Historically, French people were mainly of Celtic-Gallic origin, with a significant admixture of Italic (Romans) and Germanic (Franks) groups reflecting centuries of respective migration and settlement.[236] Through the course of the Middle Ages, France incorporated various neighbouring ethnic and linguistic groups, as evidenced by Breton elements in the west, Aquitanian in the southwest, Scandinavian in the northwest, Alemannic in the northeast, and Ligurian in the southeast.

Large-scale immigration over the last century and a half have led to a more multicultural society; beginning with the French Revolution and further codified in the French Constitution of 1958, the government is prohibited from collecting data on ethnicity and ancestry; most demographic information is drawn from private sector organisations or academic institutions. In 2004, the Institut Montaigne estimated that within Metropolitan France, 51 million people were White (85% of the population), 6 million were Northwest African (10%), 2 million were Black (3.3%), and 1 million were Asian (1.7%).[237][238]

A 2008 poll conducted jointly by the nstitut national d'études démographiques and the French National Institute of Statistics[239][240] estimated that the largest minority ancestry groups were Italian (5 million), followed by Northwest African (3–6 million),[241][242][243] Sub-Saharan African (2.5 million), Armenian (500,000), and Turkish (200,000).[244] There are also sizeable minorities of other European ethnic groups, namely Spanish, Portuguese, Polish, and Greek.[241][245][246] France has a significant Gitan (Romani) population, numbering between 20,000 and 400,000;[247] many foreign Roma are expelled back to Bulgaria and Romania frequently.[248]

It is currently estimated that 40% of the French population is descended at least partially from the different waves of immigration since the early 20th century;[249] between 1921 and 1935 alone, about 1.1 million net immigrants came to France.[250] The next largest wave came in the 1960s when around 1.6 million pieds noirs returned to France following the independence of its Northwest African possessions, Algeria and Morocco.[251][252] They were joined by numerous former colonial subjects from North and West Africa, as well as numerous European immigrants from Spain and Portugal.

France remains a major destination for immigrants, accepting about 200,000 legal immigrants annually.[253] In 2005, it was Western Europe's leading recipient of asylum seekers, with an estimated 50,000 applications (albeit a 15% decrease from 2004).[254] In 2010, France received about 48,100 asylum applications—placing it among the top five asylum recipients in the world.[255] In subsequent years it saw the number of applications increase, ultimately doubling to 100,412 in 2017.[256] The European Union allows free movement between the member states, although France established controls to curb Eastern European migration.[citation needed] Foreigners' rights are established in the Code of Entry and Residence of Foreigners and of the Right to Asylum. Immigration remains a contentious political issue.[257]

In 2008, the INSEE (National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies) estimated that the total number of foreign-born immigrants was around 5 million (8% of the population), while their French-born descendants numbered 6.5 million, or 11% of the population. Thus, nearly a fifth of the country's population were either first or second-generation immigrants, of which more than 5 million were of European origin and 4 million of Maghrebi ancestry.[258][259][260] In 2008, France granted citizenship to 137,000 persons, mostly from Morocco, Algeria and Turkey.[261] In 2022, more than 320,000 migrants came to France, with the majority coming from Africa.[262]

In 2014, the INSEE reported a significant increase in the number of immigrants coming from Spain, Portugal and Italy between 2009 and 2012. According to the institute, this increase resulted from the financial crisis that hit several European countries in that period.[263] Statistics on Spanish immigrants in France show a growth of 107 per cent between 2009 and 2012, with the population growing from 5,300 to 11,000.[263] Of the total of 229,000 foreigners coming to France in 2012, nearly 8% were Portuguese, 5% British, 5% Spanish, 4% Italian, 4% German, 3% Romanian, and 3% Belgian.[263]

The official language of France is French,[264] a Romance language derived from Latin. Since 1635, the Académie française has been France's official authority on the French language, although its recommendations carry no legal weight. There are also regional languages spoken in France, such as Occitan, Breton, Catalan, Flemish (Dutch dialect), Alsatian (German dialect), Basque, and Corsican (Italian dialect). Italian was the official language of Corsica until 9 May 1859.[265]

The Government of France does not regulate the choice of language in publications by individuals, but the use of French is required by law in commercial and workplace communications. In addition to mandating the use of French in the territory of the Republic, the French government tries to promote French in the European Union and globally through institutions such as the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie. Besides French, there exist 77 vernacular minority languages of France, eight spoken in French metropolitan territory and 69 in the French overseas territories.  
  
  
  
According to the 2007 Adult Education survey, part of a project by the European Union and carried out in France by the INSEE and based on a sample of 15,350 persons, French was the native language of 87.2% of the total population, or roughly 55.81 million people, followed by Arabic (3.6%, 2.3 million), Portuguese (1.5%, 960,000), Spanish (1.2%, 770,000) and Italian (1.0%, 640,000). Native speakers of other languages made up the remaining 5.2% of the population.[266]