# People of France

## Ethnic groups

The [French](https://www.britannica.com/topic/French-people) are, paradoxically, strongly conscious of belonging to a single nation, but they hardly [constitute](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/constitute) a unified [ethnic group](https://www.britannica.com/topic/ethnic-group) by any scientific gauge. Before the official discovery of the Americas at the end of the 15th century, France, located on the western extremity of the Old World, was regarded for centuries by Europeans as being near the edge of the known world. Generations of different migrants traveling by way of the Mediterranean from the [Middle East](https://www.britannica.com/place/Middle-East) and [Africa](https://www.britannica.com/place/Africa) and through Europe from [Central Asia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Central-Asia) and the Nordic lands settled permanently in France, forming a variegated grouping, almost like a series of geologic [strata](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/strata), since they were unable to migrate any farther. Perhaps the oldest reflection of these migrations is furnished by the [Basque](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Basque) people, who live in an isolated area west of the [Pyrenees](https://www.britannica.com/place/Pyrenees) in both [Spain](https://www.britannica.com/place/Spain) and France, who speak a [language](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Basque-language) unrelated to other European languages, and whose origin remains unclear. The Celtic tribes, known to the Romans as [Gaul](https://www.britannica.com/place/Gaul-ancient-region-Europe)s, spread from central [Europe](https://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-Europe) in the period 500 bce–500 ce to provide [France](https://www.britannica.com/place/France) with a major component of its population, especially in the centre and west. At the fall of the [Roman Empire](https://www.britannica.com/place/Roman-Empire), there was a powerful penetration of [Germanic](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Germanic-peoples) (Teutonic) peoples, especially in northern and eastern France. The incursion of the Norsemen ([Vikings](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Viking-people)) brought further Germanic influence. In addition to these many migrations, France was, over the centuries, the field of numerous battles and of prolonged occupations before becoming, in the 19th and especially in the 20th century, the prime recipient of foreign immigration into Europe, adding still other mixtures to the ethnic melting pot.

## Languages

[French](https://www.britannica.com/topic/French-language) is the national language, spoken and taught everywhere. Brogues and [dialects](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dialects) are widespread in rural areas, however, and many people tend to conserve their regional linguistic customs either through tradition or through a voluntary and deliberate return to a specific regional [dialect](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dialect). This tendency is strongest in the frontier areas of France. In the eastern and northern part of the [country](https://www.britannica.com/topic/nation-state), Alsatian and Flemish ([Dutch](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Dutch-language)) are [Germanic languages](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Germanic-languages); in the south, [Occitan](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Occitan-language) (Provençal or Languedoc), Corsican, and [Catalan](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Catalan-language) show the influence of Latin. [Breton](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Breton-language) is a [Celtic language](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Celtic-languages) related to languages spoken in some western parts of the [British Isles](https://www.britannica.com/place/British-Isles) (notably Wales), and [Basque](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Basque-language) is a language isolate. Following the introduction of universal [primary education](https://www.britannica.com/topic/elementary-education) during the [Third Republic](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Third-Republic-French-history) in 1872, the use of regional languages was rigorously repressed in the interest of national unity, and pupils using them were punished. More recently, in reaction to the rise in regional [sentiment](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sentiment), these languages have been introduced in a number of schools and universities, primarily because some of them, such as Occitan, Basque, and Breton, have maintained a literary tradition. Recent immigration has introduced various non-European languages, notably [Arabic](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Arabic-language).

## Religion of France

About three-fifths of the French people belong to the [Roman Catholic Church](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Roman-Catholicism). Only a minority, however, regularly participate in religious worship; practice is greatest among the middle classes. The northwest (Brittany-Vendée), the east (Lorraine, [Vosges](https://www.britannica.com/place/Vosges-massif-France), [Alsace](https://www.britannica.com/place/Alsace), Jura, [Lyonnais](https://www.britannica.com/place/Lyonnais), and the northern Alps), the north (Flanders), the [Basque Country](https://www.britannica.com/place/Basque-Country-region-France), and the region south of the [Massif Central](https://www.britannica.com/place/Massif-Central) have a higher percentage of practicing Roman Catholics than the rest of the [country](https://www.britannica.com/topic/nation-state). Recruitment of priests has become more difficult, even though the church, historically [autonomous](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/autonomous), is very progressive and [ecumenical](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ecumenical).Reflecting the presence of immigrants from [North Africa](https://www.britannica.com/place/North-Africa), [Algeria](https://www.britannica.com/place/Algeria), and [Morocco](https://www.britannica.com/place/Morocco), France has one of [Europe’s](https://www.britannica.com/place/Europe) largest Muslim populations: an estimated 5,000,000 Muslims, a sizable percentage of them living in and around [Marseille](https://www.britannica.com/place/Marseille) in southeastern France, as well as in [Paris](https://www.britannica.com/place/Paris) and [Lyon](https://www.britannica.com/place/Lyon-France). Protestants, who number 700,000, belong to several different denominations. They are numerous in Alsace, in the northern Jura, in the southeastern Massif Central, and in the central Atlantic region. There are more than 700,000 adherents of Judaism, concentrated in Greater Paris, Marseille, and Alsace and the large eastern towns. In addition to the religious groups, there also are several societies of freethinkers, of which the most famous is the French Masonry. Large numbers, however, especially among the working classes and young population, profess no religious belief.In the early 21st century the government approved a number of measures that reflected both France’s dedication to being a [secular](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/secular) state, a principle known as *laïcité*, as well as the [ambivalence](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ambivalence) and, in some cases, hostility felt by some French toward the country’s large Muslim population. In 2004 the government banned Muslim head scarves and other religious symbols in state schools. Additional controversial legislation passed in 2010 prohibited face-concealing garments—i.e., veils that fully covered a woman’s face—in public places.

# Settlement patterns

Rural landscape and settlement

Centuries of human [adaptation](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/adaptation) of the various [environments](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/environments) of France have produced varied patterns of rural landscape. Scholars have traditionally made an initial contrast between areas of enclosed land (*bocage*), usually associated with zones of high rainfall and heavy soils, and areas of open-field land (*campagne*), generally associated with level and well-drained plains and plateaus. Two other patterns have evolved in the Mediterranean region and in the mountains.

## [***Bocage***](https://www.britannica.com/topic/bocage-district-France)

In its classic form, [*bocage*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/bocage-district-France) is found in [Brittany](https://www.britannica.com/place/Brittany-region-France), where small fields are surrounded by drainage ditches and high earthen banks, from which grow impenetrable hedges arching over narrow sunken lanes. Similarly enclosed land is found elsewhere, however, notably on the northern, western, and southern [fringes](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/fringes) of the [Paris Basin](https://www.britannica.com/place/Paris-Basin), such as in [Normandy](https://www.britannica.com/place/Normandy), as well as in the western and northern parts of the [Massif Central](https://www.britannica.com/place/Massif-Central), parts of [Aquitaine](https://www.britannica.com/place/Aquitaine), and the Pyrenean region. At higher levels hedges may be replaced by stone walls. Settlement mostly takes the form of hamlets and isolated farms.

## [**Open-field**](https://www.britannica.com/topic/open-field-system)

The greatest extent of open-field land is found in the Paris Basin and in northern and eastern France, but there are pockets of it elsewhere. The landscape typically lacks hedges or fences; instead, the bewildering pattern of small strips and blocks of land is defined by small boundary stones. The land of one farmer may be [dispersed](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/dispersed) in parcels scattered over a wide area. The land is predominantly arable, and the farmsteads are traditionally grouped into villages, which may be irregularly clustered or, as in [Lorraine](https://www.britannica.com/place/Lorraine-region-France), linear in form.

## Mediterranean

The generally block-shaped Mediterranean lowland parcels normally are not enclosed or are enclosed only by rough stone banks. However, in areas where delicate crops would be exposed to wind damage, there are screens of willows and tall reeds. Hillsides are frequently terraced, although much of this land type has been abandoned except in areas of intensive cultivation, such as the flower-growing region around [Grasse](https://www.britannica.com/place/Grasse). A very large farmhouse built on three floors is characteristic of wine-growing and sheep-raising regions, such as [Provence](https://www.britannica.com/place/Provence-region-France). Rural population was formerly often clustered at high elevations, both for defense and in order to be above the malarial plains. In modern times there has been a move to more convenient lowland locations.

## Mountain

In the high mountains and especially in the [Alps](https://www.britannica.com/place/Alps), there is the contrast between the *adrets*, the sunny and [cultivated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cultivated) valley slopes, and the *ubacs*, the cold and humid slopes covered with forests. The variety of vegetation on the slopes of the mountains is remarkable. Cultivated fields and grasslands are found in the depths of the valleys, followed in ascending order by orchards on the first sunny embankments, then forests, Alpine pastures, bare rocks, and, finally, permanent snow. A unique aspect of the mountain [environment](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/environment) is that Alpine villages of the lower valley sides were often combined with *chalets* (*burons* in the Massif Central), temporary dwellings used by those tending flocks on summer pastures above the tree line.

## Postwar transformation

After [World War II](https://www.britannica.com/event/World-War-II) the French government instituted a program of consolidation, whereby the scattered parcels of individual farmers were grouped into larger blocks that would accommodate heavier, mechanized cultivation. Initially progress was greatest in the open-field areas, particularly the Paris Basin, where there were few physical obstacles to the process. Subsequent extension to *bocage* areas had more severe consequences for landscape values and ecology, as hedges, sunken lanes, and ponds disappeared in favour of a new open landscape. At the same time, the vast numbers of people abandoning agricultural pursuits enormously changed the nature of rural settlement. Particularly in the more attractive areas, abandoned farms were purchased as second homes or for retirement. Where [alternative](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/alternative) employment was available, rural people stayed and became commuters, transforming barns and stables for other uses, such as garages. On the fringes of the expanding city regions, new houses and housing subdivisions for urban commuters were built in the villages, markedly changing their character.

## [**Urban**](https://www.britannica.com/topic/urban-planning) **settlement**

The primacy of Paris as the predominant urban centre of France is well known. After World War II the French government had an ambivalent attitude toward the development of the urban structure. On the one hand there was the desire to see Paris emerge as the effective capital of Europe, and on the other there was the policy of creating “métropoles d’equilibre,” through which cities such as Lille, Bordeaux, and Marseille would become growth poles of regional development. Even more evident was the unplanned urbanization of small and medium-size towns related to spontaneous industrial decentralization from Paris, such as that along the Loire valley, or to retirement migration, such as that along the coastlands of southern France.

# Demographic trends

## Population history

In 1801 France was the most populous nation in [Europe](https://www.britannica.com/place/Europe), containing about one-sixth of the continent’s inhabitants. By 1936 the French population had increased by 50 percent, but in the same period the number of people in [Italy](https://www.britannica.com/place/Italy) and [Germany](https://www.britannica.com/place/Germany) had nearly trebled, and in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands the population had nearly quadrupled. The marked difference in [population growth](https://www.britannica.com/science/population-growth) between France and some of its neighbours up to the 1940s was attributed to a falling [birth rate](https://www.britannica.com/science/birth-rate). At the same time, the [mortality](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/mortality) rate in France began its decline somewhat later than in other advanced European countries, not falling until the close of the 19th century. The birth rate was particularly affected by the practice of French peasants who deliberately limited their families in order to reduce the effect of a Napoleonic law that required the splitting of the family holdings among all heirs. Other factors may have included the rise of bourgeois [individualism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/individualism) following the French [Revolution of 1789](https://www.britannica.com/event/French-Revolution), the decline of Roman Catholic observance (especially among the political left), and the lack of economic opportunity in the interwar years. Population growth was, of course, adversely affected by wars, including the [wars of the Revolution](https://www.britannica.com/event/French-revolutionary-wars); the wars of the First Empire; the [Franco-German War](https://www.britannica.com/event/Franco-German-War) (1870–71); [World War I](https://www.britannica.com/event/World-War-I) (1914–18), which cost France more than 1,500,000 lives; and [World War II](https://www.britannica.com/event/World-War-II) (1939–45), which reduced the population by 600,000.The deficit in national growth was so drastic by 1938 that France began to give [monetary](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/monetary) and other material benefits to families with children. The policy appears to have been effective, because a rise in the birth rate occurred even during the difficult years of Nazi occupation and [Vichy France](https://www.britannica.com/event/Vichy-France), culminating in the postwar [baby boom](https://www.britannica.com/topic/baby-boom-human-population) years, when soldiers and prisoners returned to a climate of economic optimism. The relative youth and high fertility of immigrants also contributed to the upsurge in the birth rate, which was coupled with a decline in mortality rates, attributable to improved [public health](https://www.britannica.com/topic/public-health) facilities and social welfare programs.In the second half of the 20th century, the high birth rate slowed, and about 1974 it fell into a sharp decline, eventually reaching a point insufficient for the long-term maintenance of the population. Since midcentury, because of a corresponding decline in the [death rate](https://www.britannica.com/science/mortality-demography), the rate of natural increase (balance of births against deaths) has remained positive, though in decline. By the early 21st century, France had an average population increase of roughly 300,000 people each year. These changes were not exceptional to France; the same postwar pattern was largely paralleled in neighbouring countries. A number of factors [combined](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/combined) to reduce the birth rate, among them the introduction of the contraceptive pill and the new preference for smaller families.

## [**Emigration**](https://www.britannica.com/topic/emigration)

Unlike many of its neighbours, France has never been a major source of international migrants. In the 17th century, because of religious persecution, France lost more than 400,000 [Huguenot](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Huguenot) refugees—often highly skilled—mainly to Prussia, England, Holland, and [America](https://www.britannica.com/place/United-States). The same century saw the beginning of emigration; relatively small numbers of emigrants settled at first in [North America](https://www.britannica.com/place/North-America), notably in eastern [Canada](https://www.britannica.com/place/Canada) (Quebec) and in Louisiana, in certain parts of Latin America that are still *départements* of France (Martinique, [Guadeloupe](https://www.britannica.com/place/Guadeloupe), and French Guiana), and later in various countries of Africa and [Asia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Asia) that were parts of France’s colonial [domain](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/domain). Since decolonialization, whether forced or voluntary, many have returned to France, but others have remained overseas, either in business or in programs of technical and cultural cooperation in most of the former French territories, notably in Africa. Small numbers of French, especially from [Brittany](https://www.britannica.com/place/Brittany-region-France) and [Normandy](https://www.britannica.com/place/Normandy), continue to relocate to Canada, and a number of Basques go to [Argentina](https://www.britannica.com/place/Argentina).