

‘French public opinion and foreign policy’ from the Communauté européenne (July 1964)


Caption: In July 1964, Roland Sadoun, Director of the French Public Opinion Institute (IFOP), outlines French public opinion with regard to France’s foreign policy.

Source: Communauté européenne. Bulletin mensuel d'information. dir. de publ. Fontaine, François ; RRéd. Chef Chastenet, Antoine. Juillet - Août 1964, n° 7-8; 8e année. Paris: Service d'Information des Communautés européennes. "L'opinion publique française et la politique étrangère", auteur:Sadoun, Roland , p. 6.

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French public opinion and foreign policy

by Roland Sadoun, Director of the French Institute of Public Opinion

Foreign policy is now one of the major areas of concern for the French public when they are asked about the problems which their country faces today. It is a subject which is nearly as important as prices and salaries.

Many interesting facts emerge from the regular studies undertaken by FIPO. We shall draw some conclusions therefrom, without trying to cover every aspect of foreign policy in this article, nor in any way hoping to provide a detailed analysis of attitudes which sometimes show very subtle differences and are, at times, contradictory.

We may, however, first of all conclude that France's foreign policy meets with the approval of a large majority of the French people.

Two sets of results reinforce this view:

– 40 % of French people are satisfied with France's foreign policy; 21 % are dissatisfied; 31 % don't know. The satisfied have a large lead over the dissatisfied, especially amongst women, tradespeople, employees and those not in paid employment.

– In May 1964, nearly one out of two French people said that they approved the country's foreign policy. One out of four disapproved. These figures become especially meaningful if one compares them to the views held on economic policy, where disapproval greatly outweighs approval.

It must be noted, however, that views are equally divided over whether France should aim to be a leading world power in the future or whether it should be satisfied with a more low-key role.

Desire for independence

More than one out of two French people are opposed to a world divided into two blocs and would like France to be independent of both the Soviet Union and the United States.

This goes a long way towards explaining the strong desire for a completely independent, united Europe rather than a Europe with strong ties to the United States.

These opinions are partly the result of the French belief that there is now a reasonable balance of power between East and West. This does not exclude the fact that **there is still a relative majority in favour of closer links between France and NATO.**

But all these wishes for independence as part of certain alliances do not, of course, exclude the possibility of closer links with other countries around the world.

It must be stressed that, for the last ten years, the French opinion of the other major powers has continually improved.

West Germany

is at the top of the list of countries of which the French approve (53 %), whereas, in 1956, the figure was 12 %. Today, attitudes towards Chancellor Erhard are more favourable than those towards Chancellor Adenauer just before he retired. The Franco-German Treaty of Cooperation signed in 1963 was deemed to be a big step towards the unification of Europe.

Our best ally: the United States

The United States

is held to be France's best ally, coming way ahead of West Germany and Great Britain.

Favourable opinions towards the United States have also improved significantly in the last 10 years, reaching 52 %. The popularity in France of President Kennedy and some aspects of his major policies explain this phenomenon to a large extent. But there is a real fear in France that the strength of the American economy will impede growth in France and the rest of Europe.

Great Britain

has lost the lead that it held since 1956 as regards approval by the French. Today, 43 % of French people have a good opinion of Great Britain, but for a while now Germany has become the preferred ally.

The USSR

has, for the first time in 10 years, as many supporters as opponents amongst the French. Although a relative majority feel that the fundamental interests of France and the USSR are different, a treaty of cooperation between the two countries would be very popular.

If one wishes to draw any major conclusions from these facts, one might say that current French foreign policy is very popular. It would be interesting, however, to find out how much of this popularity relates to spontaneous and deep-seated beliefs and how much is the result of the influence of policies that have gained acceptance only after a certain amount of reflection.