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France and the United Kingdom: demographic stability on the continent, stop-and-go across the Channel

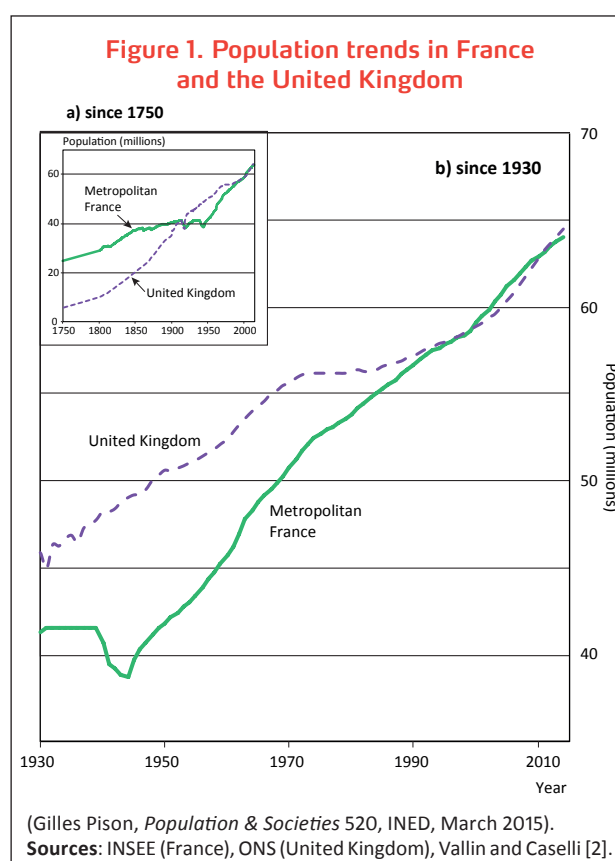
Gilles Pison*

Metropolitan France (i.e. mainland France and Corsica) is the third most populous European Union country, behind Germany and the United Kingdom (UK). The populations of metropolitan France and the United Kingdom have been of similar size for the last 20 years (nearly 65 million in 2015) and have been increasing at virtually the same pace. This means that the two regularly swap places as the European Union's second largest country. But as Gilles Pison explains, the sources of population growth in the two countries are not the same.

On 1 January 2015, the population of metropolitan France was estimated at 64.2 million, while that of the French overseas *départements* stood at 2.1 million, giving a total population of 66.3 million.[1] In 2014 the population of metropolitan France rose by approximately 280,000 (+0.4%), on a par with 2013, while births remained at the same level and deaths fell slightly (Table, page 3).

Length of life continues to rise

The number of deaths in 2014 – 544,000 – was 2.5% lower than in 2013 (558,000). While the population grew by 0.4%, the proportion of older persons also rose. Calculating life expectancy provides a means to eliminate fluctuations in mortality due to variations in population size and age distribution, leaving only what is due to changes in the risk of death. In 2014, life expectancy at birth reached 79.3 years for males and 85.5 years for females, as against 78.8 and 85.0 years in 2013, an increase of half a year for each sex from 2013 to 2014. This is a considerable gain, but it is important to recall that because of severe flu epidemics, life expectancy barely increased in 2012 and 2013. The 2014 jump simply put it back on track with regard to the trend observed over the last decades: an average increase in life expectancy of three months per year.



* Institut national d'études démographiques.

As many births in 2014 as in 2013

Both the number of births, 783,000 in 2014 in metropolitan France versus 782,000 in 2013, and the total fertility rate, 1.98 children per woman in both 2014 and 2013, have remained stable. Moreover, consistent with a trend observed for the last 35 years, the age at childbearing has continued to rise: women who had children in 2014 were 30.3 years old on average. This figure has risen constantly since 1977, when the mean age at childbearing was 26.5 years. But while female fertility in metropolitan France continues to rise after age 30, as it has since the late 1970s, it has been falling since 2010 among women under 30.

If we examine fertility by birth cohort, we find that women born in 1964, who therefore turned 50 in 2014 and have completed their childbearing years, had an average of 2.05 children. Women born in 1974, who turned 40 in 2014, had already reached a fertility rate of 1.96 children in that year, meaning that the total for them will probably have reached at least 2.0 by the time they turn 50. And the same is likely to be true for the younger generations of women, who still have many more childbearing years ahead of them.

Which is the second largest country in the European Union – France or the United Kingdom?

With its 63.9 million inhabitants on January 1, 2014, metropolitan France is quite far behind the most populous European Union country, Germany (80.8 million), but only just behind the second most populous one, the United Kingdom (64.3 million). For the last 20 years, the populations of metropolitan France and the UK have been of similar size and have increased at almost the same rate (Figure 1). As a result the two have vied for the place of second largest EU country. However, as is shown by a detailed examination of growth components, the two countries do not have the same demographic profile.

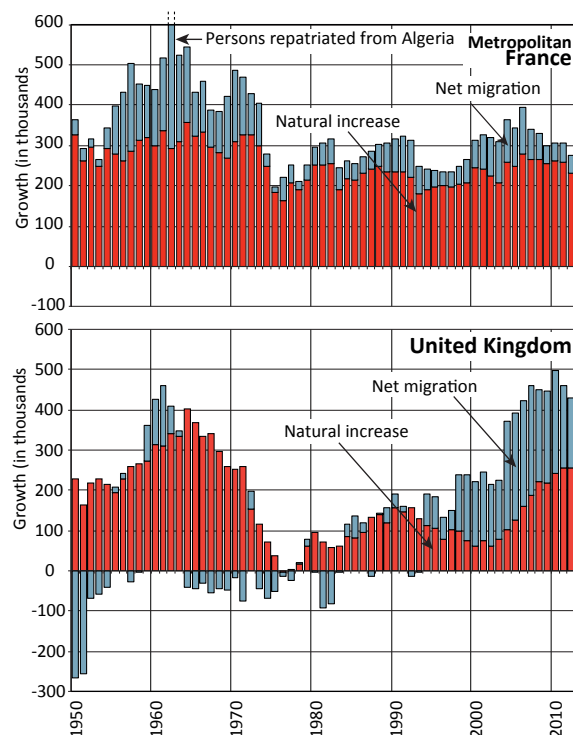
Before analysing current population growth in the two countries, let us take a look at long-term trends. In the mid-eighteenth century, France had four times as many inhabitants as the UK (around 25 million versus 6 million) (Figure 1). In the second half of the eighteenth and throughout the nineteenth century, the UK population gradually caught up [2]. Mortality fell earlier in the UK than in France, while birth rates fell later, resulting in sharply higher population growth for the UK throughout this period. It had caught up with France by 1918, when both countries had nearly 40 million inhabitants. The UK population then continued to rise, and by 1944 it had pulled ahead of France by 10 million (49 million in the UK, 39 million in France).

(1) Average age at birth of first child is 28.3 years.

And then France caught up with the United Kingdom

After the end of World War II, a new period of continuous population growth began in France, at a faster rate than in the UK. Gradually, France narrowed the gap, and by 2000 the populations of the two countries were once again the same, at 59 million. This was due mainly to a level of

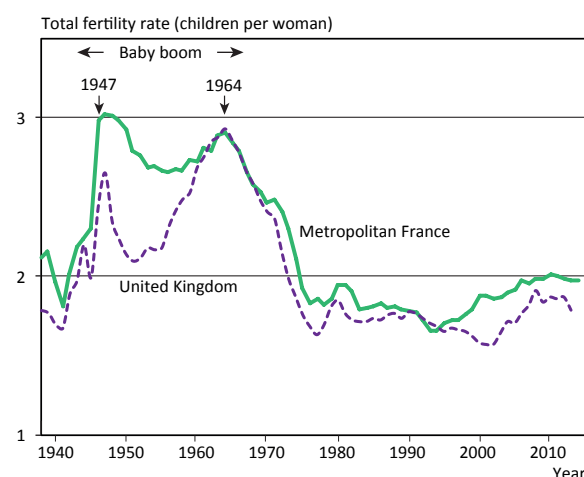
Figure 2. Annual population growth in France and the United Kingdom since 1950



(Gilles Pison, *Population & Societies* 520, INED, March 2015).

Sources: INSEE (France), ONS (United Kingdom), INED Database on developed countries

Figure 3. Fertility trends in France and the United Kingdom since 1938



(Gilles Pison, *Population & Societies* 520, INED, March 2015).

Sources: INSEE (France), ONS (United Kingdom), INED Database on developed countries.

natural increase (births minus deaths) that remained consistently higher in France than in the UK through the second half of the twentieth century (Figure 2).

Like most developed countries, France and the UK experienced the baby boom, a temporary surge in fertility between 1945 and 1964 (Figure 3). The baby boom began and ended at almost the same time, and just as quickly, in both countries. But it was not as strong in the UK as in France, especially early on in the period: the first peak in the UK was 2.7 children per woman in 1947, while in France the figure was 3.0; in 1951 it fell back to 2.1 children for a short time in the UK whereas in France it did not dip below 2.8.

Net migration, which until a few decades ago was sharply higher in France than in the UK, is another factor behind the narrowing of the population gap between the two countries in the second half of the twentieth century. For the nearly 20 years between 1955 and 1973, net migration in France was over 120,000 persons per year on average (Figure 2), to which must be added the approximately 800,000 persons repatriated from Algeria in 1962. Over the same period, in the UK, net migration was practically nil. The difference was due not so much to immigration, which was strong in both countries, as to emigration, which was very low in France, in contrast to the UK where the high numbers of immigrant entries were counterbalanced by similar numbers of emigrant departures.

Population growth fuelled by natural increase in France and net migration in the United Kingdom

Since the 1990s, the populations of France and the UK have been similar, with comparable levels of growth in both countries (Figure 1). But if we examine growth from year to year, distinguishing between the two components of natural increase and net migration, the contrasts become apparent (Figure 2). Growth has been more regular in France in the last 20 years, fluctuating between 230,000 and 400,000 persons annually, whereas in the UK it has varied widely between 130,000 and 500,000 per year. Moreover, until 2003, growth was slower in the United Kingdom than in France, which explains why France moved ahead to become the second most populous EU country. After 2003, however, the UK again took the lead, and France fell back into third place once more. The two growth components have also remained relatively constant in France over the last twenty years, while varying much more in the UK. From 1992 to 2002, natural increase in Britain, already lower than in France, fell back, as did fertility, which dropped to 1.63 children per woman in 2002 (Figure 3). But in the early 2010s, fertility rose above 1.9 children per woman, and the resulting rise in natural increase put the country on a par with France. Furthermore, UK net migration, nil or very low until 1993, greatly increased thereafter, exceeding 200,000 per year from 2004. And despite a sharp increase

Table. Demographic indicators 1950 to 2014, metropolitan France

| | 1950 | 1960 | 1970 | 1980 | 1990 | 2000 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012(p) | 2013(p) | 2014(p) |
|--------------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|---------|---------|---------|
| Births (m) | 858 | 816 | 848 | 800 | 762 | 775 | 797 | 786 | 796 | 793 | 802 | 793 | 790 | 780 | 783 |
| Deaths (m) | 530 | 517 | 540 | 547 | 526 | 531 | 516 | 521 | 532 | 538 | 540 | 535 | 559 | 561 | 544 |
| Natural increase (m) | 328 | 299 | 308 | 253 | 236 | 244 | 280 | 265 | 264 | 255 | 262 | 258 | 232 | 219 | 239 |
| Net migration (m) | 35 | 140 | 180 | 44 | 80 | 70 | 115 | 75 | 67 | 44 | 43 | 50 | 50 | 50 | 45 |
| Total growth (m) | 363 | 439 | 488 | 297 | 316 | 314 | 395 | 340 | 331 | 299 | 305 | 308 | 282 | 269 | 284 |
| Adjustment ⁽¹⁾ (m) | - | - | - | - | - | 94 | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - |
| Birth rate (t) | 20.5 | 17.9 | 16.7 | 14.9 | 13.4 | 13.1 | 12.9 | 12.7 | 12.8 | 12.7 | 12.7 | 12.5 | 12.4 | 12.2 | 12.2 |
| Death rate (t) | 12.7 | 11.3 | 10.6 | 10.2 | 9.3 | 9.0 | 8.4 | 8.4 | 8.5 | 8.6 | 8.6 | 8.5 | 8.8 | 8.8 | 8.5 |
| Infant mortality rate (r) | 51.9 | 27.4 | 18.2 | 10.0 | 7.3 | 4.4 | 3.6 | 3.6 | 3.6 | 3.7 | 3.5 | 3.3 | 3.3 | 3.5 | 3.3 |
| Total fertility rate (e) | 2.93 | 2.73 | 2.47 | 1.94 | 1.78 | 1.87 | 1.98 | 1.96 | 1.99 | 1.99 | 2.02 | 2.00 | 1.99 | 1.97 | 1.98 |
| Life expectancy: | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Male (a) | 63.4 | 67.0 | 68.4 | 70.2 | 72.7 | 75.3 | 77.2 | 77.4 | 77.6 | 77.8 | 78.0 | 78.4 | 78.5 | 78.7 | 79.3 |
| Female (a) | 69.2 | 73.6 | 75.9 | 78.4 | 80.9 | 82.8 | 84.2 | 84.4 | 84.4 | 84.5 | 84.7 | 85.0 | 84.9 | 85.0 | 85.5 |
| Marriages (m) | 331 | 320 | 394 | 334 | 287 | 298 | 267 | 267 | 259 | 245 | 245 | 231 | 240 | 225 | 225 |
| Marriage rate (t) | 7.9 | 7.0 | 7.8 | 6.2 | 5.1 | 5.0 | 4.3 | 4.3 | 4.2 | 3.9 | 3.9 | 3.7 | 3.8 | 3.5 | 3.5 |
| Population ⁽²⁾ (m) | 42,010 | 45,904 | 51,016 | 54,029 | 56,893 | 59,267 | 61,795 | 62,135 | 62,466 | 62,765 | 63,070 | 63,379 | 63,660 | 63,929 | 64,204 |
| Under 20 ⁽²⁾ (m) | 12,556 | 14,665 | 16,748 | 16,419 | 15,632 | 15,068 | 15,315 | 15,338 | 15,369 | 15,407 | 15,440 | 15,485 | 15,534 | 15,606 | 15,674 |
| 65 and over ⁽²⁾ (m) | 4,727 | 5,288 | 6,174 | 7,541 | 8,036 | 9,561 | 10,208 | 10,301 | 10,421 | 10,540 | 10,667 | 10,978 | 11,295 | 11,619 | 11,642 |
| Under 20 ⁽²⁾ % | 29.9 | 31.9 | 32.8 | 30.4 | 27.5 | 25.4 | 24.8 | 24.7 | 24.6 | 24.5 | 24.4 | 24.4 | 24.4 | 24.4 | 24.4 |
| 65 and over ⁽²⁾ % | 11.3 | 11.5 | 12.1 | 14.0 | 14.1 | 16.1 | 16.5 | 16.6 | 16.7 | 16.8 | 16.9 | 17.3 | 17.7 | 18.2 | 18.6 |

(a) years – (e) children per woman – (m) in thousands – (p) provisional – (r) per 1,000 live births – (t) per 1,000 population.

(1) Population estimates for 2000 were adjusted to establish accounting consistency between the 1999 and 2006 censuses (see Vanessa Bellamy and Catherine Beaumel, 2015 [4]).

(2) At year-end.

Source: INSEE. Division des enquêtes et études démographiques (www.insee.fr).

in emigrant departures (an average of over 300,000 per year since 2000), migrant entries increased even more, exceeding half a million per year. In France, on the other hand, entry and exit flows were much smaller and net migration lower. Net migration is thought to have further diminished in the last few years, standing at around 45,000 per year since 2009.[1]

In both countries, fertility rates seem to have weathered the recent economic crisis relatively well, in contrast to many other developed countries where fertility has been falling in the last few years.[3] In France, the total fertility rate has stood firm at nearly 2 children per woman, while in the United Kingdom it fell from 1.92 children per woman in 2012 to 1.84 in 2013 [4] and was probably even lower in 2014. The fertility decline seems to be affecting women of all ages.

The role of family policy

The fall in fertility in the United Kingdom – concomitant with stable, high fertility in France – does not appear to be linked to unemployment, which has been declining in the UK since 2011, in contrast to France where it continued to rise through 2014. But it may be related to new family policies in the United Kingdom which were announced in 2011 and 2012 and came into force in 2013. Reforms include cuts in housing benefits for persons living in a property deemed to be larger than they need under the new criteria (a child under 10 years of age no longer needs his or her own room; a child under 16 can share his or her room with a sibling of the same sex). Family allowances have been capped for certain recipients and abolished for others under new means-testing rules. [4] These changes have led some couples to delay births or to limit their family size. But no detailed studies of the subject have yet been done. In France, in 2014, the government decided to reduce family allowances for the wealthiest households. The effect of this measure on births will only be visible in one to two years' time, but it is unlikely to have a major impact as it only concerns France's wealthiest 12% of families for whom family allowances represent a small percentage of their income.

The decline in births in the UK since 2013 – contrasting with stability in France – suggests that France and the UK may continue to take turns as the EU's second largest

country for a few years yet. In the UK, population growth alternately accelerates and slows down, whereas in France it remains remarkably stable. This growth is fuelled by two components – natural increase and migration – both of which have remained quite constant in France over the last two decades, in contrast to the situation across the Channel.

References

- [1] Vanessa Bellamy and Catherine Beaumel, "Bilan démographique 2014 : des décès moins nombreux", *Insee Première*, 1532, January 2015, www.insee.fr/fr/themes/document.asp?reg_id=0&ref_id=ip1532
- [2] Jacques Vallin et Graziella Caselli, "Quand l'Angleterre rattrapait la France", *Population et Sociétés*, 346, May 1999, 4 p., www.ined.fr/fichier/s_rubrique/18719/pop_et_soc_francais_346.fr.pdf
- [3] Gilles Pison, "Two children per woman in France in 2010: Is French fertility immune to economic crisis?", *Population & Societies*, 476, March 2011, 4 pp. www.ined.fr/fichier/s_rubrique/19144/pesa476.en.pdf
- [4] Office for National Statistics, "Births in England and Wales, 2013", 2014, 12 p., www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171778_371129.pdf

Abstract

In the mid-eighteenth century, the population of France was four times larger than that of the United Kingdom (around 25 million versus 6 million). In the late eighteenth and nineteenth century, population growth was much weaker in France than in the UK, and by 1918 the two populations were the same size (nearly 40 million inhabitants). The UK population then continued to grow, so that by 1944 it was larger than France's by 10 million (49 million versus 39 million). After World War II, France's population gradually recovered, and since the mid-1990s, the two populations have remained fairly similar in size and increased at the same pace. However, recent population growth has been more regular in France and is due primarily to natural increase (births minus deaths), whereas in the UK net migration (the difference between migrant entries and departures) is the main growth factor.