Debré's name was mentioned repeatedly. Louis Pauwels, a journalist and founder of this magazine, wrote:

"The first task is to stop the decline in the number of births. Contrary to popular belief, a country's wealth and power are determined by its population size. In two years in our country only 30% of the population will be under the age of 20. A similar situation was observed in war-ravaged France in 1945. The economic consequences are obvious, but that's not all that's coming for us. Western countries, including Russia, inhabited by representatives of the white race, constituted a third of humanity in 1920. If the fertility decline continues, in 2000 they will make up only a fifth of the world's population. If the ratio of demographic forces

comes into severe conflict with the power ratio of technological ones, a race war will not be far off” (Pauwels 1979).

On the same day, this time in the left-wing newspaper *Le Nouvel Observateur*, Jean Matouk makes at least one argument in support of the alarmist discourse of the pronatalist, which he expresses as follows:

“It (the discourse) has drawn attention to demographic processes: their evolution is slow, they are not easy to understand, but they are the ones that are responsible for all economic and social transformations. One can challenge the pronatalists’ prognosis – the disappearance of the ‘white race’ or object to their criticism of contraception and abortion. But there is no denying that declining fertility should one day create serious problems for European countries” (L’avortement 1979).

“We see that concern with demographic issues is present in both the left and right-wing parts of the political spectrum, but this does not prevent the opposition from expressing its opinion more openly. There is no longer a consensus on these issues. Environmentalists, following feminists, want their protesting voice to be heard: ‘Stabilizing or even lowering the population is a prerequisite for most of their requirements...’ Isn’t it a responsible policy to take advantage of such a development?” (Natalité 1979). Some members of the Green Movement have declared a “fertility strike” in response to the nuclear program adopted by Giscard d’Estaing’s administration. “The fertility strike is not an ‘abandonment of children’ movement, but a means of pressuring the government. Members of the movement decided not to have children until the civilian and military nuclear program was scrapped. We chose this way of fighting because we have been watching an intense pronatalist campaign for months now and know that the demographic issue is of great concern to our government” (Mouvement 1979). This is a way of attracting the government’s attention: “to put on the agenda the ‘wombs strike’ initiated in the late 19th century by neo-Malthusian and feminist circles” (Ronsin 1980).

Since 1980, the debate has waned

Since 1980, the debate has begun to lose its scope: in 1980 85 articles were published on topics of our interest, in 1981 – 44 and only 29 in 1982.

Speeches on the issue have become increasingly rare but concerns about demographic issues have persisted. From time to time, a demographic debate would arise in the National Assembly, as it did, for example, in the discussion of family policy in May 1980 (Les députés 1980). In 1981 birth rates begin to rise, which is certainly becoming a point of discussion. In particular, one of the articles published on 5 February stressed that the trend towards higher fertility is also observed in other European countries, regardless of the family policy measures adopted in these countries (Reprise 1981). Undoubtedly, the absence of Michel Debré, who had focused on his election campaign, explains the weakening of the debate, although he left no attempt to revive it. So, on March 20, defending the idea of paying salaries to mothers of three or more children – one of the main points of his election program, he confirmed that “the only opportunity to stop the falling birth rate is to pursue a consistent and generous pronatalist policy towards the family” (M. Debré présente 1981).

However, skepticism about such policies began to be expressed more openly. For example, one teacher spoke out against unprovable arguments:

“For over 100 years pronatalism and ‘Malthusianism’ have been fighting for primacy in a number of demographic doctrines. However, in the controversy over the main issue on which

their views differ – whether we should stimulate population growth – no real alternative is offered... The views we call Malthusian believe contraception and family planning information plays a vital role in the fertility decline sought by most underdeveloped countries. Similarly, pronatalist views, especially welcome in our country due to low fertility since the 19th century, exaggerate the role of the state as a regulator. As in terms of demographic policy, the effectiveness of the state's efforts can very rarely be assessed *a posteriori*" (Boyer 1980).

But overall, one can conclude that the discussion has dried up.

Thus, it seems that the vote on the final version of the Veil Act, with which the discussion described above was largely associated, has weakened society's interest in the problem of declining fertility rates. No doubt it is conceivable that society eventually grew tired of this long discussion. Indeed, we see the opposition increasingly opposing the pronatalist dogma. But what was the impact of this discussion on public opinion? Does it express the same concern? What place does society give to demographic problems?

Opinions on demographic trends

Since 1947 INED had conducted regular surveys aimed at measuring the level of knowledge about demographic issues and assessing public opinion on these issues. The questionnaires changed from one survey to another to assess the current situation and innovations in legislation, such as changes in the age of majority, retirement age or rights to obtaining family allowances (Girard 1950; Girard and Henry 1956; Girard and Bastide 1960; Bastide and Girard 1966, 1975; Girard and Zucker 1967, 1968; Girard et al. 1976; Girard and Roussel 1979; Bastide et al. 1982). But in an effort to learn the opinions and awareness of respondents about recent demographic trends, the authors of the survey idea led by Alain Girard included several questions in all surveys, enabling to describe the evolution of opinions and knowledge of demographic issues.

Five surveys were conducted in the 1970s–1980s. The first, in October 1974, focused on "the views and opinions of the French on fertility and family" (Bastide and Girard 1975). The following year, the Fertility and Population Policy Survey was conducted on behalf of the government from 20 May to 15 June (Girard et al. 1976; INED 1976). In November 1976, "French views on demographics, fertility and family politics" were studied (Bastide and Girard 1977). Two years later, in December 1978, the "Study of Opinions on Fertility and Demographics trends" survey was conducted (Girard and Roussel 1979), whereas the survey conducted in January 1982 studies views on the demographic situation (Bastide et al. 1982). These studies gave rise to a series of review articles published in the journal *Population*. Thanks to the databases of these surveys conducted since 1947, the author was able to supplement some of the already published results, check whether estimates and opinions have changed and whether societal anxiety had increased on the demographic situation between 1974 and 1981 (INED Archives). Not all databases are available, forcing the author in some cases to rely only on articles published by survey results.

Demographic literacy

Before examining the opinion of society on population issues, it is important to check whether it is well informed about demographic trends and whether that knowledge is circulating, as are the opinions of experts on demographics, in a public sphere. In addition to the

information that appears in the press, INED regularly produces a 4-page newsletter, “Population and Society” (Population et sociétés), representing the demographics of the country and the world and having a wide readership. The teaching of demographics trends at schools and universities also contributes to the dissemination of knowledge about population issues (Geneslay et al. 1967; Garlot 1968; Dittgen 1992).

Examination of the level of demographic literacy shows that, since the 1950s, society has been well-informed about demographic trends in France. In surveys conducted between 1949 and 1974, respondents were asked the same question about the dynamics of the French population. The vast majority of respondents knew that the population was increasing (Table 1).

Table 1. Distribution (%) of answers to the question “What do you know about the population of France: does it increase, decrease or remain unchanged?”

Replies	1949	1962	1965	1974
Increases	80	96	95	90
Decreases	7	2	2	2
Remains unchanged	3	0	0	5
No Reply	10	2	3	3
Total	100	100	100	100

Numerous publications on the rise of births after the Liberation undoubtedly explain the rise in the proportion of well-informed respondents from 80 to 96% between 1949 and 1962.

Up until the October 1974 survey, the level of knowledge about population dynamics remained rather high. The decrease in the percentage of those well-informed from 95% in 1965 to 90% in 1974 may be due to the fact that respondents confused actual growth of the population, which remained positive, with the slowdown in growth, which the media started talking about at that time. In the meanwhile, the proportion of those who think France’s population remains unchanged has increased slightly. In any case, the vast majority of the population at that period knew that the population of France was growing.

The decline in birth rates that began in 1974 and the discussions resulting from this decline explain why between 1975 and 1978 the question of fertility rates was included in surveys “in recent years” (Table 2). Access to data from these surveys helps to clarify the characteristics of well-informed respondents.

In 1975, the proportion of those who knew that the number of births had declined “in recent years” was 62%; by 1976 it had risen to 68%, and in 1978 it was 76%. There is a marked difference in the estimation of fertility between men and women, while the proportion of those who are aware of the decline in birth rates has increased during this period in both. Women were better informed than men. It can be noted that in the 1970s in women’s magazines, for example, Parents or *Enfant* magazine, articles about the “third child” began to appear more often. Therefore, the debate about the decline in birth rates, which revived the national press at the time, was also reflected in the media focused on the female audience; this is undoubtedly why there was high awareness of demographic issues in women.

Table 2. Distribution (%) of answers to the question "What do you know about the number of births in recent years: has it increased, remained the same or decreased?"

	Increased			Remained the same			Decreased			Don't know		
	1975	1976	1978	1975	1976	1978	1975	1976	1978	1975	1976	1978
Sex												
Both sexes	11	6.4	5.7	21	19.5	15.2	62	68.1	76.4	6	5.9	2.6
Men	14	7.1	6.2	23	19.3	15.8	56	68.5	74.9	7	5.0	3.1
Women	9	5.8	5.3	19	19.7	14.8	66	67.7	77.8	6	6.8	2.1
Age												
18-24	12.6	7.9	7.4	23.7	18.6	14.7	59.1	67.6	76.0	4.6	5.9	2.0
25-34	11.5	6.1	6.1	19.0	16.0	15.4	63.3	73.1	77.0	6.2	4.7	1.5
35-49	11.4	5.8	5.5	19.6	19.3	12.7	63.8	68.8	79.2	5.2	6.1	2.5
50-64	12.1	5.6	5.5	21.8	24.0	14.6	61.2	65.3	76.9	5.0	5.0	3.0
65 years and over	10.5	7.5	4.5	21.0	19.5	19.9	58.4	64.7	71.6	10.2	8.4	4.0
Education												
Primary	12.9	7.9	5.5	25.9	25.2	19.5	52.7	59.4	69.9	8.5	7.5	3.8
General	11.8	5.7	6.4	22.4	22.9	16.0	58.6	66.3	73.4	7.2	5.1	4.3
Secondary-technical	13.0	6.4	6.0	19.7	20.6	14.8	62.6	66.1	76.9	4.8	6.9	1.4
Secondary	7.8	5.6	4.0	15.6	11.9	11.8	71.6	77.3	82.5	4.9	5.1	1.6
Higher	7.2	4.4	4.3	11.0	9.7	9.6	79.9	84.1	85.0	1.9	1.8	1.3

Respondents over the age of 65 were slightly worse informed than the rest of the age groups, but whatever the age of the respondent, in 1978 7 out of 10 were aware of birth rate trends. In addition, it turns out that as education levels increased, awareness also grew. In 1978, 70% of respondents with primary and 85% with higher education knew about real fertility trends.

Based on an analysis of these two questions assessing individuals' level of knowledge, we can only draw cautious conclusions. But clearly, the results speak of one thing: respondents were well aware of both French population dynamics and the decline in birth numbers "in recent years." But what did they think of it?

Examination of opinions

We are interested in the opinions of respondents on population growth, fertility rate, level of state participation in changing observed demographic trends. First of all, we shall take a long-term look at the evolution of public opinion regarding population growth, using answers to a single question repeated in all surveys between 1947 and 1982: "In your opinion, is it desirable that the population of France increase, decrease or remain roughly the same?" (Table 3).

In the 1940s, the proportion of those who considered population growth desirable was high, although it declined in this period from 73 to 54%. One can safely attribute this to the influence of pronatalist propaganda, which no other doctrine opposed those years; military casualties have also left their mark on the minds of the French. But in the 1950s–1970s there are noticeable changes in opinions. The majority of respondents – 50 to 65% – began to prefer a stable population number. There has been a lot of talk in the media about the baby boom and its implications for the job market, the availability of places in schools and universities... (De Luca Barrusse 2018).

Also alarming was the rapid growth of the "third world" population (a term first used by Alfred Sauvy (Sauvy 1952), and these concerns were reflected in the media. It should be noted, however, that since 1978 opinions had begun to change. While in 1974–1976 23–26% of respondents considered that French population growth was desirable, the proportion reached 40% in 1978–1982.

There is every reason to believe that the discussion about the risks of declining birth rates in the media has borne fruit. Analysis of the results of three surveys, for which we have detailed information on the characteristics of respondents, allows us to clarify our point of view (Table 4).

Table 3. Distribution (%) of the answers to the question "In your opinion, is it desirable that the population of France increase, decrease or remain the same?"

Year	Increase	Remain unchanged	Decrease	No Reply	Total
1947	73	22	1	4	100
1949	54	33	3	10	100
1955	22	57	6	15	100
1959	27	59	8	6	100
1962	36	50	7	7	100
1965	29	59	7	5	100
1967	27	61	7	5	100
1974	23	63	10	4	100
1975	23	65	8	4	100
1976	26	63	7	4	100
1978	40	49	8	3	100
1982	40	50	8	2	100

Table 4. Distribution (%) of the answers to the question "In your opinion, it is desirable that the population of France increase, decrease or remain the same?"

	Increase			Remain unchanged			Decrease			No Reply		
	1974	1978	1982	1974	1978	1982	1974	1978	1982	1974	1978	1982
Sex												
Both sexes	23.3	40.3	40.0	62.7	48.5	50.2	9.6	8.2	8.0	4.4	2.9	1.8
Men	27.1	42.9	43.3	59.1	46.4	45.9	9.7	7.9	9.1	4.1	2.7	1.7
Women	19.6	37.8	35.7	66.2	50.6	54.4	9.5	8.5	7.1	4.7	3.1	2.8
Age												
18-24	24.1	34.1	31.0	60.1	50.0	53.1	10.6	12.5	13.5	5.3	3.4	2.5
25-34	22.4	36.3	39.0	59.7	52.0	49.7	13.3	8.6	9.0	4.6	3.1	2.3
35-49	24.8	42.6	40.5	64.4	49.4	51.1	7.4	6.4	5.9	3.5	1.6	2.4
50-64	23.2	45.9	41.5	62.7	44.2	51.7	9.3	7.4	5.3	4.9	2.5	1.6
65 years and over	21.0	40.9	42.5	67.1	47.2	46.4	7.8	7.2	8.4	4.1	4.7	2.8
Education												
Primary	18.5	34.2	34.7	66.5	53.4	53.3	9.8	8.1	9.6	5.2	4.2	2.5
General	22.5	41.1	39.9	60.9	49.6	48.9	11.2	7.4	8.7	5.4	1.8	2.4
Secondary-technical	24.0	39.7	37.9	61.5	48.4	51.9	11.5	10.5	8.3	3.0	1.4	1.8
Secondary	26.2	42.0	39.6	64.7	46.6	51.9	6.6	7.7	6.2	2.5	3.6	2.3
Higher	35.7	50.7	47.4	50.7	40.0	43.4	8.7	7.3	6.9	5.0	1.9	2.3
Occupation												
Farmers	26.6	37.6	30.5	59.4	50.8	60.4	9.2	8.0	6.5	4.8	3.6	2.6
Workers employed in agriculture	13.5	34.6	38.0	55.8	51.9	52.0	22.6	7.7	10.0	8.1	5.8	0.0
Workers	19.9	32.6	35.6	62.7	53.8	51.5	11.1	10.0	11.8	6.3	3.6	1.1
Craftsmen	21.8	45.2	43.4	72.7	46.3	46.1	4.0	7.7	7.9	1.5	0.8	2.6
Employed workers	21.6	40.2	39.8	63.3	51.4	51.5	12.3	5.6	7.1	2.9	2.8	1.6
Mid-level managers	28.1	44.4	47.4	61.3	48.0	48.6	7.2	6.1	2.4	3.4	1.5	1.5
Top managers, individual entrepreneurs, representatives of free professions	45.1	57.0	56.4	40.4	32.2	35.9	6.7	7.8	6.1	7.7	3.0	1.6

The first finding is the difference between the views of men and women throughout the observation period: men are more likely to find population growth desirable; women overwhelmingly prefer that the numbers remain the same. In addition, the proportion of those who declined to answer this question decreases over time. This result is very important because it shows that discussion in the media over several years has led more and more individuals to take one position or another on demographic issues and increasingly voice their opinions.

As we can see, between 1974 and 1978, the proportion of respondents who are positive about population growth changed; Table 4 shows that older respondents contributed more to this change of opinion than young people. As age increases, so does the proportion of those who find it desirable to increase the population; in older ages it exceeds 40%. In addition, the proportion of those who prefer population growth depends on the level of education: the higher education is, the higher this figure. Since the level of education is related to occupation, observations are comparable. Thus, the discussion in the media about the risks of reducing the rate of population growth led to the formation of positions among respondents, which quite closely coincided with the positions of the experts expressed on this issue. The most well-off social groups proved to be the most receptive to the expert opinion.

Are there similar trends in opinions about the number of births? In all surveys from 1956 to 1974, respondents answered the same question: “Overall, you would say that the number of births in France is now too high, not high enough or at the necessary level?” (Table 5).

Table 5. Distribution (%) of the answers to the question “Overall, would you say that the number of births in France is now too high, not high enough, or at the necessary level?”

Replies	1956	1959	1965	1966	1967	1971	1974
Too high	37	34	38	45	28	23	15
At the necessary level	46	53	53	45	54	55	65
Not high enough	9	6	5	6	14	15	12
No Reply	8	7	4	4	4	7	8

In 1956, 46% of respondents believed that the number of births was sufficient, this figure fluctuated around 50% for almost the entire period, but by 1974 it reached 65%. The change in the proportion of those who believe that the given number is either too large or too small is remarkable. We see a marked decline in the proportion of respondents who consider the rise in the number of births in France too high: it fell from 37 to 15%, while the proportion of those who consider such growth to be insufficient rose from 9 to 12% between 1956 and 1974. Perhaps this change reflects the impact on public opinion of the discussion about contraception liberalization (De Luca Barrusse 2018). Anyway, in October 1974, when the press received the first warnings about the beginning of the decline in the birth rate and a long debate began on the topic, two thirds of respondents believed that the number of births is at the necessary level. But if the number of births continues to decline, what will the opinion become on that matter? Such a question was included in the 1976, 1978 and 1982 surveys.

Indeed, the survey questions related to the birth rate focused on its continued decline because, as we saw, it was a commonly known fact. However, in all three surveys, questions are worded differently to give respondents some clue about the level of decline. In 1976, the question was as follows: “The number of births, which in previous years was about 850,000,

has declined by about 50,000 per year over the last three years. Do you think this decline in births is good, bad, or neither good nor bad?". In the 1978 survey the question is included in the following wording: "Since 1973, the annual number of births has been significantly reduced. Since then, it has declined by about 100,000, rounded – from 850 to 750 thousand births. Do you think this decline in births is good, bad, or neither good nor bad?". Finally, in 1982, the question was: "After the Second World War the number of births increased significantly, then declined markedly. It seems to have remained about the same in the last few years. If the number of births decreased, would it be, in your opinion, good, bad or neither good nor bad?". The questions are different, however, one can try to compare the results to understand how the perception of the continued decline in birth numbers changes, while remaining very careful in conclusions (Table 6).

Table 6. Distribution (%) of the answers to the question "If the number of births were to (actually) decrease, it would be...?"

	Good			Bad			Neither good nor bad			No Reply		
	1976	1978	1982	1976	1978	1982	1976	1978	1982	1976	1978	1982
Sex												
Both sexes	14.9	21.7	12.4	54.9	57.1	67.5	21.7	13.4	13.0	8.5	7.7	7.1
Men	14.2	20.9	11.9	58.5	59.2	68.0	21.4	13.5	12.8	5.9	6.5	7.4
Women	15.6	22.6	12.9	51.5	55.2	67.1	22.1	13.4	13.2	10.8	8.9	6.8
Age												
18–24	21.3	28.4	14.5	47.0	47.5	60.4	23.3	14.0	17.2	8.4	10.0	7.9
25–34	17.4	24.6	14.2	52.8	52.8	63.2	21.3	16.1	16.7	8.5	6.5	6.0
35–49	15.4	21.7	13.1	55.3	59.1	67.4	20.6	11.9	11.2	8.8	7.2	8.3
50–64	10.8	15.9	9.3	58.1	64.7	77.2	23.2	12.0	7.9	7.8	7.4	13.5
65 years and over	9.9	19.0	11.4	60.8	59.3	67.4	20.4	13.6	13.5	8.9	8.1	7.7
Education												
Primary	14.7	25.1	15.9	48.8	47.8	61.7	26.6	16.7	14.4	9.9	10.4	8.0
General	8.7	19.9	12.3	63.9	64.2	68.5	20.8	10.6	13.8	6.6	5.3	5.4
Second- ary-technical	17.7	25.6	9.6	53.8	55.0	67.0	21.4	12.6	16.4	7.1	6.8	7.0
Secondary	17.3	17.0	10.7	57.2	63.9	72.0	17.1	11.8	10.7	8.4	7.3	6.5
Higher	15.0	16.7	10.5	62.1	66.6	71.9	15.9	10.9	10.3	7.1	5.8	7.3

The percentage of those who believe that the continued decline in fertility is bad rose from 55 to 68% between 1976 and 1982. The older the respondents, the more negative they saw in the drop in the birth rate. Similarly, with rising levels of education, worries about declining birth numbers have increased. It seems that discussion of these issues in the media has led to widespread public concern about declining birth rates. During the period under

review, the proportion of those who did not respond to this question decreased. In 1978, the survey examined respondents’ perceptions of generational substitution. Respondents were asked the following question: “Since 1975, the observed number of births is below the level that guarantees the replacement of one generation by the next. If this continues, will it be very positive for the future of the country, rather positive, irrelevant, rather negative or very negative?” 56% considered the insufficient number of births rather negative, 19% was very negative, 12% considered it irrelevant, 7% found it positive (categories “very positive” and “rather positive” combined).

Surveys conducted in the 1970s also address the acceptability of birth stimulating measures, which are discussed in this period and in the press. The 1966 and 1974 surveys provide insight into society’s moods at a moment when the media debate about the decline in birth numbers is unfolding.

Respondents were asked: is the dynamics of the number of births a problem relating only to public authorities, or only to families, or both? In other words, to what extent is state intervention in fertility processes acceptable? (Table 7)

Table 7. Distribution (%) of the answers to the question “Do you think the government should have an impact on the number of births in the country or do you think it’s a matter solely for the family?”

Replies	1966	1974
Government	49	46
Family	43	46
No Reply	8	8
Total	100	100

In 1974, as before and in 1966, the population was divided almost equally between supporters of state intervention and those for whom the problem was a purely private matter. Also, there was no change in the proportion of those who did not answer the question. That is, at the beginning of the discussion on fertility reduction, it is impossible to say with certainty that the view on the need for state intervention in fertility issues dominates.

But the discussions, warnings, proposals on declining birth rates seem to have led to a change in the perception of respondents of government intervention in this area (Table 8).

Table 8. Distribution (%) of the answers to the question: “In order to stop the fertility decline, the state must...”

Replies	1975	1976	1978
Take measures	39	43	59
Not take measures	47	40	29
No Reply	14	17	12
Total	100	100	100

If prior to 1974, in answers to the question of who should be more concerned about the decline in fertility – only the family or the state as well – society was divided roughly equally, between 1975 and 1978, the proportion of those who believe that the state should take action against declining birth rates, increased from 39 to 59%. In a 1976 survey, one in three re-

spondents was asked an additional question: "In order to stop the decline in fertility, should the state be advocating?" 50% of them felt that "it should not be doing so". It seems that respondents interviewed in 1976 understood the difference between advocacy in the form of endorsing the desire to have children expressed in official discourses and birth support measures, which are more frequently associated with family policy among respondents. In fact, an entire host of questions about family policy shows that society has a positive attitude to it. Financial support measures for the birth of a child were generally well received. Thus, in 1978, respondents were asked: "Do you think that the state should take special measures to help families to try to stop the decline in birth rates?" 59% of respondents responded affirmatively, and 29% were opposed. That is, the public is rather positive about targeted intervention if it is limited to merely financial measures to support fertility.

In conclusion, we would like to note the use of this discussion for political purposes. Indeed, it emerged just as France was entering a period of economic crisis, barely emerging from the "glorious thirty-year" period with its economic boom. Perhaps discussions about demographics were organized in order to divert society's attention from rising unemployment, inflation, etc. The fact that all political parties have been concerned with the decline in births shows that this is not the case. There is certainly a link between economic and demographic indicators, but we can hardly talk about using the discussion about demographics for political purposes. The press debate about the renewed decline in births only showed that French society's concerns about demographics remained unchanged at that period.

Demography is not a discipline monopolized by specialists, it is also the object of attention of dilettantes who can express their opinions about it. In France, therefore, demographics are discussed in a sphere beyond the range of experienced experts, and discussions, regardless of the tone of the comments, provide the public with information. The population is familiar with the main demographic trends that are covered in the media.

Widely presented in the press, references to data and analysis of demographic trends bear fruit when it comes to public awareness. The media supports the teaching of demography and publishes relevant results of expert analysis of demographic trends. Another finding is that these discussions draw society's attention to situations that are thought to be a cause of concern that is shared by society itself as well, as evidenced by research conducted by INED.

Indeed, in 1974–1981 society held a view on the value of fertility. Apparently, society was also following the discussion about declining births, as the majority of the population knew it had fallen. The French mostly negatively assessed "denatality". Also in these years, the press was dominated by the following idea: even if the decline in the birth rate concerned everyone, it is not an unbridled rise that would be preferable, but rather a return to a level that would provide generation replacement. Thus, there is some overlap between the views of the media and the general public on population and fertility. We tried to infer the impact of the media on society's concerns. This finding coincides with the results of research in media sociology, even if they refer to other objects (Gamson and Modigliani 1989; McCombs and Shaw 1972; Katz 2001). However, the influence of the debate is limited only to perceptions of the desired dynamics. In fact, this does not lead to changes in behaviour, because at the same time the ideal number of children in the family, which was equal to three between 1947 and 1974, fell to two during the study period, and the birth rate continued to decline. Therefore, the view on demographic trends is based on the information being disseminated on the issue. How numbers are used and commented on and what words they are accompanied by affects their perception. However, the extent to which this influence continues today, in the era of the spread of information networks, remains to be explored.

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