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The French Protest Pension Reform



People in Paris Protest Pension Reform, Photo Credit: CNN

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People in Paris Protest Pension Reform, Photo Credit: CNN

Over one million people protested in France over President Macron's planned pension reforms to increase the age from 62 to 64.¹ The protests have been ongoing since January 2023 but have recently escalated.

On Thursday, March 16, 2023, President Macron used the 49:3 clause in the French constitution to pass the law without the National Assembly voting.² Paragraph 3 of Article 49 in the French constitution "allows the prime minister, "after deliberation by the Council of Ministers to force a bill through the Assemblée Nationale with no vote."³

The National Assembly has 24 hours to pass a motion of no-confidence. If it is accepted, the law passes. Otherwise, there would need to be new elections.⁴ In addition, prior French Presidents used article 49:3, such as Francois Hollande, due to the fierce political struggle with the Socialist Party in attempting to get a bill voted by the National Assembly.⁵ On Monday afternoon (Paris time), a no-confidence motion was put forward in the Parliament. However, it failed only by nine votes, allowing the law to take place.⁶ In France's political history, only one no-confidence vote was successful, in 1962. However, the labor unions have insisted that they are not backing down on opposing the measure.

The far-left New Ecological and Social Popular Union (NUPES), planned mass protests, and insisted on using "all means" to overturn the reform.⁷ Due to the protests, only two of the fourteen metro lines in Paris operated. While protests had been taking place, Thursday marked the first day of coordinated action.⁸ Notably, the Bordeaux Town Hall was set on fire, while the government was hoping that the rising violence in the protests will dissuade more people from taking part.⁹ The labor unions have realized the risk of protests spiraling out of their control as well.



The French National Assembly, Photo Credit, [Le Monde](#)

President Macron has defended this policy by arguing that there are more old people in France and fewer working-aged people. Compared to other countries in Europe, the retirement age is lower.¹⁰ In addition, President Macron wants to check government spending and reduce the national deficit on par with the EU standard.¹¹ When asked about whether he had any regrets in a television interview, Macron stated, “I don’t live with regret, I live with will, tenacity, engagement, because I love our country and people.”¹² However, the history of past French protests demonstrates that, eventually, the government will have to cave into some of the demands.

Macron also emphasized, “between opinion polls and the national interest, I chose the national interest.”¹³ However, Macron’s reaction risks making the situation worse. Jean-Francois Vilian, a retired insurance worker, claimed, “there’s money in France... Only it’s not in the hands of working people. We see financial companies making billions in profits, and they share very little of it.”¹⁴ Previously, Macron threatened to dissolve parliament due to gridlock but has since backed down. In 1997, President Chirac dissolved parliament, but his party lost the majority. Even if new elections were to be called, it is highly likely that the far-right, led by Marine Le Pen’s National Rally (formerly known as Le Fronte Nationale), would win the majority.¹⁵

Adding to the protests was the planned visit by King Charles to France as part of his first overseas visit to France and Germany. However, in a statement provided by Elysée and Buckingham Palace, the trip had been postponed.¹⁶ Parisian writer Stephan Clarke stressed that “normally the French would welcome a British king. But in this moment, people protesting are on high alert for any sign of privilege and wealth.” Initially, King Charles was planning to visit Versailles, but Clarke adds that “it does not look good. This seems very 1789. The opulent Versailles, once the dazzling center of royal Europe and a focal point of the French Revolution, is an enduring symbol of social inequalities and excess.”¹⁷



Photo Credit, [Politico](#)

The current protests in France reflect broader trends in French politics and society. Twenty-three years ago, people in France would advance within the same company if the work was good. However, today, many companies are not intending to hire people for life.¹⁸ In addition, President Macron's popularity has declined ever since the gilets jaunes (yellow vest) protest movement in 2018, which was sparked after an increase in the fuel tax.¹⁹

In the June 2022 legislature elections, President Macron lost his parliamentary majority. In addition, Macron's decision to use the 49:3 clause to pass the law illustrates the growing power of the presidency. Charles de Gaulle established this article to stabilize France, given its tumultuous history with change in governments in the aftermath of World War II.²⁰ However, this decision has "pushed France into a political crisis — one that raises questions over the very architecture of the Fifth Republic and the extensive power it hands the head of state."²¹

While President Macron was elected in 2016 with much optimism and seen to mitigate the influence of the far-right, six years of government by the centre has eroded support. Opponents call him "le président des riches" (the president of the rich), given his decision to cut the wealth tax. More broadly, France's centre left, and centre right parties have gradually been losing influence. "What is left is a contest between Mr. Macron and a cacophony of extremists on the left and the right."²² In April 2023, France's Constitutional Council struck down some elements of the new law, but keep the increase in the retirement age which is cherished by the French. The Council also refused a second chance for the opposition to seek a referendum to overturn the ruling. While Macron has accomplished what he set as his goal, it comes at a great political price, given his popularity has sunk in the polls.



Protestors in Paris overwhelm the Champs-Élysées Photo Credit, [Al Jazeera](#)

Further Reading

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² Manuela López Restrepo, “What France's revolt over raising the retirement age says about the attitude to work,” *NPR*, March 20th, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/03/20/1164705654/france-retirement-age-emmanuel-macron-no-confidence-vote-protest>

³ Les Décodeurs, “French Constitution: How does Article 49.3 allow a bill to be passed without a vote,” *Le Monde*, October 19th, 2022, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/france/article/2022/10/19/france-how-does-article-49-3-allow-a-bill-to-be-passed-without-a-vote_6001019_7.html

⁴ Ibid.

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⁷ Cyrielle Cabot, “Protests, appeals, referendum: What’s next for France’s pension reform?” *France 24*, March 21st, 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/france/20230321-protests-appeals-referendum-what-s-next-for-france-s-pension-reform>

⁸ Dalal Mawad, Aurore Laborie, Oliver Briscoe and Joshua Berlinger, “French airports, schools and oil refineries hit by national strike over pension age increase,” *CNN*, March 23rd, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/03/23/business/france-national-strike-pension-reform/index.html>

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¹¹ “France’s Pension Reforms: Why is There so Much Opposition,” March 17th, *Wall Street Journal*, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ygM7Z6I9rBg>

¹² Paul Kirby, “French reforms: Macron refuses to give way as pension protests escalate,” *BBC*, March 22nd, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-65037507>

¹³ Dalal Mawad, Aurore Laborie, Oliver Briscoe and Joshua Berlinger, “French airports, schools and oil refineries hit by national strike over pension age increase,” *CNN*, March 23rd, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/03/23/business/france-national-strike-pension-reform/index.html>

¹⁴ Lisa Bryant, “Massive Protests, Strikes Continue as Opposition Digs In Against French Pension Reform,” *VOA*, March 23rd, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/massive-protests-strikes-continue-as-opposition-digs-in-against-french-pension-reform/7018904.html>

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¹⁹ The Economist, “Emmanuel Macron seems to be surrendering. Or is it tactical retreat?” *The Economist*, December 15th, 2018, <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2018/12/15/emmanuel-macron-seems-to-be-surrendering-or-is-it-tactical-retreat>



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