

Finding France

Can the environment
reunite France?



**Destin
Commun**

More in Common France

Environmental concerns have rarely been as central to the national conversation in France as they are now. In cities large and small, in suburban as well as rural areas, French voters are increasingly concerned about issues such as air, land or water pollution and the effects of global warming. Conventional wisdom has it that concern for the environment is the preserve of educated cosmopolitan elites, but new research by **Destin Commun (More in Common France)** shows that concerns for environmental issues transcend France's deep divisions. Perhaps surprisingly – given how contested the issue has been in other nations such as the United States – these findings suggest that **French people could come together around an inclusive, hands-on environmentalism rooted in local communities, engagement with nature.**

'Finding France', a comprehensive national study on the state of democratic life in France published by Destin Commun in February 2020, tells the story of a deeply divided country whose people are in search of a common narrative and a sense of a shared destiny. France is divided on many issues, including immigration, Islam, the country's colonial past, democracy and globalization. **Yet despite these deep divisions, 83 percent of French people are convinced that they can face problems together and 61 percent consider that the country's divisions are surmountable.**

Among the major challenges facing France, we found that protecting nature and the environment is a high priority for most French people. It is one of the few issues that has the potential to unite France across lines of division. **That is why Destin Commun led a second, more detailed study to better understand French perspectives on the environment.**

Methodology

This report builds on the model developed for the 'Finding France' project, first published in February 2020. It found that French people cluster into six population segments, with distinct values and identity. The initial research for the 'Finding France' project was carried out from March to December 2019 by Kantar Public, with a representative national sample of 4,000 people.

This new report involved two phases:

- a qualitative research phase in which we convened seven focus groups (one for each of our six segments and two for the segment called the 'Left Behind') between 23 October and 8 November 2019 in Lille, Montpellier and Paris.
- a quantitative research phase, which took place between 27 November and 3 December 2019, in which we surveyed a nationally representative sample of 2,003 people.

As with 'Finding France', part of this study's originality lies in the methodology we applied, which to our knowledge has never before been used in France. We attempted to map the hidden architecture of people's psychology by showing how their belief systems, core values and sense of identity help explain the most divisive issues facing French society today. Building on our research in other countries, we find that these core beliefs inform the way individuals interpret the world around them.

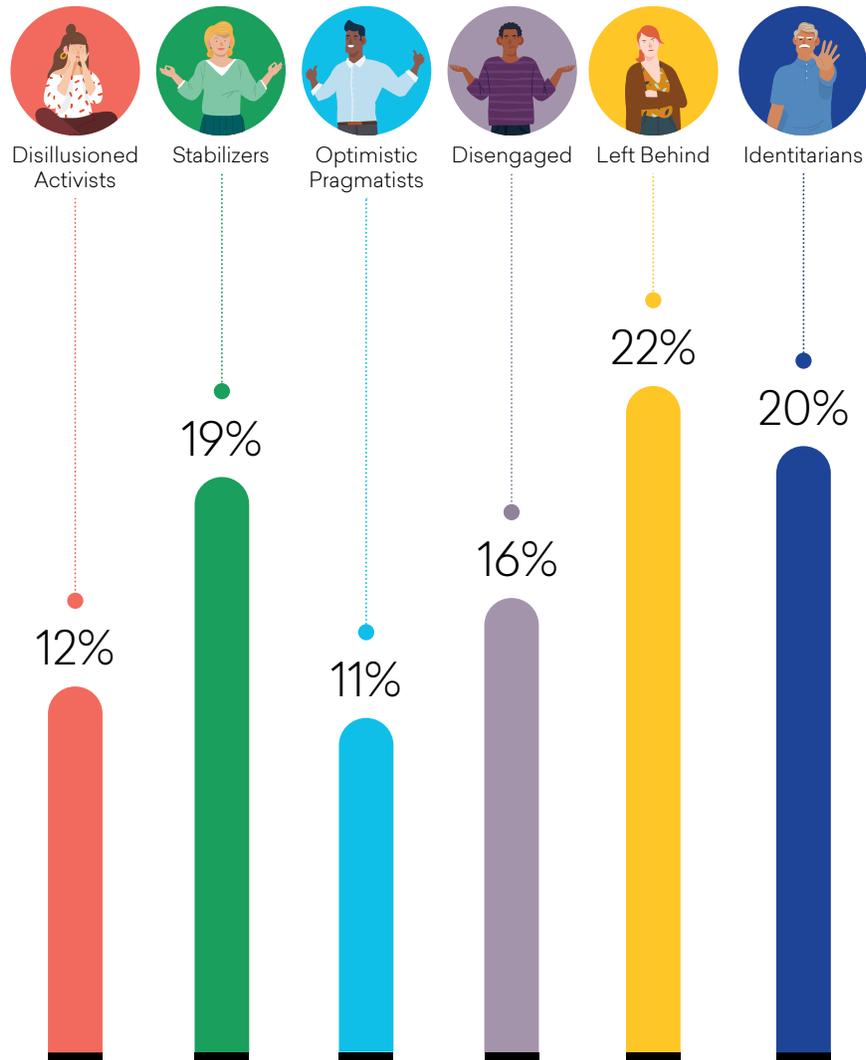
We used a set of questions that draw on insights from social psychology and other social sciences on:

- Group identity
- Moral foundations
- Perception of threat
- Optimism and pessimism
- Parenting style and authoritarianism
- Agency and personal responsibility

We used a statistical analysis methodology called cluster analysis, which identifies patterns in participants' answers to a series of questions about their core beliefs and their level of social and civic engagement. While we know the detailed socio-demographic characteristics of the segments (such as age, income, education and political self-positioning), the segments are based entirely on participants' responses to these questions about their core beliefs – we did not use any demographic information to create the segments.

Likewise, we did not use any answers relating to people's attitudes on current social and political issues (including on the environment) to create our segmentation. Instead, the segmentation is based on deeper elements of people's values, identity and worldview. The result of this methodology is striking: we find that on a wide range of issues, these segments are more predictive of people's opinion than traditional socio-demographic attributes or people's self-declared political identity. In other words, people's core beliefs can be more predictive of their attitudes on current issues than demographics or political labels.

FIGURE 1. SIX FRENCH FAMILIES



For a detailed description of each segment, please see the initial 'Finding France' report.

Source: Destin Commun (2019)

The six French segments that emerge from our research are:

- **Disillusioned Activists (12 percent of the national total):** educated, cosmopolitan, progressive, not religious, pessimistic
- **Stabilizers (19 percent):** moderate, engaged and established, participating in civic life, rational, compassionate, hold mixed opinions
- **Optimistic Pragmatists (11 percent):** young, individualistic, pragmatic, confident, entrepreneurial
- **Disengaged (16 percent):** young, detached, lacking confidence, individualistic
- **Left Behind (22 percent):** angry, defiant, feel abandoned
- **Identitarians (20 percent):** older, conservative, nativist, uncompromising, believe in national decline

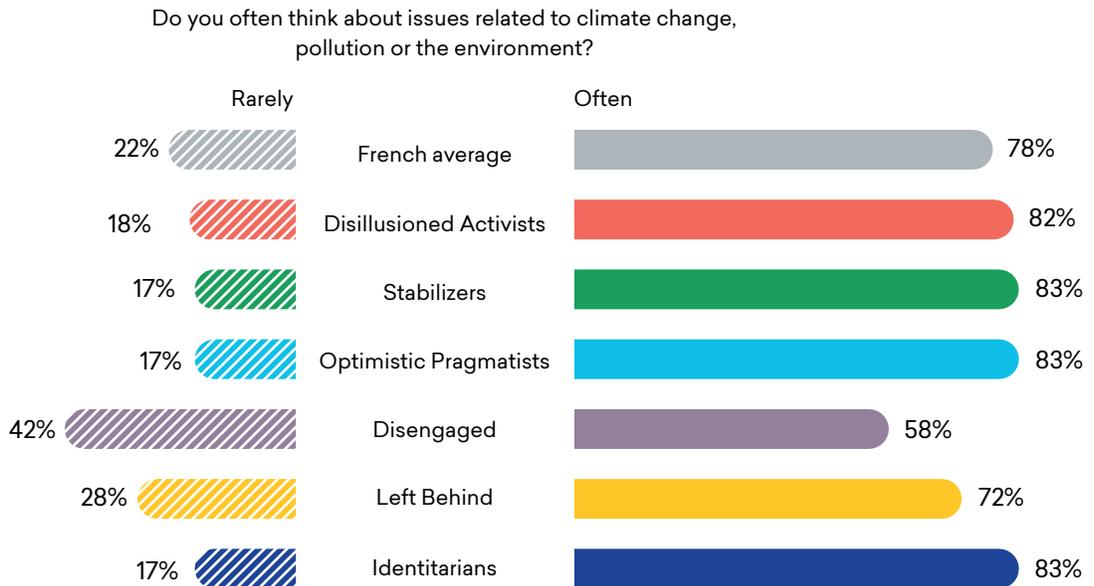
Key findings

1. Concern about the environment is shared across French society

Across France, 78 percent of people say that they think about problems related to the environment regularly. There are only two segments for whom concern is below 70 percent (the Disengaged and the Left Behind). Concern is highest among the two segments of the population that are most politically engaged: Disillusioned Activists (27 percent of whom say that they think about the issue **every day**) and Identitarians (19 percent).

These findings suggest that **no segment of the French population is embracing climate denialism or eco-skepticism.** This is in contrast with other Western democracies, where in English-speaking countries such as the United States, Canada and Australia, the science of climate change gets caught up in the crosshairs of political polarization (as shown in More in Common’s Hidden Tribes study on the United States in 2018), and likewise in Germany where the far-right party Alternativ für Deutschland has made climate denialism part of their political platform (advancing policies that support the coal and diesel industries).

FIGURE 2. THE ENVIRONMENT IS A MAJOR CONCERN FOR ALL FRENCH PEOPLE



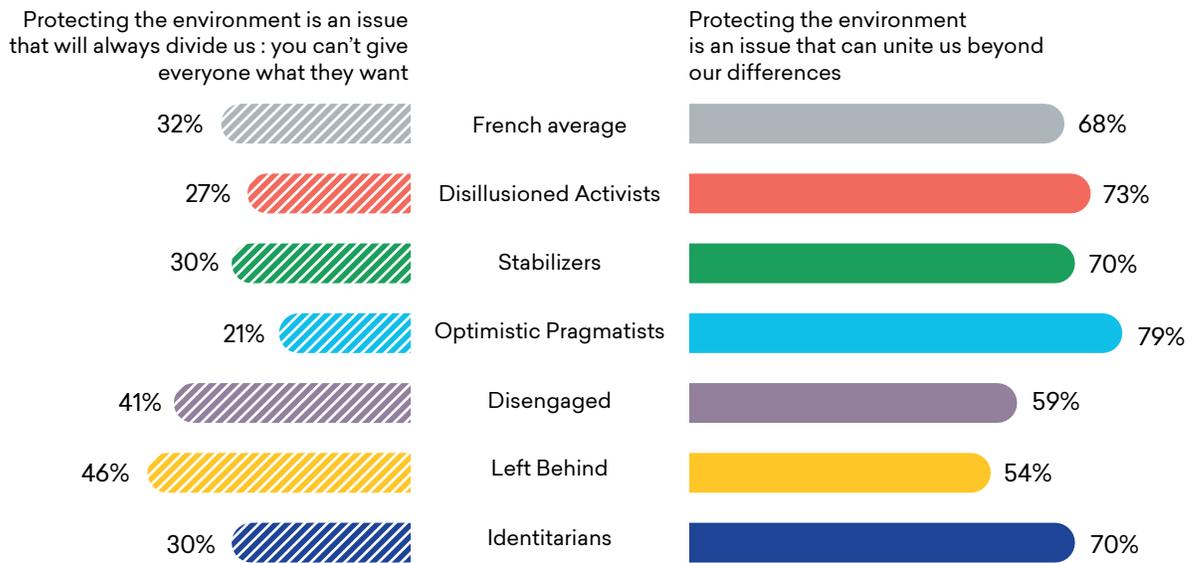
Source: Destin Commun (2019)

2. Environmental protection is a common priority that can help bridge deep divisions in French society

The strength of concern for protecting nature across all groups in society suggests that this shared goal could help to unify the French people. **Close to seven out of ten French people (68 percent) believe that the environment is an issue that can bring people together across lines of division.** Concern is lower among the Left Behind and the Disengaged, but even in these segments, a majority sees the potential for environmental protection to bridge those divisions.

These findings challenge the conventional wisdom that environmental issues will inevitably widen divisions between educated cosmopolitans, who can afford such concerns for “the end of the world” (a widely used phrase in the French environmental movement), and those in what we have called ‘Forgotten France’, who struggle from month to month just to make ends meet (they are widely referred to as more concerned about “the end of the month”). Our study shows that French people in all of our segments unite around a concern for the environment, rather than being divided by this issue. Further, the two groups with the most opposed and polarized views, Identitarians and Disillusioned Activists, actually have similar levels of concern for the environment.

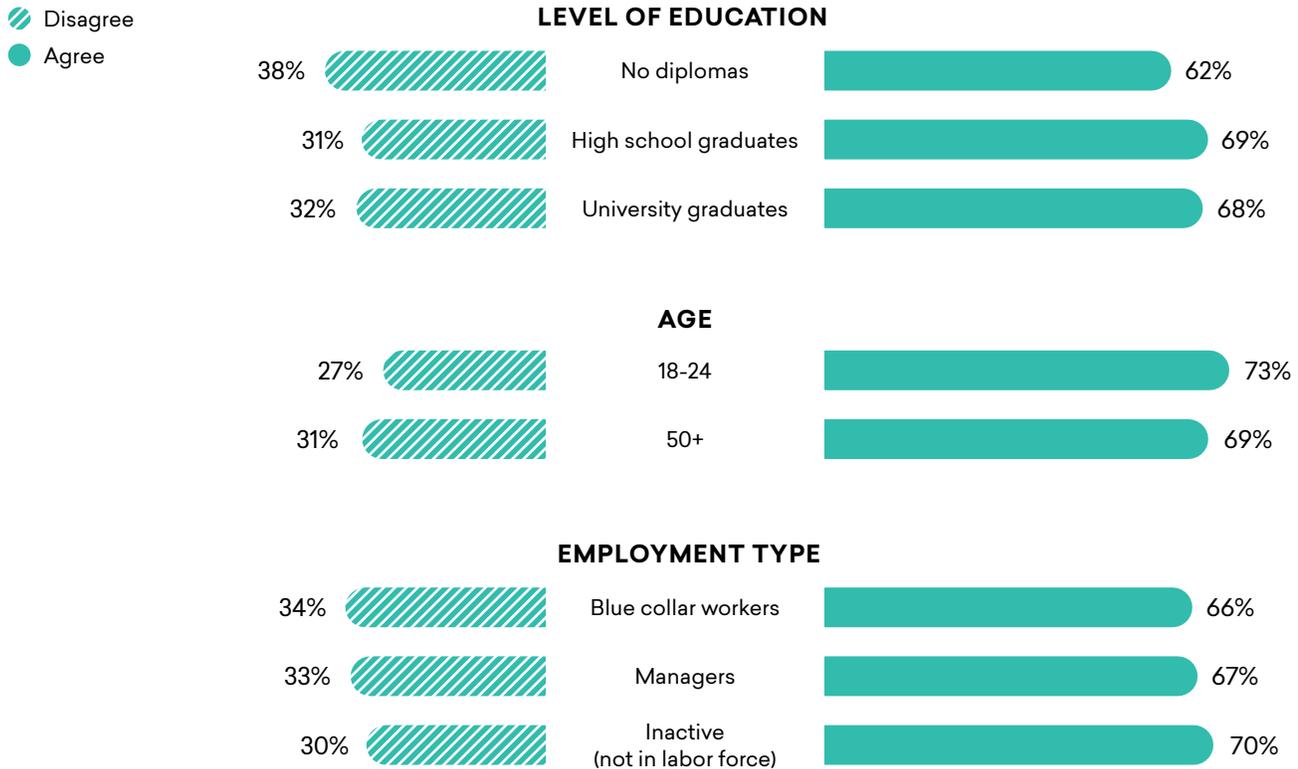
FIGURE 3. THE GREEN TRANSITION, NEW FRAME FOR A FRENCH « STORY OF US »



Which of these statements do you agree with more?
Source: Destin Commun (2019)

This concern is shared by old and young, among different educational backgrounds and employment types.

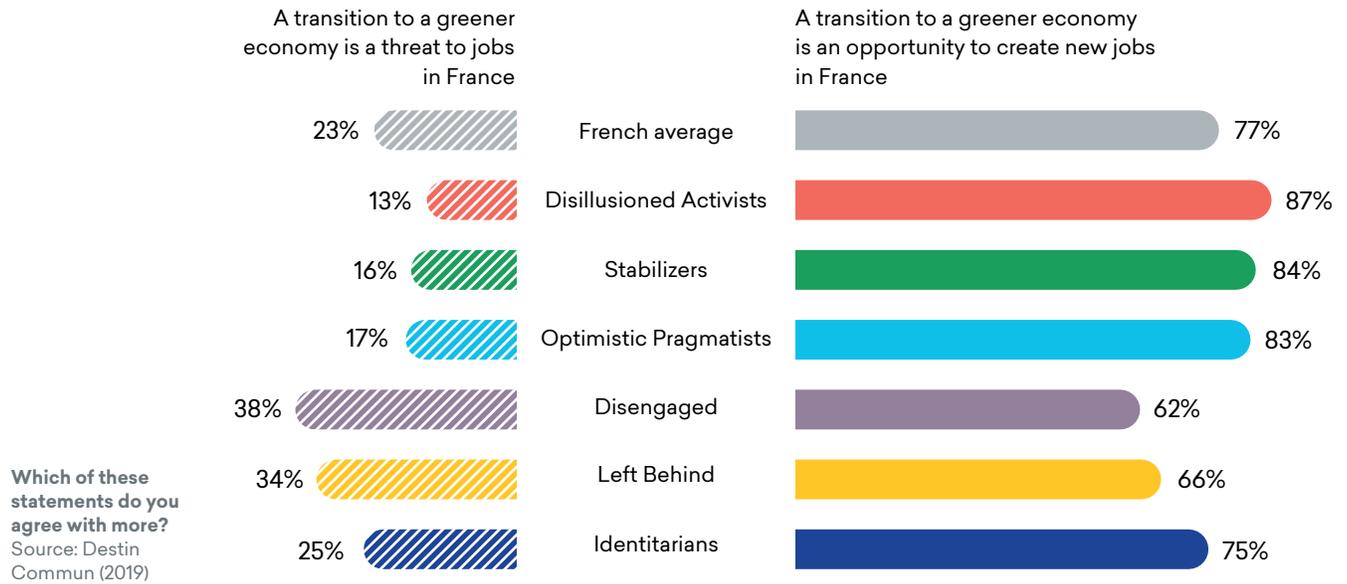
FIGURE 4. PROTECTING THE ENVIRONMENT IS AN ISSUE THAT CAN UNITE US BEYOND OUR DIFFERENCES



3. French people see a ‘green transition’ as an economic opportunity, not a threat.

On average, **77 percent believe that making the transition to a greener economy is an opportunity to create new jobs in France.** In every segment, a majority believe this – including the Left Behind (66 percent) and the Disengaged (62 percent). **This finding challenges the widely held view that economic anxieties are holding some segments of the French population back from supporting an environmental transition.** This is not to deny that many French people - and specifically in what we have called ‘Forgotten France’ – feel a profound sense of economic insecurity and believe France is in long-term economic decline. **But far from accentuating these anxieties, our research suggests that an inclusive transition could help, not hinder, all French people to imagine a better future.** The possibility of an environmental transition opens up more opportunities than it closes – even in ‘Forgotten France’ – provided it is designed, communicated and implemented in a way that speaks to the values and concerns of the majority - including on social justice issues - and does not merely reflect the interests and values of educated urban elites.

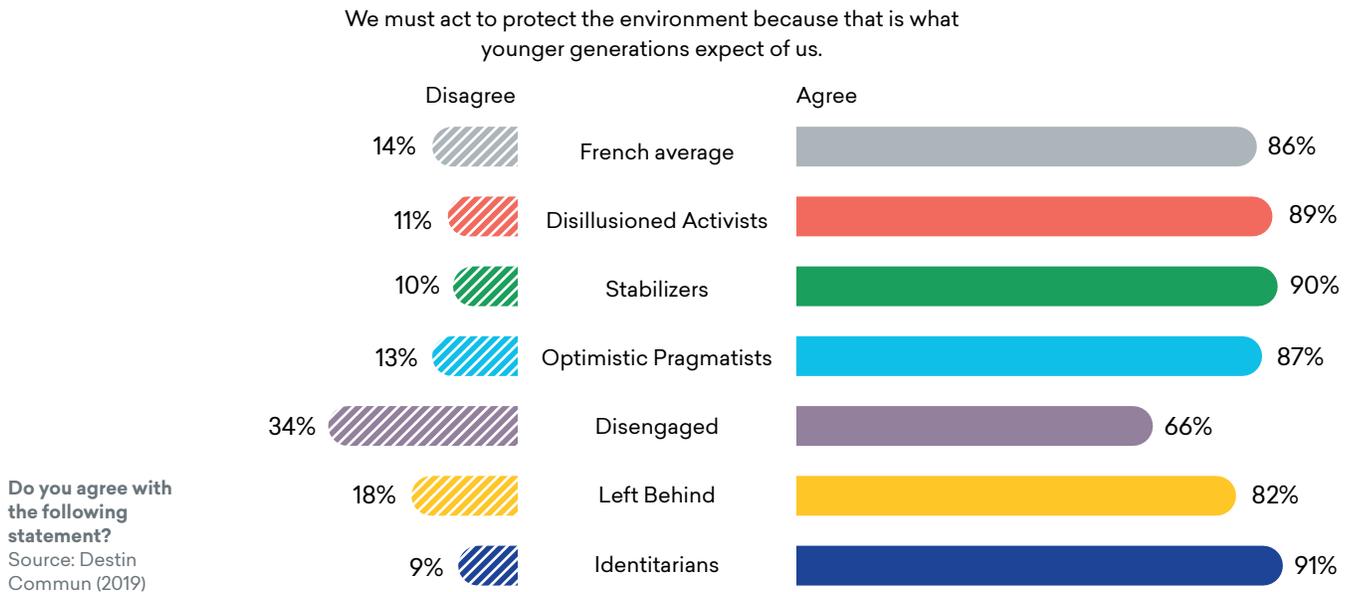
FIGURE 5. JOBS AND THE GREEN ECONOMY: OPPORTUNITY OR THREAT?



4. Almost nine in ten French people see protecting the environment as our responsibility to future generations.

This argument, long put forward by the environmental movement, has again risen to prominence with the climate marches and the global school strikes in the past year. **An overwhelming 86 percent of French people believe that we must protect the environment because younger generations expect it from us.**

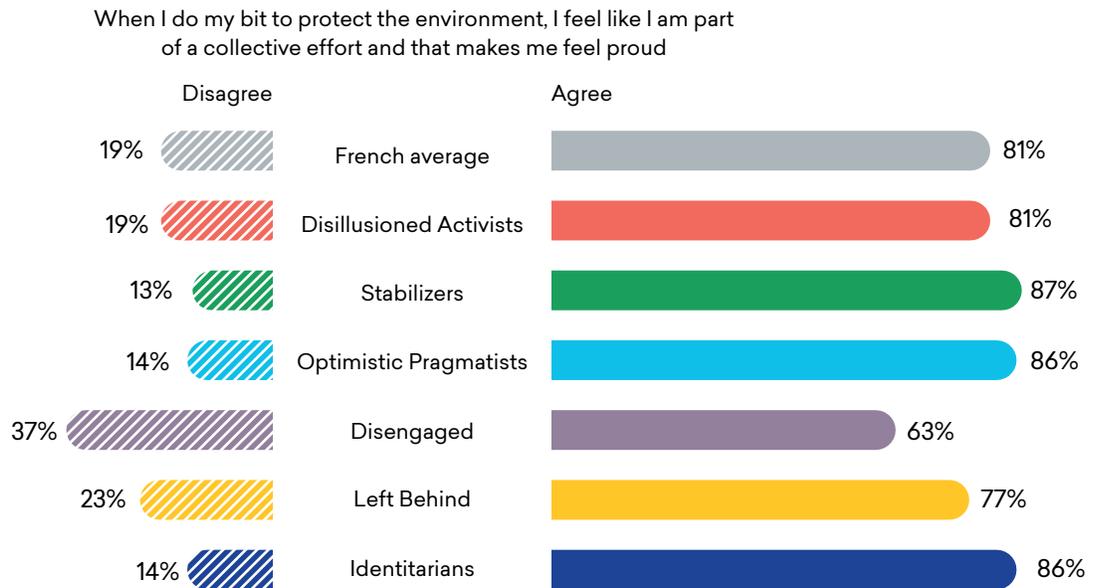
FIGURE 6. ACTING FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS



5. Taking action to protect the environment brings a sense of pride and agency to all segments of French society.

Eight of out ten people say that when they act to protect the environment, they feel they are part of a collective effort and that makes them feel proud. Strong majorities agree even among the Disengaged (63 percent) and Left Behind (77 percent), two segments of the population who consistently express frustration at their lack of agency as we examine in detail in the main 'Finding France' report.

FIGURE 7. AGENCY AND PRIDE



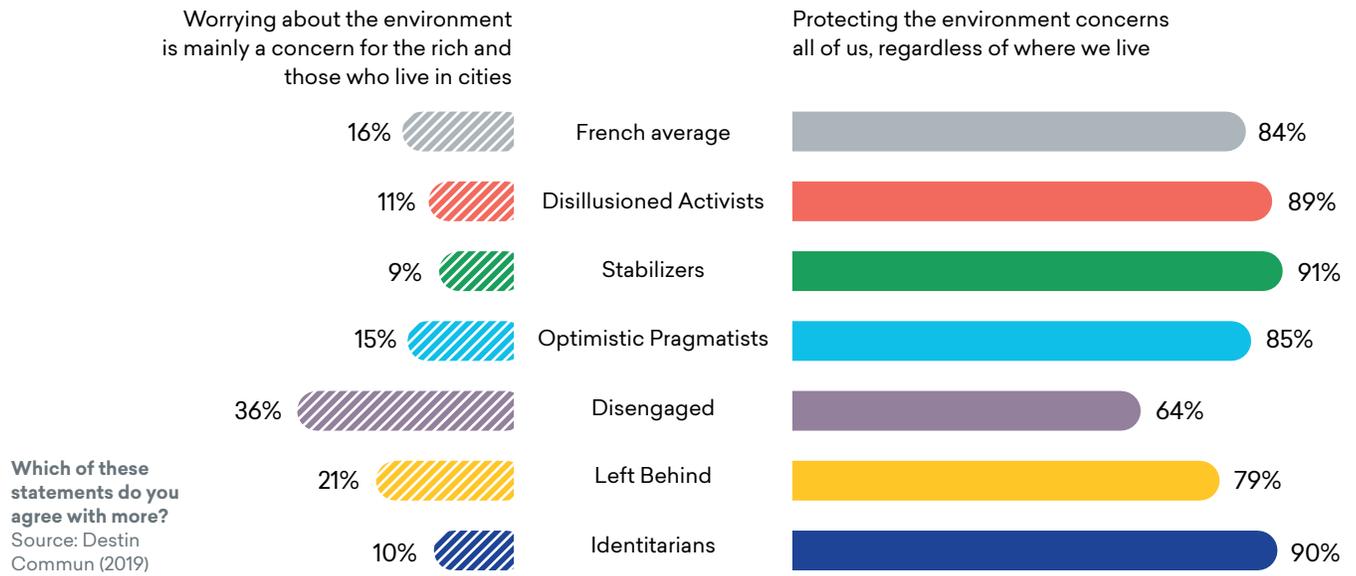
Do you agree with the following statement?
Source: Destin Commun (2019)

6. Concern about the environment goes far beyond educated urban elites

Environmental concerns are often perceived as limited to educated, wealthier cosmopolitans, **but we find that an overwhelming majority of 86 percent of French people across all segments of society say the environment is a concern for everyone, regardless of where they live.**

Even in the most economically vulnerable groups, strong majorities agree. Only 21 percent of people in the Left Behind segment say that caring for the environment is a concern for the urban rich. Indeed, the belief that the environment is a concern for all of the people of France unites the otherwise polarized Identitarians (90 percent) and Disillusioned Activists (89 percent).

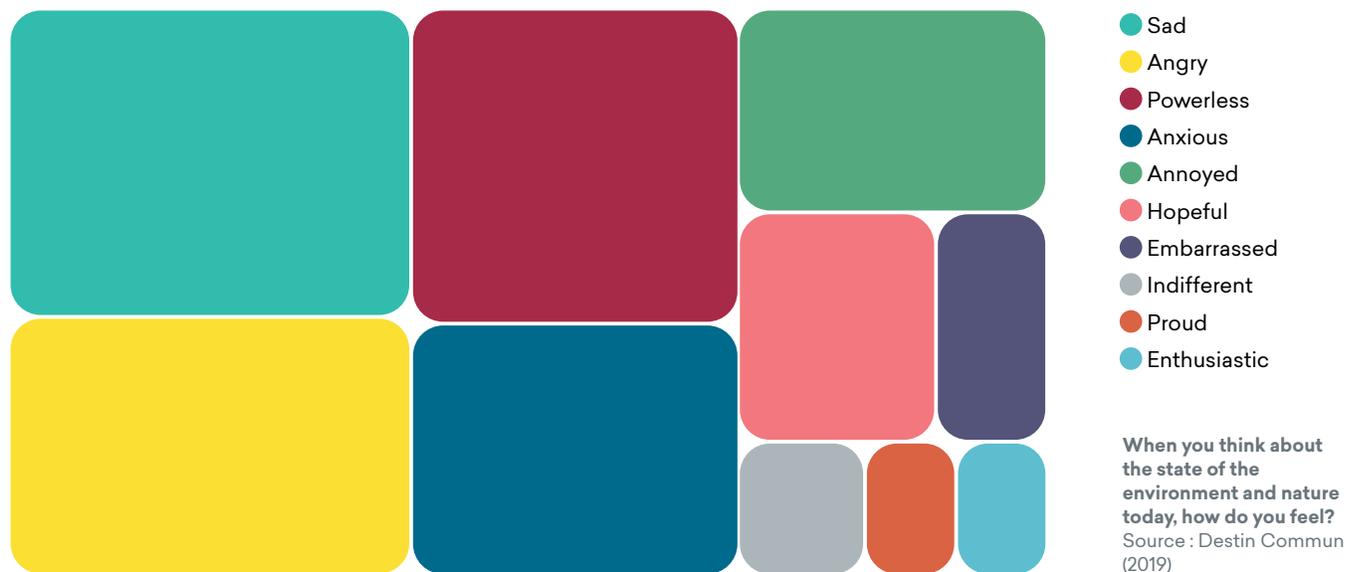
FIGURE 8. CLIMATE CHANGE: ONLY A CONCERN FOR THE URBAN RICH?



7. There is nevertheless a sense of frustration and pessimism about the current state of the environment

Despite the potential for environmental protection to bridge divisions, create new economic opportunities and restore a sense of pride and agency, **we found a bleaker picture when we asked people how they felt about the state of the environment now.** Given a list of adjectives describing positive and negative feelings, French people overwhelmingly chose negative words to describe their emotions, with the most common responses being sadness (48 percent), anger (40 percent), helplessness (39 percent) and anxiety (31 percent). Only 18 percent reported that they feel hopeful. These findings are significant, given findings from social science research showing that while anger or hope can be useful levers to encourage action, anxiety, sadness or helplessness tend to act as inhibitors.

FIGURE 9. FEELINGS ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT

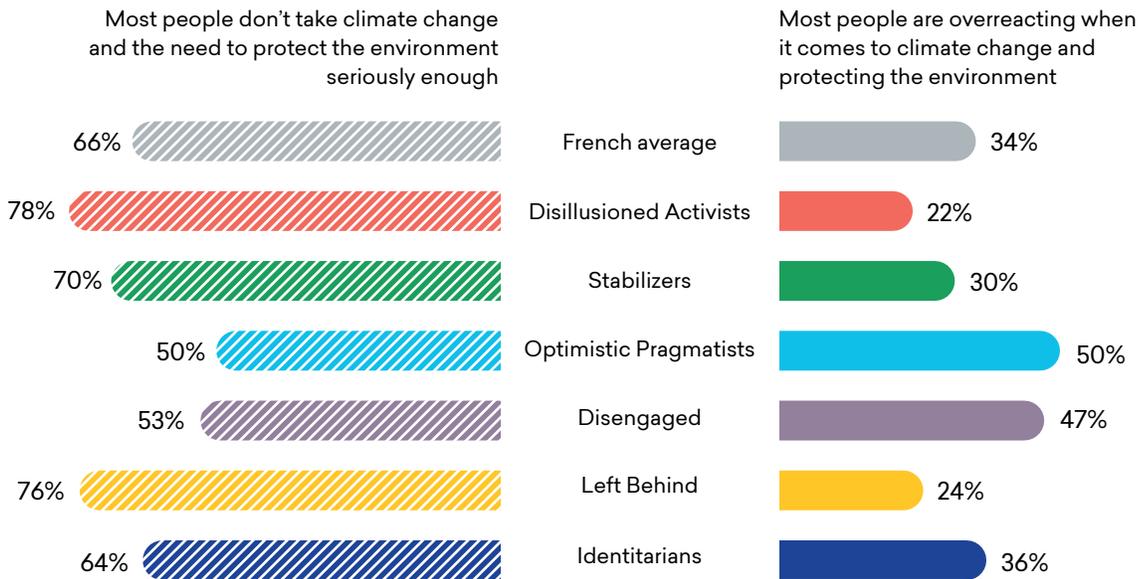


8. Two thirds of French people feel that others are not taking climate change seriously enough

Although they feel personally aware of environmental concerns, **a strong majority of 66 percent of French people believe that others are not taking environmental protection seriously enough.** The highest levels of concern are shared by Disillusioned Activists and the Left Behind, groups that could be expected to conflict with each other on many current issues. The two groups among whom opinions are more evenly split are the Optimistic Pragmatists and the Disengaged, among whom around half are either indifferent or doubtful about the place of environmental concerns in the national conversation.

Separately, 9 out of 10 French people believe that companies have a key role to play in the changes required to protect the environment, and they expect private sector organizations to take decisive action on environmental issues.

FIGURE 10. ARE WE TAKING CLIMATE CHANGE SERIOUSLY?



Which of these statements do you agree with more?
Source: Destin Commun (2019)

9. The time has come to move from awareness to practical action and engagement.

Our research suggests that a tipping point has been reached on environmental awareness, thanks to decades of work by the environmental movement in France. This suggests the need to focus more on engagement and addressing barriers to practical engagement and action.

The factors most correlated to the level of action that individuals take on environmental protection are not their political beliefs, but their engagement with social and political issues more generally, and their wider orientation to society:

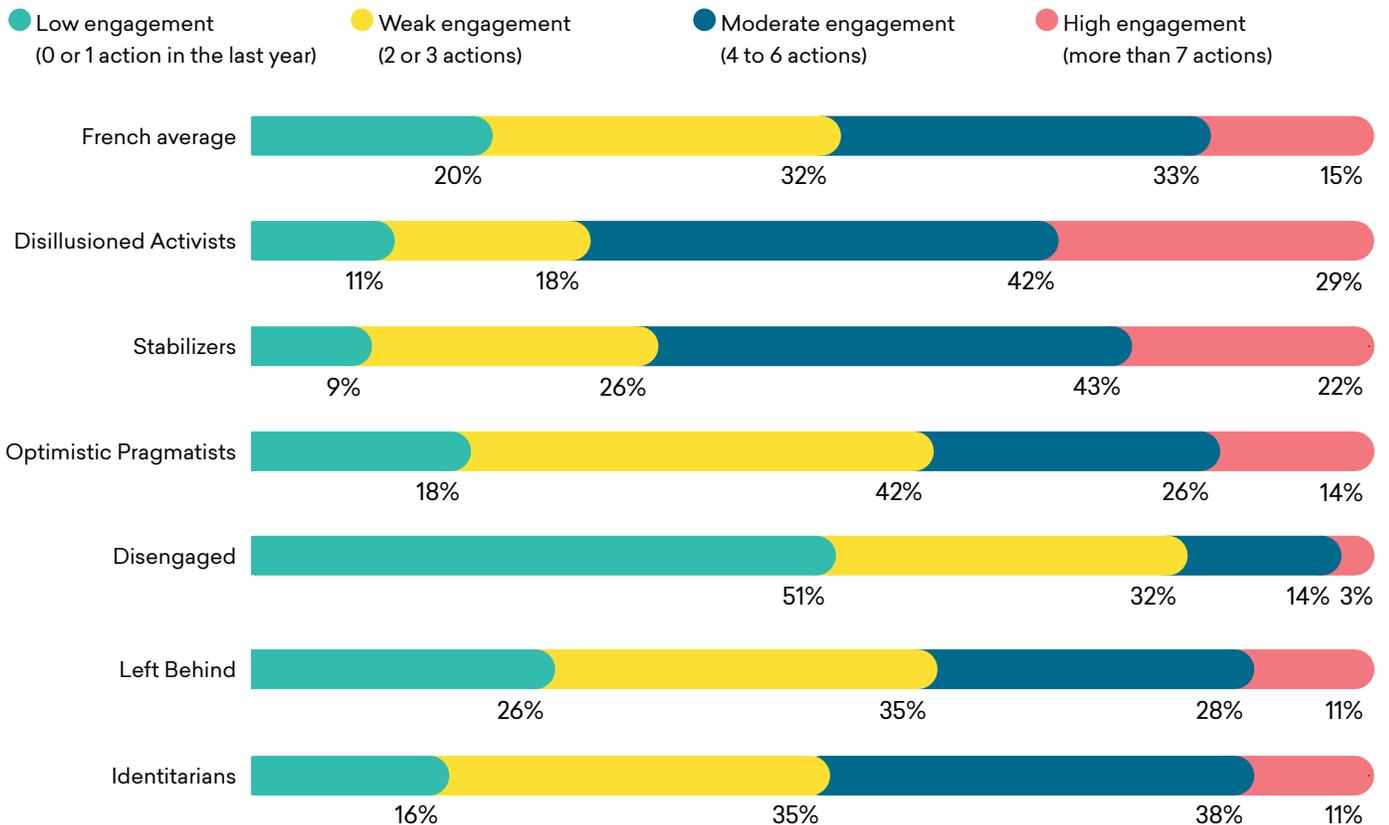
- The group least likely to take practical steps to protect the environment is the Disengaged.
- The highest level of engagement is found among Disillusioned Activists.
- However this is not an issue that polarizes French people, as higher than average levels of commitment are also found among Identitarians.
- Stabilizers also show very high levels of commitment, reflecting their orientation towards practical civic action in their local community.

These conclusions come from analyzing people’s responses to questions about what they are already doing to protect the environment. As part of this analysis, **we created an engagement index**, incorporating people’s responses to questions about whether they had taken any of 14 types of action over the past year ranging from individual acts (e.g. recycling, buying food in bulk or reducing meat consumption) to more collective forms of action (e.g. signing a petition, taking part in a march for the environment or voting on the basis of climate issues in the 2019 European elections).

The six segments divided into three groups on the engagement index:

- Overall, 15 percent of French people showed a strong engagement index (seven or more actions per year), with 29 percent of Disillusioned Activists in this category
- 33 percent showed a moderate engagement (four to six actions)
- 32 percent showed a weak engagement (two or three actions)
- 20 percent showed a minimal engagement (one action or none), with 51 percent of the Disengaged falling into this group – underscoring their low levels of engagement more generally.

FIGURE 11. LEVEL OF ENGAGEMENT BY SEGMENT



Actions listed included recycling, joining a climate march, eating less meat, signing a petition (among others)

Source: Destin Commun (2019)

10. Organizations engaged in environmental or climate communications need to speak to the core beliefs of people who are less-engaged – not those already-engaged

People across France share high levels of concern about environmental issues, but they express those concerns in different ways, reflecting their values and psychology. Understanding the differences in how various segments of French society think about environmental issues is key to reaching less-engaged audiences, who think in different ways to most environmental activists.

Our research finds that people in some groups are more inclined to think of climate and environmental issues in abstract, systemic and global ways – this is especially the case among those with higher education levels, such as the Disillusioned Activists, and to a lesser extent Stabilizers and Optimistic Pragmatists. They tend to embrace more ‘open’ values (as is discussed in more detail in the first ‘Finding France’ report). They use more abstract terms such as “climate change” and “protecting the environment” when they talk about these issues.

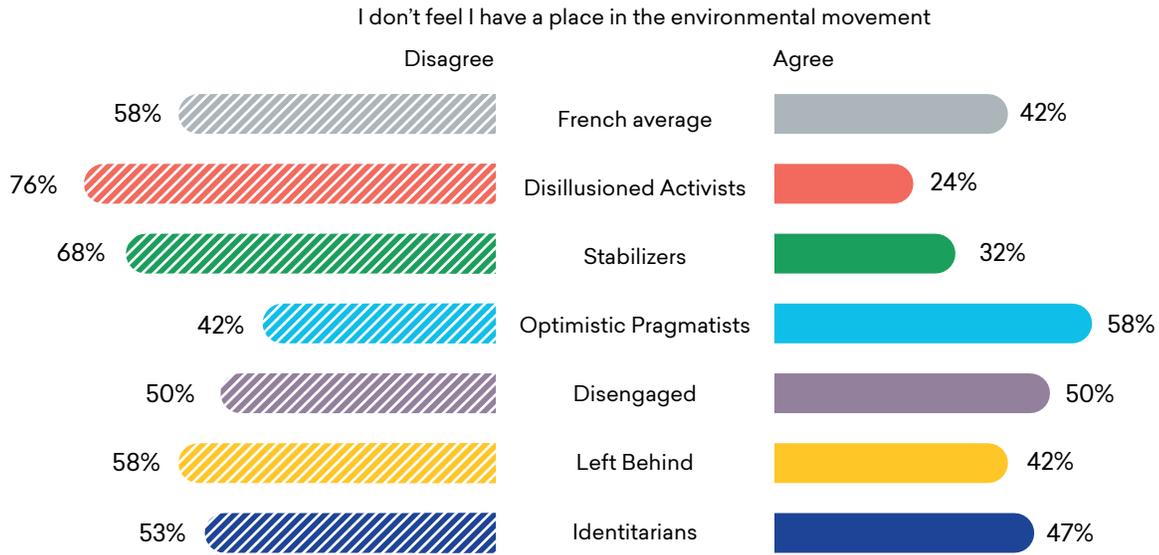
On the other hand, others are more inclined to think of these issues in more tangible ways that relate more to their country and community. For example, those in the Identitarian segment more often speak in terms of “nature”, France’s “terroir” or soil, “heritage” and “conservation”. These concepts reflect an attachment to the land and respect for tradition. People in the Left Behind and Disengaged segments often toggle between an awareness that a lot is at stake with climate change, and pressing individual and collective concerns. Because they distrust governments and corporations, when they think about solutions many in these groups reflect on their own actions rather than seeing government action as the solution.

11. The public identifies with the need for environmental protection more strongly than with the environmental movement

Some 42 percent of French people do not feel that the environmental movement resonates with them personally. This is despite the high levels of environmental concern across all segments. Disillusioned Activists and Stabilizers feel more at home in the environmental movement, perhaps because it reflects their language and values. In contrast, the movement resonates far less with the Optimistic Pragmatists, Disengaged, Identitarians and Left Behind, who tend to have the weakest identification with the movement, a finding reflected in recent research into the sociology of climate marches.¹

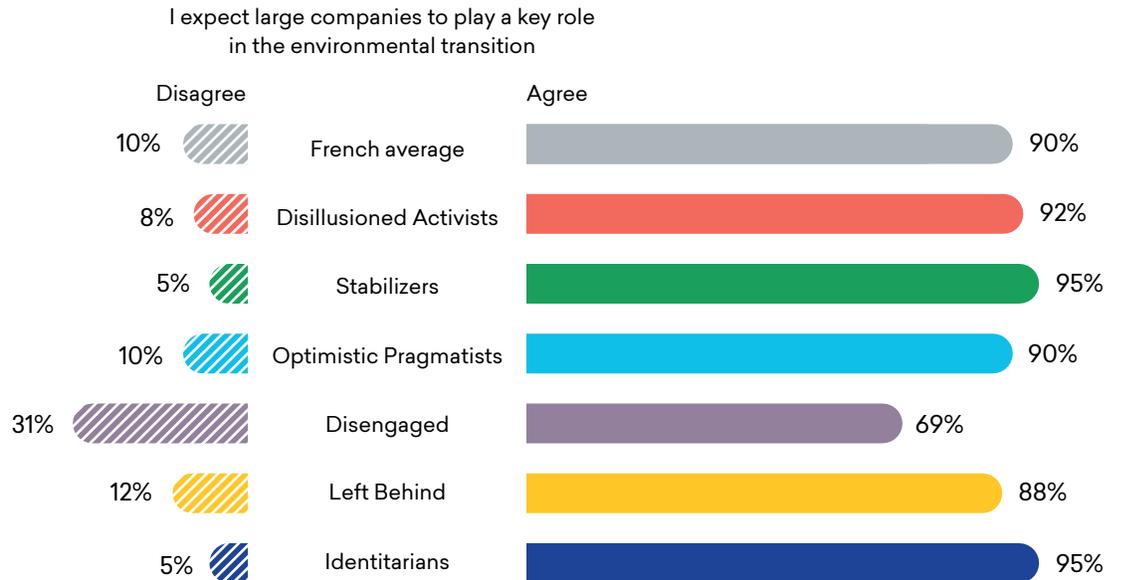
1. See the work of the research group Quantité Critique <https://reporterre.net/Qui-manifeste-pour-le-climat-Des-sociologues-repondent>

FIGURE 12. IS THE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT FOR ME?



Do you agree with the following statement?
Source: Destin Commun (2019)

FIGURE 13. PEOPLE EXPECT BIG BUSINESS TO ACT



Do you agree with the following statement?
Source: Destin Commun (2019)

Similarly, the public seems more convinced by the substance of environmental concerns than by the voices most often heard on environmental issues. We tested for reactions to prominent environmental campaigners and organizations that speak out on environmental issues, expressed in terms of a 'feelings thermometer' graded from 0 (cold or negative feelings) to 100 (hot or positive feelings):

- Public feelings towards environmental activists (both prominent individuals and as a group generally) are lukewarm: while Disillusioned Activists, Stabilizers and Optimistic Pragmatists have positive feelings towards them, the Disengaged and the Left Behind do not.
- No organization achieves an average 'warmth' score above 66.
- There is especially low trust in those with views seen as self-interested or extreme, such as large oil and chemical corporations, SUV drivers and vegans.

These results suggest there is a need and a space for new voices to emerge to engage wider audiences on environmental concerns – perhaps coming from spheres of life affected by environmental factors, rather than from the environmental sector itself.

Conclusion

FIGURE 14. FEELING THERMOMETER (% OF POSITIVE FEELING)

	Environmental activists	Large companies	Vegans	Nicolas Hulot	SUV drivers	Greenpeace	Yann Arthus-Bertrand	Gilets jaunes
French average	58%	26 %	32 %	58%	28%	66%	57%	50%
Disillusioned Activists	74%	15 %	36 %	58%	17%	75%	62%	49%
Stabilizers	60%	19 %	30 %	65%	23%	75%	64%	44%
Optimistic Pragmatists	64%	43 %	42 %	68%	40%	72%	64%	44%
Disengaged	45%	29 %	34 %	44%	31%	51%	47%	43%
Left Behind	47%	24 %	26 %	51%	27%	59%	43%	59%
Identitarians	57%	28 %	30 %	57%	29%	61%	59%	57%

Our findings challenge assumptions that action on the environment will inevitably reinforce existing divisions in French society, for example between those concerned with social justice and those concerned with a universalist concern for the environment or between the two most polarized groups in French society (Disillusioned Activists and Identitarians). In fact, our findings show that the opposite is true: **in a country that cannot agree on much, protection of the environment is a cause that can unite French people across all population segments.**

Public sensitivity to the impact of environmental policies has been highlighted in recent times by the rise of the Gilets Jaunes movement in October 2018, which led to the most serious social unrest in France in half a century. The protests were sparked by frustration about the rise in diesel taxes and other changes announced by the government in 2018. These changes sparked widespread unrest because of perceptions that urban elites disregarded or had no understanding of the concerns of French communities outside of the major cities, and that these communities were being forced to bear the brunt of change.

Our discussions with people across different segments of the French population have underscored the extent to which the ‘burden’ of environmental protection must be shared across society in a way that people perceive to be fair. To gain widespread acceptance, policies and actions must especially resonate with segments of the population who have largely lost trust in the authorities and in their society’s institutions, but who can feel a renewed sense of agency and belonging when their community comes together around a common cause.

For that to happen will require considerable change, including new policies that ensure justice between different groups in French society; new communications strategies that engage the disengaged on their own terms; and new voices that can speak to strategically important audiences. There is no inevitability that environmental concerns will bring French people together, but there is clear potential. There is also urgency to act.

Destin Commun and More in Common’s work to build on the findings of this report has begun. Our goal is to work with a wide range of institutions and partner organizations: government institutions, trade unions, political parties, foundations, the private sector, environmental organizations, the non-profit sector, citizen mobilization groups, the media and France’s creative industries.

To find out more about this project and join or support these efforts, please contact us: contact@destincommun.fr

ABOUT DESTIN COMMUN (MORE IN COMMON FRANCE)

Destin Commun is the French arm of More in Common, an international initiative set up in 2017 to build societies that are stronger, more united, and more resilient to the increasing threats of polarization and social division. We work with a wide range of groups in civil society, business, faith, education, philanthropy, media and government to connect people across lines of division. More in Common's teams in France, Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States work together and share a commitment to advancing our mission.

For more information please visit www.moreincommon.com and www.destincommun.fr

AUTHORS

Mathieu LEFEVRE

Anaïz PARFAIT

This study was conducted with the polling firm Kantar Public France.

Graphic design by H el ene Koetschet

  Destin Commun 2020

Contact

Destin Commun (More in Common France) can be reached by email on contact@destincommon.fr or through www.destincommun.fr

More in Common can be reached by email at contact@moreincommon.com and through www.moreincommon.com

Imprint

More in Common France is registered as an Association de Loi 1901 in Paris.
Our postal address is c/o Le Tank, 22bis Rue des Taillandiers, 75011, Paris, France



**Destin
Commun**
More in Common France



KANTAR