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Inside the minds of French citizens: a survey on the perceptions of the social contract

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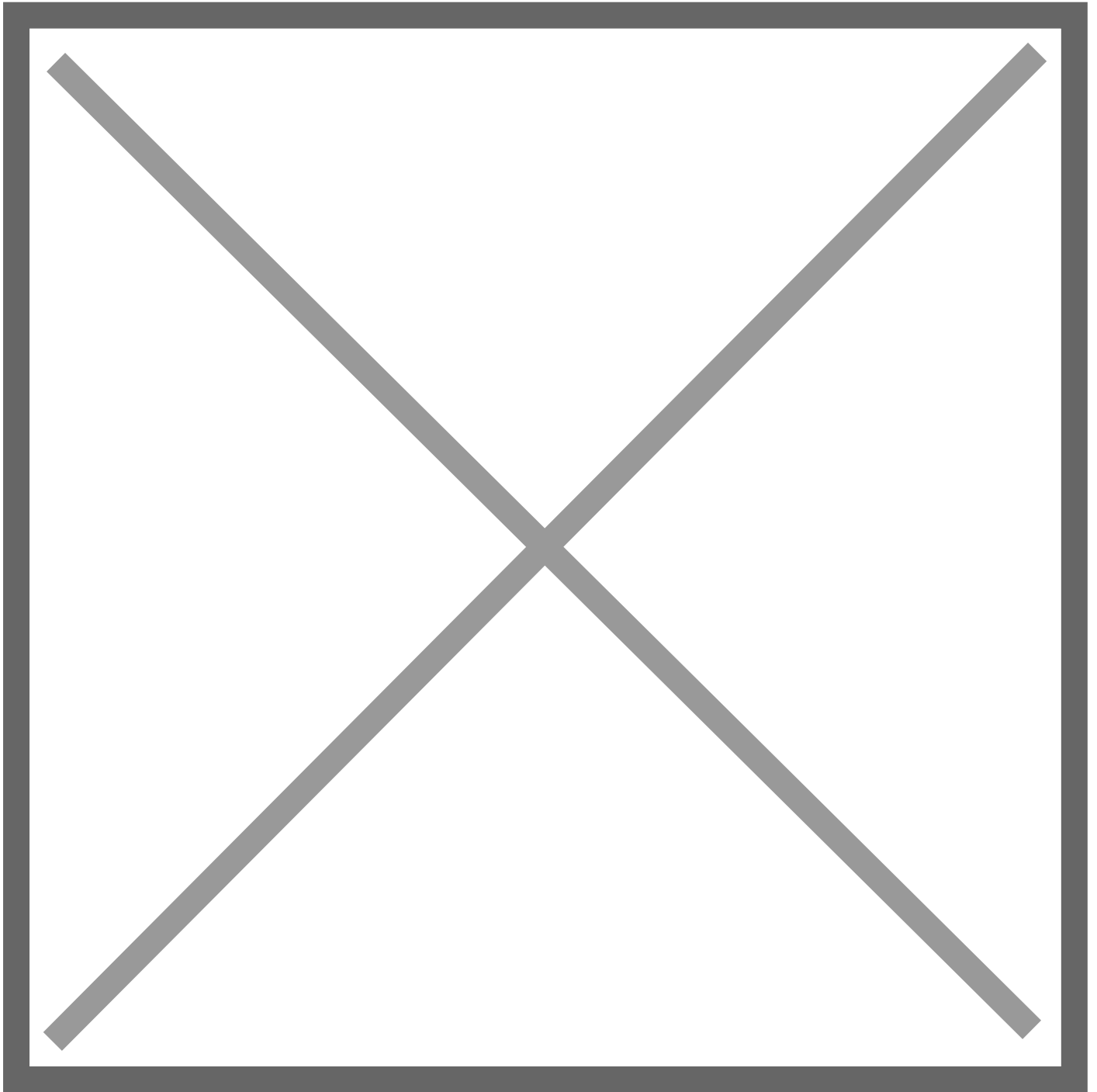


The latest European and legislative elections in France seem to indicate that a deep malaise runs through society. Could this context, marked by numerous political crises and social tensions, mean that our current social contract has run its course? The implementation of the ecological transition cannot avoid this question, and it is to this issue that the research project led by IDDRI is devoted. This blog post summarizes the main findings of a two-month [survey](#) with French citizens, the second part of this project - following the publication of the report [Towards a 21st century social contract: how did we get here?](#)

Today's political landscape seems to be structured around three opposing visions, each of which in its own way defines a desirable future social contract: one that is committed to maintaining the status quo, and therefore preserving our current social contract; one that affirms the need for a transformation in favour of a more sustainable

and egalitarian society; and finally, an authoritarian and identity-based vision, driven by the promise of order and national preference.

Today, more than ever, if the ecological transition is to embody a genuine project for society and translate into political implementation commensurate with today's challenges, it must be considered in the context of this struggle between visions and through the lens of the social contract. In the [report published in June 2024](#), IDDRI drew up a historical review of our common pacts and a framework for reflection conducive to the collective reworking of our social contract.



Note: this figure represents our understanding of the current social contract. The space that unfolds around the four pacts is the one where citizens are supposed to achieve autonomy and cultivate the 'good life'. The four pacts (Work, Democracy, Security, Consumption) all express the same logic: 'We accept the current system of democracy, security, consumption and work in spite of its drawbacks, provided that we obtain sufficient benefits from it'.

What do French citizens think of the social contract?

This is what we at IDDRI wanted to find out by conducting interviews between February and March 2024, to gain access to the experiences, aspirations and disillusionment of citizens with regard to the current social contract. In the course of this research, we asked ourselves three questions: will the participants of these interviews rely on a contractual logic (cost/compensation; gains/benefits; rights/duty; etc.) to shape their social and collective life? How are the four main pacts we have identified (Consumption, Democracy, Work, Safety) perceived and evaluated? Finally, through what narratives and counter-narratives do the participants relate to these pacts?

20 French men and women answered our questions; they were chosen to obtain an equal sample, characterized by geographical diversity (urban, rural, suburban, etc.), political, professional (different positions in the division of labour; diversity in the degree of autonomy at work), cultural, socio-economic (with a greater representation of the middle classes). For 1.5 hours, the participants talked about their life course, their education, their first job, their day-to-day working practices, their consumer habits and their relationship with voting or current political life. We chose not to address ecological issues during the discussion, since this first phase of research was devoted to exploring social pacts and qualifying the current social contract, as they are inherited from the past and shape our expectations.¹ It is only in the next phase that IDDRI will incorporate these transition issues into its exploration.

Connecting the individual and the collective

Contrary to what one might think, getting individuals to talk about their day-to-day lives and intimate experiences was a fruitful way of tackling major collective issues, as the participants in the interviews were very aware of the intricacies between individual and political dimensions. Like Sarah, a school teacher from a modest background, who explains her success in graduating by the solidarity schemes she benefited from as a young student. The opposite is true of Fred, a paramedic, who says that he experienced loneliness and social insecurity when he became unemployed, so inadequate was the support offered by Pôle Emploi (French governmental job agency). These intimate statements illustrate the ability of individuals to assign a social cause to their experiences, and sometimes to measure the discrepancy between the promises and collective narratives in which they believed, and their actual trajectory—which for some was disappointing. These testimonies all add up to a particularly dense and rich body of empirical material, crucial to the development of a new social contract.

Exploring the social contract through life courses

The first lesson to be learned from this survey is that exploring people's life stories is a good way of discussing social issues—which is also a lesson for future deliberative exercises: exploring individual experiences has in fact led participants to express a contractual logic (even though this lexicon was deliberately omitted from our questions), by regularly referring to the socio-economic realities of their lives through a rights/duty, gains/compensations prism. This is the case, for example, of Stan, a logistics manager, who says that he is so suspicious of social assistance in France that solidarity has become contractual: to receive a benefit, he tells us, is to commit oneself to being accountable to the State one day or another. The participants also spoke of a series of collective promises in which they believed, or which serve as references in their perception of social justice. This is the case for Florian, who describes a feeling of being downgraded, which is disappointing in relation to the promise of an increasingly prosperous life as the generations go by; or Thomas, a farm worker, who notes that the promise of the social mobility is in reality a fiction.

The social contract is not being 'fulfilled'

The second lesson to be learned from this phase of the interviews is that there is a widespread feeling among the participants that the social contract is not being ‘fulfilled’, that the situation has deteriorated—a deterioration that the participants explain in different ways, depending on their political views and social situation. This observation is not only shared by those who suffer from the current social contract: a police officer, for example, who was confident about the stability of his status, expressed concern about the downgrading and precariousness of essential workers (particularly in the care sector), and of a certain fringe of the population who no longer have access to home ownership, unlike the older generation.

One thing is certain: institutions, decision-makers and all those involved in deliberation must create the conditions for a collective discussion which, by exploring life courses, leads citizens to link their individual trajectories to the collective arrangements they lack, as well as to the common pacts we may desire. In our view, this survey is a first step towards such a democratic and social dialogue.

¹ See our [report published in June 2024](#), in which we explain that the ecological transition imperative is colliding with long-term social arrangements (giving rise to the emergence of a number of social tensions and revolts, such as the Gilets jaunes movement), which we therefore need to explore and qualify before considering the question of the transition as such.

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