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PUBLIC POLICY EVALUATION IN FRANCE: MIXED PROGRESS DURING THE FIVE-YEAR TERM 2012-2017

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Summary

The scientific evaluation of the impact of public policies offers the possibility of a public debate based on solidly established facts, and, ultimately, the implementation of more effective policies. This brief offers the results of the five-year presidential term of 2012-2017 concerning the development of the evaluation process in France. The results are mixed: very positive, with the introduction of open data (access to administrative data for research purposes, etc.), but clearly less encouraging for actual evaluation research. Despite announcements made at the highest level, it must be acknowledged that the evaluation of public policies remains limited in France. It is most often reduced to an exercise in controlling funds spent, within the framework of audits. To correct this situation, it seems more necessary than ever to promote scientific evaluation, for example through dedicated funding from the French National Research Agency (ANR). ■

- Access to administrative data for research and evaluation has made great strides in France thanks to several legislative changes
- The practice of evaluating public policies remains very limited in France, despite a significant public relations campaign
- In France, evaluation too often remains synonymous with audit missions that assess the implementation of policies, rather than their effectiveness
- Providing resources to the French National Research Agency to fund scientific evaluation of public policies would make it possible to develop evaluations over the long term, bringing together perspectives from different disciplines, and with full independence.



The Institut des Politiques Publiques (IPP) has been developed through a scientific partnership between the Paris School of Economics and the Centre for Research in Economics and Statistics. IPP's aim is to promote quantitative analysis and evaluation of public policy using cutting-edge research methods in economics.

In his declaration of general policy in 2012, the Prime Minister, Jean-Marc Ayrault, assured that reducing the budget deficit, a major challenge for the government, would rely on "The evaluation of current policies one by one and their effectiveness"¹. The public commitment to evaluation was repeated several times at the most senior levels of national government, with French President François Hollande stating: "We need verification, evaluation and the critical regard of the social sciences on public policies"².

What are the results of the initiatives of 2012-2017 in promoting the evaluation of public policies?

Significant progress concerning access to public data

Open data

Beginning in 2013, Prime Minister Ayrault made a commitment to openness and the sharing of public data. He distributed a guide to the members of the government that argued for making public data freely available, a necessary condition for performing quality impact assessments. Within the government, Etalab was responsible for overseeing the release and sharing of public data, and important progress was made during its leadership.

The most visible advance concerning data access was the wider distribution of non-personal public data via data.gouv.fr. The partnership between Etalab and the government departments and bodies led to publishing a large number of databases that provide varied information on different types of public efforts. All of these data are not directly useful in the evaluation of public policies, but they offer the possibility of exploiting the considerable mass of information available within government agencies while greatly reducing the cost of access by potential users.

The open data process led the government to adopt legislative measures to facilitate the collection and distribution of data in several fields (cf. [Box 1](#)).

Box 1: Recent open data legislation

Law of 7 August 2015 on France's new regional organisation

The purpose of Article 106 of this law is to require territorial authorities and public agencies for cooperation between municipalities to make their public data available.

Ordinance 2015-899 of 23 July 2015 concerning public contracts

In effect for all public contracts involving competitive bidding since January 2016, the ordinance requires buyers to make public contract data freely available in a user-friendly format.

Law of 28 December 2015 on the free availability and conditions for re-use of public sector data

This law transcribes a 2013 European directive. It institutes a principle of free availability in all sectors.

Law of 10 July 2015 on economic growth, activity and equal opportunity

Article 4 of this law requires transporters and other transportation service providers to make their main data available in a user-friendly format. The orders implementing this law were taken in June 2016.

Health Law of 17 December 2015

Adopted following work begun in 2014 by the "Open data in Healthcare" Commission named by the Minister of Social Affairs and Health, the purpose of this law, and its Article 47 in particular, is to organise "open data in healthcare" and a wider availability and better use of personal medical data for research and innovation.

Digital Republic Law of 8 October 2016 This law favours data access and circulation by requiring public agencies to freely provide their databases on the internet, on condition of anonymity and protection of confidentiality.

In addition to these legal advances, technical innovations have greatly facilitated data access. Public agencies have dropped licensed products in favour of open source software and are developing the necessary skills to manage it internally³. As a result of this progress, France has made significant strides in the international standings in the Open Data Index: in 2014, it occupied third place just after the United Kingdom and Denmark.

Access to administrative data for research purposes

In addition to the open data approach for non-personal data, some measures were taken during the five-year term to allow researchers to access, within a secure framework, administrative data protected by "confidential" categories (statistical, tax, etc.). This concerns business and individual tax data, workforce data and medical data. They cannot be made freely available because of the personal information they contain, but they are very valuable for research in that they can be used for very accurate evaluation of the impact of public policies on households and businesses.

The approach adopted for increasing the possibilities for access to administrative data for research consisted in preparing a procedure that included appropriate assurances for preserving data security and, notably, preventing non-authorized outside parties from gaining access. This procedure relies on i) an evaluation by a committee – the confidentiality committee – on the nature of the proposed projects, ii) an authorisation by the data producers and the personal commitment of the researchers to the data confidentiality clauses, and iii) secure access in which the IT environment prevents any unauthorised release of data⁴.

The legislative advances have initially concerned statistical data (modification in July 2008 of the Law of 1951 on Statistical Confidentiality), followed by tax data (Art. 104 of Law 2013-660 of 22 July 2013) and medical data (Law 2016-41 of 26 January 2016). Lastly, the Digital Republic Law contains several provisions intended to facilitate the use of public data for research: Article 36 extends to all public agencies the option of a confidentiality committee to allow secure access to their data; Article 38 puts in place a simplified procedure for matching public data.

1. Declaration of general policy by Jean-Marc Ayrault, Prime Minister, to the National Assembly on 3 July 2012.

2. François Hollande, President of the French Republic. 23 February 2017, Campus Jourdan.

3. Henri Verdier, *Les données au service de la transformation de l'action publique*, 2015 Report to the Prime Minister on Data Governance (December 2015).

4. One of these secure remote access measures is that offered by the CASD of GENES, www.casd.eu

These legislative advances place France among the most advanced countries for researcher access to administrative data⁵. The countries of northern Europe (Denmark, Sweden and Norway) have long made their administrative data available for research, resulting in a wealth of scientific research on public policies in these countries involving researchers of all nationalities. In economics, for example, a significant part of the most cited research in recent years concerns studies based on Danish, Swedish and Norwegian data. The situation has been so striking that some American researchers, among the most influential, deemed it necessary to send an open letter to the National Science Foundation⁶ to express their concern about nothing less than the loss of American leadership due to their own difficulties in accessing administrative data in the United States.

If undeniable progress has been made during the five-year term to provide the scientific community with access to the tremendous wealth of administrative data in France, the impact of this development on the quality of evaluation research will only be felt over the long term. In contrast, the results of the evaluations that were actually carried out in France during the last five years are clearly less positive.

Rather mixed results for carrying out evaluation research

From RGPP to MAP

The French General Review of Public Policies (RGPP) was set up in 2007 to analyse the missions and actions of the State and territorial authorities, in order to reduce public expenditure and increase the effectiveness of public policies. From its inception, the RGPP stated its intention of carrying out a major audit of public policies, covering all ministries and regional authorities. Responsibility for this audit was assigned to the General Inspectorates, working in coordination with consultancies, which some interpreted as a sign of defiance with regard to the administration.

With the election of François Hollande in 2012, the desire was expressed to close the RGPP in order to reduce expenditure as part of a particularly tight budget. Against this backdrop, the Secretariat-General for Government Modernisation (SGMAP) was created and numerous announcements were made to the effect that impact assessments of public policies would be a priority of the presidential term, rather than the familiar audits and expense reviews that had previously been favoured. These assessments were to be used to judge, scientifically and rigorously, the effectiveness of various public policies.

5. Bozio, A. and Geoffard, P.-Y. (2017), *L'accès des chercheurs aux données administratives*, Cnis report.

6. Card, D., Chetty, R., Feldstein, M. and Saez, E. (2010), *Expanding Access to Administrative Data for Research in the United States*, NSF white paper.

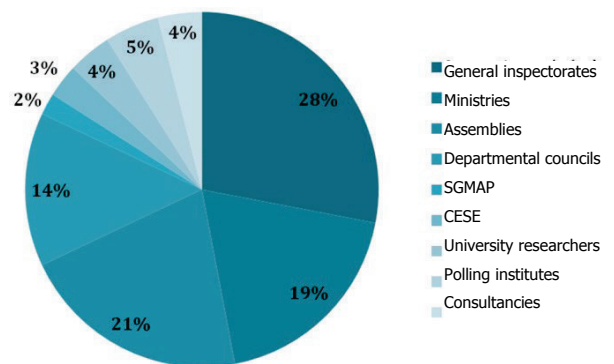
7. Internet site of the Secretariat-General for Government Modernisation, methodology for government modernisation evaluations

Despite the change in discourse, it quickly became clear that the methodology of the evaluations performed by SGMAP were not significantly different from the audit and control methods, even though these were considered incomplete: an initial phase consists in preparing a diagnostic based primarily on interviews with those responsible for implementing the public policy and a consultation concerning the requirements of the beneficiaries of the policy; using this diagnostic, scenarios for reforming the situation are considered in a second phase in an effort to improve the targeted public policy⁷. The top priority of the evaluations thus remains saving money and optimising State services. The Prime Minister, Manuel Valls, directly set the budgetary objectives of the evaluations: a savings of one billion euros in 2014, and another billion in 2015.

Audit and control rather than impact assessment

The number of evaluation reports produced by the main institutions whose mission is to assess public policies (MAP, Parliament, CESE and France Stratégie) can be estimated at a little more than one hundred, if only reports which explicitly state their purpose is evaluative in nature are counted. The analysis of the categorisation of authors of these reports shows the strong domination of control bodies and ministries responsible for implementing the policies under evaluation (Figure 1). In certain cases, production was outsourced and given to an outside service provider (9% of reports). These service providers are most often consultancies or polling organisations, but much more rarely they are experts in the techniques of evaluating public policies in accordance with international research standards. In fact, only 4% of the reports analysed were produced by independent university researchers.

Figure 1 – Authors of evaluation reports



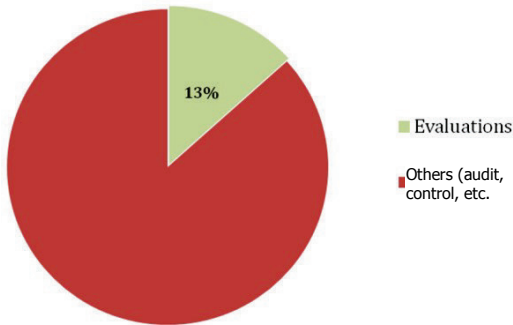
Note: Some reports were prepared by several government agencies. In this case, each author was counted. For increased legibility, the authors of the reports have been organised into major categories. Reports by the Cour des Comptes (French national audit office) are considered as analyses.

NB: 28% of the reports that were analysed were prepared by the French General Inspectorates.

Sources: Calculations by authors using information published on the websites of SGMAP, National Assembly, CESE, Senate and France Stratégie.

Analysis of the methodologies used in all of these evaluation reports highlights the very low share (13%) of research using evaluation techniques that approximate international standards in the field (Figure 2). Most of the analyses resemble more audits for implementing public actions, and the traditional function of controlling public expenses.

Figure 2 – Methodology of published evaluation reports



Note: More than 100 reports by various institutions that performed evaluations were analysed. Reports by the Cour des Comptes were not part of the analysis.

NB: 13% of the reports analysed are evaluations that comply with international standards on impact assessments.

Sources: Calculations by authors using information published on the websites of SGMAP, National Assembly, CESE, Senate and France Stratégie.

Despite the government’s announcements on the importance of evaluating public policies, it must be observed that the reality of the past five years did not live up to the objectives set out.

How can more evaluation be encouraged in France?

France has solid assets for carrying out top-notch evaluations of public policies, which are likely to advance knowledge of their effectiveness, to promote enlightened public choices. The presidential term saw notable progress in terms of access to public data, and these changes raise no doubts about long-term effects on the quality of future evaluations. How to encourage this type of research remains to be seen, however.

First, the distinction between public policy evaluations and audit and control practices must be clearly established. While these practices are entirely legitimate – the improvement of government efforts relies on effective implementation – their ultimate aim is very different: they do not seek to establish the impact of the policy and thus cannot provide public decision-makers with the necessary information regarding the effectiveness of a measure compared with other possible options.

In addition, it is imperative to consider institutional arrangements that would elicit a greater number of evaluations with the scientific rigour and independence necessary to usefully fuel public debate. In general, this type of research takes much more time than administrative reports, but their contribution to understanding the effects of public policies is often major and long-lasting. To encourage this evaluation process, one little-discussed option in France consists in setting aside a budget for evaluation within the French National Research Agency (ANR). Long-term research, mobilising research teams from a variety of disciplines and drawing on their differing methodologies, and whose publications would be evaluated in scientific reviews with an international editorial committee, could then be considered. The other advantage of such an approach would be public funding of independent teams not directly related to the conflicts of interest that naturally emerge from any public contract by an agency under the supervision of a politician who implemented the policy under evaluation. The agencies may participate in selecting the policies to evaluate, without participating directly in the process of selecting evaluators, which would be the exclusive purview of the ANR.

While other institutional arrangements are certainly possible, the current fragmentation in the evaluation effort has resulted in the lack of a coherent national strategy. In this context, promoting rigorous and independent evaluation of public policies deserves to be among the priorities of the next presidential term.