



Max Planck Institute for the Study of  
Religious and Ethnic Diversity

Max-Planck-Institut zur Erforschung multireligiöser  
und multiethnischer Gesellschaften

*MMG Working Paper 15-07* • ISSN 2192-2357

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Group consciousness and political behavior  
among citizens of immigrant origin: The case  
of France



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MMG Working Paper 15-07

Max-Planck-Institut zur Erforschung multireligiöser und multiethnischer Gesellschaften,  
*Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity*  
Göttingen

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ISSN 2192-2357 (MMG Working Papers Print)

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## Abstract

This paper explores various characteristics of political behavior of persons of immigrant origin in France (abstention and registration rates, degree of interest in politics and right-left self placement). Using newly available survey data that bypass data availability issues in that country, I conduct tests pertaining to the importance of ethnic voting and ethnic consciousness in political behavior. In particular, several potentially salient identities are selected for testing (Arab, Black, Muslim) and contrasted with the hypothesis of convergence between immigrant descendants and the rest of the French population. I find little evidence for an independent effect of potentially salient ethnic identities on political behavior, with the exception of being black from overseas territories.

*Keywords:* political behavior, immigrant minorities, ethnic voting, France

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## Introduction

There are very few issues that generate more heated public discussions in Western Europe than the integration of non-European (or post-colonial) immigrants and their descendants. On the one hand, there are fears that the stalled socioeconomic development of these populations leads to their permanent marginalization and, in some cases, ghettoization in the dense urban enclaves of European cities. On the other hand, ethnic, racial, religious and cultural diversity poses threats to the formerly (presumably) unified national identities of European nation-states. The present paper is concerned with one particular aspect of these debates that is related to the political participation and partisan alignments of populations of immigrant origin in their host countries. I explore the case of France, an obviously important one among Western European countries because of the size of the population of immigrant origin, which has been understudied so far, because of a lack of data on immigrant and ethnic minorities. As I explain below, the particular characteristics of the French Republican tradition also make that country a theoretically interesting one in the study of immigrant integration.

### Political participation of immigrants and their descendants: bridging the literature on integration and political participation

The politicization of the fate of “visible minorities” has led to the emergence of explicitly anti-immigrant parties in Europe and rendered positions on immigration a staple of party competition in recent years (Van der Brug et al. 2000; Van Spanje 2010). Understandably, a vast scholarly literature has focused on the attitudes towards immigrant minorities and voting behavior that reflects these attitudes (Sides and Citrin 2007; Mayda 2006; Norris 2005; Golder 2003). Other scholars have attempted to record integration outcomes in various countries, often studying them in relation to targeted integration policies (see, for instance, Givens 2007; Geddes and Guiraudon 2004; see also Migrant Integration Policy Index Project). However, studies that have merged these two established traditions to offer insights into the political integration of immigrants and their descendants are scarce.

A note on terminology is merited. By the term political integration of immigrant minorities I mean the gap between first immigrant generation and later generations,

as well as between immigrants and “native” majorities over a range of relevant indicators. These indicators include: overall interest in national and local politics, mobilization in protest and social movements, electoral registration and participation, self-placement on the Left-Right axis, partisanship and representation of immigrant candidates in elected offices (see Martiniello 2005). It is important to recognize debates surrounding the use of terms such as “integration”, “incorporation” or “assimilation”. The term “integration” is used mostly to refer to the “public” aspects of parity attainment vis-à-vis individuals of non-immigrant background in the host society, such as scholarly and professional achievement or participation in civil society. The way in which it is used here has no normative connotations or culturalist undertones (see discussion in Martiniello and Rath 2014).

The lack of academic interest on political integration compared to studies of the political behavior of native majorities is not hard to explain; non-European immigrants in Europe did not possess full citizenship and political rights until recently and, in some cases, this has also been true for their descendants (see Howard 2009 for a thorough overview of the development of citizenship laws in Western Europe). Yet, with the third and fourth generations of post-war immigrants’ coming of age, the importance of political citizenship for channeling demands in the political arena and for overall integration can no longer be ignored. Such emphasis is also pertinent for the study of the latest observed “civic turn” in integration policies of European states (Joppke 2007).

The oldest and most systematic attempt to record the political integration of immigrant minorities (or ethnic minorities, depending on the frame chosen by the study)<sup>1</sup> in Western Europe has come from the Ethnic Minority British Election Survey since 1997 (Saggar 2004; Heath et al. 2013) that has notably focused on South Asian and Afro-Caribbean participation in British elections. Valuable comparative studies of local immigrant communities in the Netherlands and Belgium have also contributed to theoretical and empirical advancements (Van Heelsum 2005; Jacobs et al. 2004; Fennema and Tillie 1999). The findings from these studies suggest that there is often a substantial difference among different immigrant groups in many aspects of political integration; for instance, South Asians in Britain and Turks in the Netherlands

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1 I use the terms immigrant and ethnic minorities here interchangeably but cautiously, given the conceptual and substantive distinctions between them. For the purposes of this paper, the population described under these terms refers to the descendants of non-European immigrants who have acquired full citizenship by birth or naturalization. The section on France below discusses the relevant groups for this specific case.



consistently demonstrate higher turnout rates and levels of participation in local politics than other immigrant minorities and are better represented in local councils, due to their higher stock of intra-communal social capital.

In addition to differences among groups, immigrant descendants have been found, on average, less active in the politics of the host country, even after controlling for relevant socioeconomic characteristics. The “political quiescence” and “apathy” thesis of immigrant descendants often reflects similar accusations directed against communitarian inwardness of the first generation. Yet, this thesis has also been criticized for focusing on conventional forms of participation (voting, union and party membership) and ignoring other aspects of political mobilization, such as local citizen initiatives, transnational activism and anti-racism movements (Martiniello 2005).

This fledgling literature has not fully benefited from the much more established and extensive scholarship in the United States on immigrant integration and the political participation of what are called, in the American context, second-generation ethnic and racial minorities. The lack of analytical overlap is perhaps the result of different traditions and conceptual understandings of ethnicity and groupness in Europe and the US, as well as the easier access to citizenship for immigrant descendants born across the Atlantic. It is also true that theories developed in the US historical context (for instance, in response to the specificity of the African-American experience) do not yield homologous empirical implications in the context of post-colonial or industrial-worker immigration in Europe. Still, the traditional debate on the plausibility of straight-line assimilation of immigrants into the host society’s mainstream – including the political mainstream – (Gordon 1964; Glazer 1993; Dahl 1963; see Wong 2008 and Ramakrishnan 2005 for more recent treatments) is a hypothesis that is general enough to be transportable in the case of Europe (see discussion in Bloemraad and Vermeulen 2014, 240-242, on transatlantic comparisons of political incorporation).

The American literature has yielded valuable theoretical and methodological insights on ethnic identity voting, an example is the tendency observed among members of ethnic groups in the United States (particularly African-Americans) to develop similar patterns of electoral behavior – strong political mobilization and higher levels of participation and partisanship (usually in favor of the Democratic Party). Persistent ethnic voting is regarded as an obvious counter to the straight-line assimilation thesis. Various mechanisms have been proposed to explain the historical evolution and psychological underpinnings of this group-based phenomenon in the United States (see McClain et al. 2009; Lee 2008; Chong and Rogers 2005 for use-

ful overviews). The most relevant debates revolve around the very existence of such “ethnic” voting for groups that do not share the particular historical experience and mobilization of African-Americans (indeed, the evidence for ethnic voting is at best mixed for Latinos or Asian Americans); of note is also whether voters belonging to a particular ethnic group vote on the basis of simple identification (a psychological sense of belonging or attachment to a social group) or heightened, politicized consciousness of their group’s position. Politicized consciousness underpins the “linked fate” hypothesis, according to which respondents believe that what happens in general to their ethnic group is bound to have an effect on them personally (Dawson 1995). A last relevant insight is that ethnic-group consciousness is not fixed but it is *induced* or *ascribed* consciousness. Identification with a group is activated and affects political behavior when others, normally a majority perceived as native, categorize someone as a member of an ethnic group (Lee 2007). This brief overview demonstrates the added value of delving into the American literature when studying the political integration of immigrant minorities in Western Europe: the gradations and various mechanisms behind the identity-politics link explored on the other side of the Atlantic can inform a more nuanced analysis of the political integration of ethnic minorities and avoid simplistic generalizations about supposedly monolithic ethnic voting.

#### Hypotheses:

- i. The political behavior of immigrant minorities converges with that of the rest of the population over time (integration hypothesis). Conversely, it diverges by remaining significantly less active (apathy hypothesis) or highly distinctive (ethnic voting hypothesis).
- ii. Membership in certain groups and certain common ethnic identities are more likely to structure political behavior (dominant cleavage hypothesis).
- iii. Identification with a certain ethnic group structures political behavior more strongly than mere self-classification (ethnic consciousness hypothesis). Alternatively, ascribed identity structures political behavior more strongly than mere self-classification (ascription hypothesis).

## The particularities of the French case and the *Trajectoires et Origines* Survey

France has often been at the forefront of discussions on non-European immigrant integration, since it has received successive waves in the last fifty years, mostly from its former colonies in North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa (Noiriel 1996).<sup>2</sup> More recently, highly mediatized and spectacular events, such as the passing of laws against wearing the face-covering Islamic headscarf in public places and the eruption of urban riots in immigrant-heavy neighborhoods across the country, have sharpened public focus on minority integration (Joppke 2013; Lagrange and Oberti 2006). With regard to the political behavior of immigrant descendants, the highest public body in France on such matters, the *Haut Conseil à l'Intégration* (HCI) has explicitly included “active participation” as a criterion and highlighted the importance of “...electoral registration, voting and eligibility for evaluating civic and citizenship integration” (HCI 1993).

Systematic studies of the attitudes and other aspects of political integration of immigrant minorities in France have been relatively few, but instructive nonetheless. Brouard and Tiberj (2005) conducted a survey of representative samples of three generations of immigrants of African and Turkish descent; they found similar and sometimes stronger feelings of attachment to the values of French democracy and confidence towards state institutions compared to the native population, but lower electoral participation rates. A similar disadvantage in registration rates among immigrant descendants of African origin has been recorded by Maxwell (2010), who conducted a careful crosschecking of registration catalogues and the permanent demographic sample. Furthermore, authors, such as Geisser (1997), Garbaye (2005) and Amadiou (2009) have recorded the checkered, if progressively increasing, presence of ethnic minority candidates in municipal councils in France, while case studies of less formal mobilization have covered the anti-racist protests of the early 1980s (notably the March For Equality and Against Racism) and the *sans-papiers* movement of the 1990s (Bouamama 1994; Siméant 1998). These initiatives have been very much counterweighed by the inability of the French Left to mobilize the poor, immigrant-heavy

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2 According to the 2008 estimates by INSEE, immigrants from North and sub-Saharan Africa (first and second generation) represented around 4.9 million inhabitants or about 8% of total population, but this number underestimates third-generation immigrants or higher and does not count Algerians who moved to France having French citizenship.

suburbs of the country's former industrial centers as well as the indecipherable and leaderless waves of violent rioting in these same suburbs (Beaud and Masclet 2006).

If scholarly studies have been somewhat fragmented and sporadic, the French state has been more steadfast in its refusal to collect official statistics that mention ethnicity or fund surveys with items explicitly asking for ethnic/racial self-identification (see Simon 2008 for an overview of the debate on ethnic statistics in France). The rationale behind this intransigence stems from the "Republican" tradition of public administration that does not recognize official categorizations, other than those of citizen-noncitizen. This model rests on the premise that granting full citizenship rights and ensuring universalistic access to state services regardless of particular characteristics represents the best integration option for the descendants of immigrants (Schnapper 1996). Concretely, the plausibility of the Republican model rests on the "normalization" of civic behavior among immigrant descendants. Thus, for the purposes of the present paper, the Republican model of integration "predicts" null findings on all hypotheses assuming the development of ethnic voting/ethnic consciousness and favors a convergence of political behavior between immigrant descendants and the native majority. One could argue, in a somewhat stylized way, that the analysis that follows is a test of the promise of the French Republican model with regard to the political integration of immigrant minorities.

I make use of the first large-scale survey in the country explicitly designed to record the life conditions and social trajectories of individuals of immigrant origin, with a particular attention to the effect of this origin on perceived discrimination. The survey, called *Trajectoires et Origines*, was conducted by the National Demography and Statistics Institutes (INED and INSEE) between September 2008 and 2009 covering a sample of 21,000 individuals, residing in metropolitan France and including a base sample of 3,000 French citizens without immigrant origin. Among the various items of the survey (covering personal and professional developments, residential mobility, educational trajectories, experiences of discrimination etc.) the ones of particular interest here, are items on associational and political activity, left-right self-placement, registration and participation in elections and expressed interest in politics (specific questions given in the Annex). Of equal importance are items coding the origins of parents in a very detailed way, the religion of the respondents and questions on the importance of origins/religion/color of skin for the definition of the respondent's identity and the perception of discrimination because of this identity in order to test the group consciousness hypotheses. Even if the survey does not include

an item on self-identification (a standard in US and British surveys), it largely fills the void of ethnicity data in France.

## Results and Analysis

Table 1 shows the average percentages of various groups compared to native majorities for the main outcome variables of interest. I have chosen to include several categories as candidates for the most salient ethnicity cleavage (Arab, African, Black, Muslim), because the literature yields no clear dominant division in France (Fassin and Fassin 2006). For instance, public discussion following the headscarf debates shifted towards religious affiliation, while it was arguably more concerned with the integration of North Africans in the 1980s. More recently, some scholars have argued for the emergence of a distinctive black identity following public pronouncements by groups such as CRAN<sup>3</sup> and the Indigènes de la République, and the disproportionate participation of black youth in the urban riots (Lagrange 2008). I thus include the variable “black”, which includes immigrants and their descendants from sub-Saharan Africa, as well as those respondents who come from French overseas territories (Guyana, Martinique and Guadeloupe, Réunion, New Caledonie).

The preliminary, descriptive summaries are quite revealing. The first finding is that the argument for “minority apathy” has a basis when we compare the registration and turnout rates of the various minority groups vis-à-vis the majority population, with a 5-8% gap for all groups. However, this difference is clearly not very substantial and it is actually reversed when the respondents are asked about overall interest in the national politics of France (for instance, Arab immigrants from North Africa and their descendants seem substantially more interested in the national politics of France than the majority population). An additional finding, which goes against much of the established French literature, is that minority groups, however defined, have no clear propensity to identify strongly/somewhat with the Left in a homogeneous way as expected by theories of ethnic voting (percentages for identification with the Right and neither-nor percentages do not diverge significantly from those of the majority). This finding is surprising despite a clear Left-Right divide on issues of immigration and a supposed nationalism-pluralism cleavage in French and European politics (Tiberj 2008). Unfortunately, the TeO survey does not include an

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3 Conseil Représentatif des Associations Noires

explicit item on party choice in previous election that would allow us to conduct a more thorough analysis of partisanship.

**Table 1: Political Integration of Minority/Immigrant groups in France**

	<b>Interest in French Politics (0-3)</b>	<b>Registration (% registered)</b>	<b>Turnout (% voted in 2007)</b>	<b>Identifying with Left (%)</b>	<b>N</b>
Majority Population	1.50	91.1	91	35.9	3501
1st Generation	1.65	83.7	87.9	35.2	3469
2nd Generation	1.56	85.5	86	35.8	8484
Arab	1.63	83.1	86.5	35.6	3232
Sub-Saharan African	1.69	84.4	85.5	34.8	1605
Black	1.59	85.1	85.4	34.1	2978
Muslim	1.54	86.1	87.9	34.3	4447
<i>Total</i>	1.56	86.3	87.5	35.5	

To ensure that these summary statistics do not reflect missing variable biases, the results of multivariate regression analyses are presented in Table 2. Along with the ethnic group variables, I include standard explanatory variables found to be broadly significant in political behavior literature and generally grouped into two categories: (1) individual resources and characteristics (education, income, age, gender); (2) organizational resources (church attendance, membership in a community organization, cultural association – I do not include political party membership because of the danger of multicollinearity). They are all found to be statistically significant in the expected direction, with older, better educated and wealthier immigrants/descendants being strongly associated with more elevated interest in politics and registration/participation rates, very much as the conventional wisdom has it. Equally unsurprisingly, the organizational resources and civic “premium” to be gained by participating in associational activities are strongly present in this sample. This is true even if we break down associational activity to its separate components (cultural, sports, parents, community associations – results not shown here). The only surprising and rather counter-intuitive finding is the positive and statistically significant association of being a woman with higher participation rates across all indicators.

**Table 2. Logistic Regression Results: Political Integration of Minority/Immigrant Groups**

Variables	(1) Registration (0/1)	(2) Turnout (0/1)	(3) Identification with Left (0/1)	(4) Interest in French Politics (0-3)
18-30yrs old	0.47*** (0.02)	0.35*** (0.02)	1.02 (0.04)	0.62*** (0.01)
Female	1.15** (0.05)	1.21*** (0.06)	1.04 (0.08)	0.73*** (0.02)
House income (less than 2,000 Euros/ month)	0.71*** (0.04)	0.81*** (0.05)	1.07* (0.04)	0.78*** (0.03)
No Higher Degree	0.40*** (0.01)	0.52*** (0.03)	1.06* (0.04)	0.4*** (0.01)
Associational Activity	1.54*** (0.09)	1.35*** (0.08)	0.99 (0.04)	1.5*** (0.05)
<b>Minority Status</b>				
1 <sup>st</sup> Generation	0.47*** (0.04)	0.58*** (0.05)	1.01 (0.05)	1.19*** (0.06)
2 <sup>nd</sup> Generation	0.70*** (0.05)	0.73*** (0.06)	1.02 (0.05)	1.12** (0.04)
Arab	0.92 (0.05)	1.12 (0.08)	0.98 (0.04)	1.39*** (0.05)
Sub-Saharan African	1.44*** (0.18)	1.5*** (0.2)	1.03 (0.09)	1.32*** (0.1)
Black	0.69*** (0.07)	0.69*** (0.07)	0.91 (0.06)	1.07 (0.06)
Muslim	0.96 (0.05)	1.05 (0.05)	0.93 (0.04)	0.96 (0.03)
N	16,827	14,278	16,852	16,833
Chi-Squared	832.53	584.42	15.88	1687.72

Note: Coefficients Represent Odds Ratios. Standard errors in parentheses. \*\*\* p<0.001, \*\* p<0.01, \* p<0.05



The regression results from Table 2 confirm the existence of a strong, positive association of belonging to an immigrant group, in particular for North and Sub-Saharan Africans with an increased interest in French national politics. The low rates of registration and turnout found on Table 1 do not correspond to a statistically significant relationship for Arabs and Muslims, when controlling for other factors, but being black emerges as a trait that is associated negatively with registration and turnout. This result is somewhat surprising, given the strong, positive regression result we get for sub-Saharan Africans whose negative overall participation rates presented in Table 1 are entirely explained by socioeconomic characteristics (sub-Saharans represent the poorest and most recent immigrant waves into France); the contradiction is resolved when we take into account the very low levels of participation of French black citizens from the overseas territories, whose civic integration into mainstream France seems to be lagging substantially. Another interesting finding is that there seems to be no important “Muslim” effect on any aspect of political behavior measured by the survey, in stark contrast with contemporary discourse emphasizing a Muslim radicalization (or, depending on the version of the story, a Muslim alienation). Finally, the second generation of immigrant descendants seems to increase participation rates in politics, as the straight-line assimilation model would predict, but the engagement remains imperfect in comparison with the majority population.

Table 3 reports the logistic regression results that include, as potential explanatory variables, indicators of expressed and ascribed group consciousness in terms of origins, color and religion. Here we are concerned with the political behavior and opinions of respondents who reported a specific ethnic identity as being important for their self-definition and/or expressed the opinion that there is discrimination in France on the basis of this ethnic characteristic. There seems to be no clear (strong or statistically significant) relationship between raised group consciousness and increasing political participation or identification with the Left, contrary to both the linked-fate and minority disadvantage hypotheses. The possible exception is religious self-identification, which is negatively and significantly associated with low turnout. This finding, which identifies a tradeoff between religiosity and political engagement among minority populations, is once again counterbalanced by the positive association with increased interest for national politics.

Perhaps the most robust finding of all is the strong, positive association of experienced discrimination (on the basis of origins, color and religion) and interest for national politics. This is the most direct link found between ascribed ethnic identity and political engagement. Unlike with African-Americans in the United States, how-



ever, this heightened interest does not lead to direct political action, in the form of increased participation or alignment with the Left. This perhaps reflects the successes of the Republican model of integration, embraced to a large degree by the center-Right in France, or, alternatively, but not unrelatedly, the failure and unwillingness of mobilization based on some kind of ethnic identity by the French left.

**Table 3. Logistic Regression Results: Political Integration of Minority/Immigrant Groups according to group consciousness**

Variables	(1) Registration (0/1)	(2) Turnout (0/1)	(3) Identifica- tion with Left (0/1)	(4) Interest in French Politics (0-3)
18-30yrs old	0.53*** (0.02)	0.37*** (0.02)	1.02 (0.03)	0.61*** (0.02)
Female	1.14** (0.05)	1.22** (0.05)	1.04 (0.04)	0.75** (0.02)
House income (less than 2,000 Euros/ month)	0.71*** (0.04)	0.82*** (0.04)	1.07 (0.04)	0.79*** (0.03)
No Higher Degree	0.40*** (0.02)	0.51*** (0.02)	1.06 (0.04)	0.40*** (0.01)
Associational Activity	1.59*** (0.09)	1.38*** (0.09)	0.99 (0.04)	1.45*** (0.05)
<b>Group Consciousness</b>				
Origins (self-definition)	0.95 (0.05)	0.79*** (0.05)	1.05 (0.04)	1.09** (0.03)
Color (self-definition)	1.03 (0.08)	0.89 (0.08)	0.89** (0.05)	0.98 (0.05)
Religion (self-definition)	0.86** (0.06)	0.88* (0.06)	1.01 (0.05)	1.1** (0.05)

Origins (discrimination)	0.97 (0.08)	0.98 (0.1)	0.9 (0.06)	1.28*** (0.07)
Color (discrimination)	0.87* (0.06)	1.09 (0.09)	0.95 (0.05)	1.38*** (0.06)
Religion (discrimination)	1.1 (0.18)	1.01 (0.19)	0.92 (0.11)	1.30** (0.14)
N	16,827	14,278	16,852	16,833
Chi-Squared	734.05	573.88	21.75	1677.16

Note: Coefficients Represent Odds Ratios. Standard errors in parentheses. \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$

## Conclusion

The analysis from the TeO survey finds little support for the existence of “ethnic voting” in France either in terms of political participation or alignment with the political left. This is true even for French “minority” citizens with heightened consciousness of belonging to an ethnic group or a heightened consciousness of discrimination based on an ethnic trait. Furthermore, no group emerges as exceptional for its political opinions or behavior (and certainly not Muslims), except for the French citizens from overseas territories (Dom-Tom), who reside in metropolitan France and display very low levels of political participation. In terms of the aspirations of the Republican model, the evidence seems rather mixed: France has indeed avoided an ethnicization of politics, but has not succeeded in fully integrating immigrants and, even more critically, their descendants into the formal political rituals (registration, voting) of the Republic. Last but certainly not least, the French Left seems to have failed in its bid to forge strong bonds with voters of immigrant descent/minorities – and this despite the leader of the French Right at the time, Nicolas Sarkozy, having a strong anti-immigrant pedigree. Clearly, a more elaborate consideration of all confounding factors is required to take into account the full picture of the experience of immigrant minorities in France when conducting regressions on political opinions and participation. For instance, many authors have underlined the peculiar effect of residential isolation in the French social housing estates as a factor prohibiting political mobilization (Maxwell 2010; Braconnier and Dormagen 2007). Still, the availability

of higher-quality data allows for a realistic assessment of both the Republican model of ethnicity-blind integration and the wholesale introduction of “ethnic politics” in the French political landscape.

### **Annex: Survey items on political behavior and opinions, *trajectoires et origines* survey**

*INS 6/I\_ELEUE: Are you registered to vote in France?*

1. Yes / 2. No / 8. Refuse to Respond / 9. Don't Know

*I\_VOIPDT: Have you voted in the latest Presidential Elections?*

1. Yes / 2. No / 8. Refuse to Respond / 9. Don't Know

*I\_INTFRA: Are you interested in national politics of France?*

1. Very / 2. Quite / 3. A little / 4. Not at all / 8. Refuse to Respond / 9. Don't Know

*INS 12/I\_OPIPOL: You would describe yourself as ...*

1. Very much on the Left / 2. More on the Left / 3. On the Center / 4. More on the Right / 5. Very much on the Right / 6. Neither Left nor Right / 8. Refuse to Respond / 9. Don't Know

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