French Public Opinion and the Algerian War:
A Research Note

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Historical writing of the kind which asserts that “Most, some or few of the French believed, thought or supported X, Y, or Z” has often been based on a highly selective reading of the press, sometimes on the perceptions of a handful of well-educated contemporary observers, sometimes on guesswork. Several well-known studies of public opinion in nineteenth-century France have relied on the reports to the government in Paris of the prefects and the procureurs-généraux.¹

Few historians of twentieth-century France have made use of the studies of the professional opinion samplers, despite the wealth of data that they have collected. Jean Stoetzel, for many years a professor at the Sorbonne, established the Institut français d’Opinion publique (IFOP), the first survey research organization in France, in 1938, two years after George Gallup founded in the United States the Opinion Research Corporation. IFOP, which published in 1939 the results of its first survey, on attitudes toward the Munich crisis (of which no historian, so far as I am aware, has yet made use), remains a private organization, but in recent years it has conducted a number of studies for the French government on such diverse questions as educational reform and the liberalization of the laws on abortion. Scholars are permitted access to the raw data on which IFOP’s surveys are based; inquiries may be made to the headquarters of the organization, 20, rue d’Aumale, Paris 9e. American students of France are fortunate to have in their midst the Roper Public Opinion Research Center. Established at Williams College in 1946, the Roper Center has in its collection, on

magnetic tape, the raw data of approximately 300 IFOP surveys conducted from October 1947 through June 1974.2

Poll-takers are preoccupied with their own times; they make still photographs of the opinions of their contemporaries. But if historians gather together series of these still photographs they can make motion pictures—studies of the evolution of opinion over time. A pioneering example is Jean Charlot's recent *De Gaulle et les français.* IFOP began querying the French about de Gaulle in 1946 and kept after them until his death in 1970. By then, a remarkably full record of how his countrymen perceived the central figure of their history in this century had been compiled. Charlot drew on this evidence in order to give a quantitative base to a subject that had rested on guesswork. His study adds an important dimension to the literature on de Gaulle.

The Algerian War affords another good case study of the possibilities of public opinion polls as historical evidence. The war has been portrayed as the final agony in the retreat from empire, and indeed it was a passionate and painful experience: for the guerrillas of the FLN and the political activists among the French officer corps; for those who campaigned against the army's methods of repression and for those who saw in the loss of empire an unbearable loss of face; for those whom opposition to the war drove to establish underground networks of support for the FLN and those whom devotion to the cause of a French Algeria drove to arson and murder.4 All these groups expressed their views in print and in deeds. But in order to ascertain the opinion of the mainland French, those who stood outside the circle of contending minorities, one must resort either to the art of surprise or to the public opinion polls. Indeed, aside from the career of Charles de Gaulle and the state of the French economy, between 1945 and 1963 IFOP gave no subject more attention. Its findings were

2 Queries on the holdings of the Roper Center should be addressed to the Director, Professor Philip K. Hastings, Williams College, Williamstown, Massachusetts 01267. The center provides duplicate tapes to researchers who wish to analyze the data at their home institutions; it also provides a search and retrieval service. The center lists recent acquisitions in its *Newsletter.*


published in its quarterly (now monthly) journal, Sondages. The purpose of this essay is to suggest what these polls reveal.

French opinion was slow to awake to the severity of the Algerian crisis. In late 1955, a year after the outbreak of the insurrection, and on the eve of elections to the National Assembly, only 25 per cent of those queried said that they believed the troubles in North Africa were the most serious the nation faced. The awakening came in the winter and spring of 1956, when the government of Guy Mollet, who had campaigned on a promise to negotiate a settlement in Algeria, instead intensified the repression. By the summer of 1956, when the government had committed itself to the use of large numbers of conscripts in the struggle against the guerrillas of the FLN, those who regarded Algeria as the main problem confronting the nation soared to 67 per cent.

If the mainland French recognized the gravity of the crisis in Algeria, they did not have much confidence in the capacity of governments of the Fourth Republic to resolve it. Indeed, in a poll of July 1956, four in ten blamed the French government for the deterioration in the French position. In the spring and summer of 1956 only 37 to 38 per cent expressed confidence in the government’s handling of the war. That almost half (45 per cent) opposed sending the majority of available conscripts to Algeria suggests that an intensification of the policy of repression had little support. By September 1957, nine months before the outbreak of the crisis that brought Charles de Gaulle to power, expressions of confidence in the government’s Algerian policy had dropped to one in four of those queried; 43 per cent expressed no confidence.

That the Fourth Republic inspired little confidence hardly comes as a surprise. On this issue the IFOP polls merely confirm the impression that observers held from the birth of the Republic to its death. What is less well known is how pessimistically the mainland

8 Ibid., p. 25.
11 See, for example, Herbert Luethy’s now classic essay, France against Herself (New York, 1955); also Jacques Julliard, La Quatrième République (Paris, 1969); Philip M.
French viewed the long-range prospects of the French position in Algeria. Between April 1956 and January 1958, in response to the question whether Algeria would be French ten years hence, those who answered affirmatively fluctuated between 19 and 32 per cent; those who believed it would not between 22 and 37 per cent. Half of those interviewed in January 1958 replied "perhaps." The return to power of General de Gaulle caused a surge of optimism—42 per cent believed that in ten years Algeria would still be French, and the doubters dropped to 18 per cent. Still, uncertainty on the question remained pronounced.

IFOP queried the French on their preferences with regard to Algeria as well as on their expectations. Between the outbreak of the insurrection and early 1956 most said that they preferred the maintenance of Algeria's departmental status, an arrangement which reflected the fiction that North Africa was no less French than Brittany. Nevertheless, a preference for less close ties gained ground, and by March 1957 the two options each had an equal number of adherents. Still, the FLN's solution to the Algerian problem—independence—appealed in July 1957 to only 18 per cent of those polled. Between August 1958 and February 1959, however, the dominant tendency in French opinion, 41 against 36 and then 51 against 29 per cent, respectively, agreed with the proposition that sooner or later it would be necessary to grant independence to Algeria. And by late August 1961, 58 per cent were certain that Algeria would be independent, against only 4 per cent who still believed it would remain French.

The ultra settlers and their friends in metropolitan France expected the discovery of oil in the Sahara in 1956 to strengthen the French resolve to remain in Algeria. But when in the fall of 1957 IFOP inquired whether the mainland French would advise a friend or relative to invest in the exploitation of the Saharan reserves, only 31 per cent replied that they would. Nor did confidence in de Gaulle's  

leadership restore confidence in the future of the French presence. The so-called Constantine Plan, an ambitious program for the rapid modernization of Algeria, announced with considerable fanfare in 1959, met with little enthusiasm. Only 27 per cent of those queried believed that the plan had much chance of success; 40 per cent thought the odds ranged from rather poor to nonexistent.18

Pessimism on the prospects of the Constantine Plan may have reflected a lack of enthusiasm about paying the bills for it. Certainly, a large proportion of the mainland French were not willing to pay more taxes in order to maintain French rule in Algeria. In July 1956 half of them (51 per cent) opposed a tax increase to meet the costs of the war.19

If the pocketbooks of the metropolitan French were not on the side of a French Algeria, neither were their hearts. Indeed, in the 124 years between the establishment of the French foothold and the outbreak of the insurrection in 1954 the relationship between North Africa and the mainland had been marked by suspicion, mutual disdain, and often outright hostility. In May 1959, when IFOP asked whether the mainland French felt a sense of solidarity with the settlers, 46 per cent responded “somewhat” or “little,” and as many (16 per cent) replied that they felt no sense of solidarity at all as said they stood unscreasingly with the settlers.20

Indeed, as early as July 1957 a majority of the French (53 per cent) favored negotiations with the FLN with a view toward a ceasefire, a step that settler leadership strenuously opposed. In January 1958 this figure had risen to 56 per cent; 25 per cent opposed such negotiations. By May 1959 71 per cent favored talks on a cease-fire, against only 16 per cent who did not. Moreover, nearly half (47 per cent) in May 1959 approved of discussions with the FLN not only on a cease-fire but on substantive economic, social, and political questions touching on the future of Algeria.21 By April 1961, on the eve of the opening of talks at Evian between the French government and the FLN, 78 per cent, or roughly eight in ten of the French, supported general negotiations with the leaders of the Algerian revolution.22

21 A table reviewing soundings between July 1957 and December 1959 is printed in ibid., p. 45.
It was Charles de Gaulle, of course, who conducted the negotiations which eventually brought the war to an end. De Gaulle's intentions with regard to Algeria were a mystery to his contemporaries; the conduct and the aims of his Algerian policy remain among the most controversial questions about the war, and this is not the place for a discussion of them. The Gaullist faithful, among whom the general himself must be counted, credit de Gaulle with clairvoyance on the Algerian question as in other matters; even before he took office, according to this view, he foresaw how things would turn out, and from the day he assumed power worked toward the outcome achieved in 1962. To his bitterest critics, the diehards of Algérie française, de Gaulle's Algerian policy was a betrayal of his own solemn assurances, of the actions of his early days as head of the government, and of the constitution of the Fifth Republic. Scholarly opinion covers most of the ground between these extremes; one man's de Gaulle, the masterly pragmatist, is another man's de Gaulle, the impatient muddler.  

At any rate, if de Gaulle foresaw in 1958 that the war would issue in the independence of Algeria, this knowledge was the most closely held secret in the new republic; only a year later did he publicly admit such an eventuality, only to declare that it would be a disastrous choice for the Algerians to make. What, then, do the IFOP surveys on de Gaulle's Algerian policy signify? Given the deliberately enigmatic character of his utterances on Algeria (of which the most famous is his "Je vous ai compris" to the settlers gathered on the Forum in Algiers), and the startling shifts in his position, it is at least plausible to suppose that support of de Gaulle's Algerian policy meant, in the main, support for de Gaulle, whatever policy he might choose to undertake. Louis Terrenoire, who served for a time as de Gaulle's minister of information, wrote that the referendum of September 1958 on the constitution of the Fifth Republic was "a blank check: the people of the cities and the countryside placed confidence in him [de Gaulle] to conduct the Algerian war to an issue (whatever it might be, one is tempted to add)." The IFOP polls appear to support this thesis.

When de Gaulle assumed power, confidence in the government's


ability to resolve the Algerian question soared to seven in ten.25 The French may have expected him to work miracles, for when no immediate changes in the conduct of the war took place, confidence fell back to 51 per cent.26 Still, de Gaulle's Algerian policy always enjoyed the confidence of at least half the French people and usually of considerably more. Indeed between 1959 and 1962 roughly two out of three Frenchmen supported de Gaulle's Algerian policy, no matter what the circumstances of the moment. This figure coincided neatly with the number who expressed confidence in his presidency.27 These general figures scarcely varied from one social group to another. As Charlot has pointed out, de Gaulle's policy had more support from women than from men, more support from older people (especially those over fifty) than younger, more from rural voters than city-dwellers, much less from workers than from other occupational groups.28

Yet despite their support for de Gaulle's Algerian policy, the French were divided over the question whether the war needed to have lasted so long, and they had reservations about the Gaullist thesis that de Gaulle was a providential man. Twenty-seven per cent believed that the Evian accords could have been obtained much sooner, 23 per cent a little sooner; only 22 per cent thought not. Thirty per cent said that the Evian agreements could have been reached without de Gaulle; 45 per cent believed they could not; 29 per cent thought that he was not indispensable to the task of putting the provisions of the Evian accords into effect. In December 1962, six months after Algeria had become independent, 36 per cent of the French believed that without de Gaulle the war would still have been on, but 21 per cent believed that without him it would have ended just about when it did, and 17 per cent that in the general's absence it would have been over well before April 1962.29

Public opinion polls can be useful historical sources, even if they serve only to confirm the impressions of contemporary observers. At

the least they afford a statistical confirmation of the kind of unscientific pulse-taking in which political commentators engage. But the IFOP polls on the Algerian war do more than bolster guesswork. They show that the decisive change in public opinion on Algeria occurred in 1957, fully a year before Charles de Gaulle returned to power. The mainland French—emotionally remote from the settlers, reluctant to spend vast sums of money on their defense or in the modernization of Algeria, pessimistic about the long-range prospects of the French presence, unenthusiastic about the prosecution of the war—were ready as early as 1957 to negotiate an end to the fighting and to accept looser ties than had previously existed between France and Algeria. Once the notion of looser ties became acceptable, it was but a step to the acceptance of Algerian independence. The IFOP polls also demonstrate that the die-hard settlers and the Army activists were indulging in wishful thinking when they told themselves that de Gaulle did not really have the support of the French people. The polls suggest that not only did he enjoy broad and deep support on a wide range of issues; on the matter of Algeria, he had nearly a free hand to do as he thought best. IFOP's soundings in public opinion appear to support the view that the "Algerian drama," as it has so often been called, was a drama of committed minorities. The mainland French had an interest in the outcome but more in the manner of spectators than of participants.