

# 21ST CENTURY FRENCH REVOLUTION? OR WHY ATTEMPTS TO REFORM THE WELFARE STATE ARE MET WITH RESISTANCE

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## ABSTRACT

In December 2019, France experienced the most dramatic strikes in decades and, with over 800,000 people protesting, the City of Lights came to a screeching halt.

This research attempts to make sense of the 2019/20 French pension strikes that paralysed the country for weeks by exploring the broader question of why welfare state reforms are frequently met with exceptional levels of popular resistance. First, it will discuss how a declining manufacturing sector and the new needs of an aging population put mounting pressure on the welfare state. The article then analyses both political and institutional barriers to reform, and concludes that the system's resilience lies within its broad societal support and the electoral backlash associated with unpopular policies.

More than anything, the strikes in France demonstrate that the welfare state has become an integral part of most democracies, and policy-makers cannot expect citizens to give up their economic rights easily. At the same time, it does not seem like the status quo can be maintained either. In order for the welfare state to retain its relevance, it will need to mature and evolve in a way that allows it to meet the new social needs and changing challenges of a post-industrial society

## INTRODUCTION

On 5 December 2019, France experienced the most extensive strikes in decades as workers from more than 30 unions took to the street to protest President Macron's plan for a pension reform. The country has seen major transportation issues and disruption of government services with more than 800,000 people striking and demonstrating nation-wide, from teachers to railway employees to Paris Opera staff (The New York Times, 2019). With social movements lasting well into the new year, the 2019-20 French pension strikes have surpassed even the massive protests of 1995, which arose in response to similar reform proposals (Le HuffPost, 2019; BBC, 2020). The strikes serve as a testimony for the kind of backlash political leaders have to fear when undertaking the difficult yet increasingly necessary task of reforming the welfare state system.

The term "welfare state" can be defined as a system of state institutions and services (e.g. health care, pensions, unemployment benefits, etc.) that are charged with the protection and promotion of citizens' wellbeing. The most obvious, yet striking aspect to note is that the idea of the welfare state enjoys immense support from citizens across Europe. Its provisions are understood as economic rights to which citizens are entitled and, as such, the state's responsibility to provide a minimum standard of living has slowly become consolidated (Lee et al., 2017).

In the last few decades, however, demographic shifts and the effects of de-industrialisation - i.e. fewer people working in manufacturing - have put a mounting financial strain on the welfare state causing budget deficits and state debts to gradually rise to unsustainable levels. There is pressure not only to reform, but to retrench – a term that means reducing the extent of – the welfare state provisions. Yet social policy has proven

to be remarkably resilient to such attacks since its conception. This paper will analyse the growing tension between a "frozen" welfare state and the rising number of external and internal factors that put a mounting strain on said system. It will also attempt to answer some vital questions: What are the main pressures facing the welfare state? What explains the system's continued stability in the face of these pressures? And how can we account for the massive levels of popular mobilisation in France that occurred in response to the proposed pension reform?

This article is divided into three parts. First, it will discuss the pressures on the welfare state, specifically the consequences of diminished productivity gains in the service sector and the challenges posed by demographic aging. The second part will analyse impediments to welfare state reform in more depth. It will argue that there are institutional as well as political barriers to reform, such as a system's inherent resistance to change and the electoral backlash associated with unpopular policies. Finally, the paper will analyse the current backlash to pension reforms in France by taking a closer look at the history and changing power configurations of French pension politics.

Finally, it is important to note that the acknowledgment of a growing pressure to retrench is not the same as endorsing retrenchment. As will become clear in the course of this paper, citizens are willing to go to great lengths to defend the economic rights for which they have fought in the past. Pointing out that these rights create unsustainable pressure on a flawed system means reaching one of two possible conclusions: we can either follow the system's internal logic and determine that retrenchment is necessary and economic entitlements must be relinquished, or we can view the growing tension as an opportunity and an incentive for researchers and policy makers

alike to look beyond reform. We might find that a more radical solution is in order.

### PRESSURES FACING THE WELFARE STATES IN THE POST-INDUSTRIAL ERA

The welfare state was created in the 19th century as a response to the societal ills that accompanied the Industrial Revolution. Since then, new challenges have emerged that require the adjustment, restructuring and at times retrenchment of the current welfare state system. On the following pages, the word “post-industrial” will be used to describe the conditions prevalent in advanced welfare states that have shifted from relying on their manufacturing sector to a reliance on their service economy.

#### The Effects of De-industrialisation

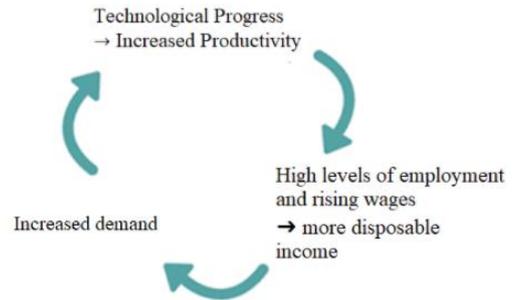
As industrial societies have matured, they have experienced unprecedented advancements in productivity, meaning that fewer people were needed to maintain the same level of output in the manufacturing sector. In response, demand for labour shifted instead to the service sector. Indeed, in the majority of developed countries nowadays, most people are employed in the service sector – a phenomenon that is described as “de-industrialisation” (Pierson, 2001).

However, most service work is not scalable in the same manner as manufacturing. For example, new technology might enable a farmer to triple their food output and lead to fewer people working in agriculture, while a service that relies on interpersonal contact, such as a massage or elderly care, usually has a strict upper capacity limit that is only marginally influenced by technological progress. In other words, an individual nurse will only be able to provide care for a limited number of people before the quality of his or her service suffers. Therefore, productivity gains in the service sector are significantly lower than in manufacturing, and as more people are employed in this field the level of productivity generally decreases. At the same time, the growth of a nation’s GDP per capita tends to slow down in kind. This means that since de-industrialisation causes lower productivity rates - i.e. fewer goods or services are produced by each individual - economic growth will necessarily stagnate (Pierson, 2001.).

While it is not the only factor, decreased productivity has been linked to the stagnation of wages that can be observed in almost all advanced democracies (Strain, 2019). Most recently, this relation has been substantiated by Stansbury and Summers in their 2017 study. They found that in the US, a rise of one percentage point in productivity corresponds to a 0.73 percent increase of the median compensation. It is also worth noting that this correlation was significantly weaker (0.53 percentage points) for production and non-supervisory workers, suggesting that this section of the workforce benefits from economic growth to a substantially lesser degree. However, a stagnation of wages has drastic implications for welfare states, particularly those that depend most heavily on income contributions to finance social services (Pierson, 2001).

According to Iversen and Wren (1998) this post-industrial shift creates a “service economy trilemma” between income equality, government spending and employment growth. When manufacturing was still the most important source of employment, it gave rise to a positive feedback loop with increased productivity through technological progress leading to more employment and rising wages. The resulting higher average income per person boosted the demand for more manufactured goods, which in turn promoted productivity. The positive feedback loop of the manufacturing sector is shown in Figure 1.

However, since the shift to the service sector has created an inelastic or almost “maxed-out” productivity, it has become increasingly difficult to generate more demand through low prices while at the same time maintaining rising wages for service workers (Iversen and Wren, 1998).

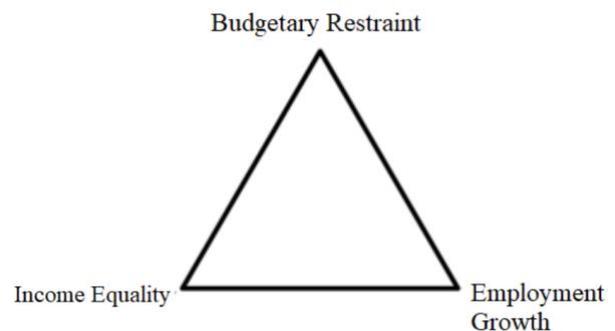


**Figure 1 - Productivity gains create a self-reinforcing "virtuous circle", leading to high levels of employment and rising wages**

Esping-Anderson (1993) distinguishes between two potential solutions to this difficulty: either wages, particularly those of already lower paid workers, could be allowed to decline further in order to promote demand and increase employment – a move that is likely to exacerbate income inequality within a given country; or, alternatively, the government could invest more of its budget to expand public sector employment and maintain artificially high wages, which comes at the cost of higher taxes and/or an increased deficit in the government’s finances.

From this observation, Iversen and Wren (1998, p. 513) conclude that “[b]udgetary restraint in the sense of no or only moderate government spending on services is therefore difficult to combine with earnings equality and high employment in the emerging service economy.” As visualised in Figure 2, only two out of these three policy objectives can be successfully pursued at the same time.

This trilemma serves as an example for how the post-industrial shift to unscalable service sector employment puts a financial strain on the welfare state and creates pressure to reform the system.



**Figure 2 : The Service Economy Trilemma:**

Only two of the three depicted objectives can be successfully pursued at the same time

## An Ageing Population and Changing Labour Market Participation

Similarly, European societies are currently undergoing demographic changes that have necessitated increased budgetary spending on welfare provision, which is difficult to sustain. This phenomenon can most clearly be observed in the negative implications an ageing population has for the pension system. As the baby boom generation moves slowly from active labour market participation into retirement, the strain put on the welfare state is twofold. Firstly, since this generation's fertility rate was below replacement rate, there are now fewer working aged individuals available to replace them. At the same time, the mortality rate has decreased, meaning that there will be more and more pensioners who depend on the welfare state for a longer time as their lifespan continues to increase (Häusermann and Palier, 2008). As the share of retired people of the population grows, the need for services like nursing and elderly care rises as well. This development puts pressure on the government to reduce the generosity of pension entitlements and to maximise employment among younger generations, since their wage contributions are frequently the system's primary source of funding (Jæger and Kvist, 2003).

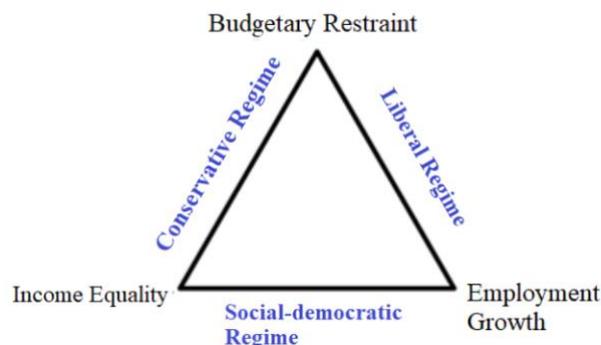
Besides these difficulties to fulfil its prior commitments, the welfare state also often lacks the flexibility to adequately address new societal problems associated with changing labour market participation (Pierson, 2001). For example, as women have moved into the workforce, they started contributing with their income taxes to the financial fundament of the welfare state, but at the same time also created new social needs, like the provision of maternity leave and child care services. In this sense, both demographic ageing and increasing female participation ~~feminisation~~ in the labour market create demand for more service work, like child and elderly care, and are thus reinforcing the previously discussed service economy trilemma. As states scramble to alleviate the new problems of a post-industrial society by increasing the number of reasonably well-paying jobs in the service sector, they risk either further exacerbating already high levels of income inequality, or increasing the financial strain on their budget. As states are torn between pressure to reduce their deficit and demands to expand their welfare provisions, the need for reform becomes more and more urgent. However, the welfare system has proven particularly difficult to change. The following section will explore the reasons for this resistance.

### IMPEDIMENTS TO WELFARE STATE REFORM

The institutional and political barriers to reform are multifaceted and complex. The first important aspect to note is that, while all post-industrial welfare states face similar pressures (which have been outlined in the previous section) not all welfare states are created equal. The kind of reforms that can be feasibly implemented depends heavily on the type of welfare state prevalent in a nation. Esping-Andersen (1990) calls this the "three worlds of welfare capitalism" and distinguishes between the social-democratic, the conservative and the liberal regime. These represent ideal types that are underpinned by distinct ideologies and map onto the three axes of the service sector trilemma.

In essence, the liberal system is prevalent in much of the anglosphere and is characterised by its emphasis on the free market and comparatively low social spending; in this system, fiscal discipline and employment growth are prioritised. On the other hand, most continental European countries espouse a conservative welfare state, which is shaped by and reproduces traditional societal structures, but also grants a lot of power to trade unions. Since high income inequality is seen as a risk for social cohesion, these states tend to pursue earnings equality

and budgetary restraint at the expense of lower employment levels (particularly among women and young people). Finally, the social-democratic system, which is common in Nordic countries, tends to offer the most universal welfare entitlements facilitated by high social spending. Here, higher taxes and/or public debt is the trade-off for income equality and employment growth (Iversen and Wren, 1998).



**Figure 3 : The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism mapped onto the Service Sector Trilemma**

This model also suggest that the three types have different internal mechanisms and each follow a distinct internal logic. Bonoli and Palier (2000) have argued that the existing institutional structures heavily restrict what kind of policy change is possible. This phenomenon is described as "path dependency" and constitutes the main institutional hurdle for welfare state reform. Every prior political decision limits the number of available reform options, meaning that each regime type is only able to evolve within the individual logic of its system. Accordingly, effective welfare reform has to overcome different hindrances in different regions of Europe. For example, pension reforms in a liberal regime like the UK have focused on increasing the role of private insurance and means-testing, whereas France has followed the logic of a continental welfare system by defending its contributory scheme and only tentatively encouraging private pension funds (Bonoli and Palier, 2000). In addition to this self-reinforcing nature of the system, most democratic regimes have a number of veto points built into their institutional set-up that can be an important barrier to reforms (Vis, 2010). This is because at different stages during the reform process, opposing political parties might have the power to stop or even reverse any changes that have been made.

Furthermore, and as mentioned in the introduction, the system's popularity constitutes a major political challenge to welfare state reform. In fact, the welfare state system is not only institutionally self-reinforcing, but also electorally. This means that it consolidates its existence by creating the very voter constituencies that oppose its retrenchment (Häusermann and Palier, 2008). In democratic societies the broader and more numerous the voter base that benefits from welfare programmes, the more difficult it will be to pass legislation that reduce these entitlements without risking major electoral backlash.

Accordingly, it appears to be more politically feasible to retrench social services that only a comparatively small part of the population directly benefits from, e.g. disability benefits, rather than those which most people are entitled to, such as pensions. It is for this reason, that Vis (2010) refers to welfare reform as "the politics of risk-taking". The logic of a democratic system basically demands that any governmental coalition that wants to stay in power should try to avoid unpopular reforms or risk losing political support. The result tends to be procrastination to implement necessary reforms and a focus on smaller, less-crucial legislation that is easier to pass (Bonoli and

Palier, 2007). This gamble with the public reaction is also reflected in the timing of important reforms. Most major reforms are attempted in the beginning or the middle of an election cycle – far enough removed from the next vote that any backlash will have hopefully dissipated by that point (Bonoli, 1997).

Other important factors are the impact of the average voter and the strength of any corporate partners, such as trade unions. Insights from psychology suggest that people display a negativity bias (Vis, 2010). This means that taking away or reducing financial entitlements from welfare programmes for the average voter is likely to create a negative reaction and possibly result in electoral punishment, even when the reform's overall impact on society is favourable. Even right-wing voter bases, which are typically more wealthy and thus less dependent on welfare provisions, have grown fond of publicly funded services like health care and education, and are unwilling to give them up (Bonoli and Palier, 2007).

Furthermore, the involvement of corporate partners, particularly trade unions, in the provision and management of welfare services tends to create an additional layer of resistance to the implementation of any policy that would diminish the power of these organisations, i.e. shift to the private sector or general retrenchment. In particular, unions' capacities to organise strikes and social movements is a crucial factor in how likely a reform is to pass or even to be proposed at all. Therefore, any successful welfare reform needs not only to overcome the institutional hurdles of a democratic, path-dependent, self-reinforcing system, but also secure the support of the average voter and the corporate partners.

However, despite these obstacles, the welfare state has not completely stagnated in the post-industrial era. In fact, most governments have made at least some changes to the provision of welfare in last two decades (Vis, 2010), sometimes creating popular backlash in the process. The final section of this essay will study the case of the pensions reform politics of a continental welfare system like France.

### **PENSION REFORMS IN CONSERVATIVE WELFARE REGIMES – A FRENCH CASE STUDY**

“When it comes to pension reforms, it's more than enough to bring down several governments.” - Michel Rocard (Prime Minister of France, 1988-1991)

While the social policy has shown itself to be very resilient nearly everywhere, the French pension system has long been held up as a particularly extreme case, where substantial reforms appear almost impossible (Mandin and Palier, 2006). An important reason for this resilience lies within the country's institutional framework. France is a typical example of a conservative welfare state that relies heavily on social insurance (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Keeping in mind that this represents only one of Esping-Andersen's three worlds of welfare state capitalism, analysing French pension politics can nonetheless provide a more concrete example for the ways in which a country's institutional set-up is able to prevent or at least slow down welfare state reforms, even in the face of mounting financial pressure.

The French pension system has a number of characteristics that make it particularly difficult to reform. As discussed in the previous section, it is harder to reduce welfare provisions that benefit large voter constituencies, and in the case of pension retrenchment, opposition can be expected to come from the particularly politically influential cohort of the baby boomer generation (Bonoli, 1997). Furthermore, pensions in France are not managed by the state, but by corporate partners and are

financed through “pay-as-you-go” (PAYG) schemes (Bonoli and Palier, 2007), meaning employees and employers pay social contributions into a pension fund as part of their salary. This set-up tends to reinforce the common understanding of a pension as a “deferred wage” (Mandin and Palier, 2006) and thus creates a high level of entitlement.

Additionally, PAYG schemes make the French pension system particularly vulnerable to demographic changes. France's population is already among the fastest aging in the world (United Nations, 2019), which means that, since there are fewer working-aged individuals that can contribute a part of their income to support an increasing number of retirees, an imbalance is created. In fact, the reliance on generous public pensions and an early retirement age have created a situation where the funds accrued through PAYG schemes are insufficient to sustain the current level of pension entitlements (Bonoli, 1997). Most recently, Macron has tried to garner support for his reform plans by pointing towards the results of a 2019 study, which predicted that, at the current rate, the pension system will run a deficit of up to €17 billion by 2025 (Conseil d'orientation des retraites, 2019).

Despite these pressures, the history of French pension politics shows that past reforms have only been passed slowly, incrementally and, frequently, against significant popular backlash. For example, in 1995 Prime Minister Alain Juppé was forced to abandon his reform plans to raise the public sector retirement age and universalize the pension system after massive strikes had paralyzed public transport for more than three weeks (Bonoli, 1997). This earlier failed attempt mirrors the mobilisation that followed Macron's reform plans in December 2019. Similar to Juppé, Macron proposed plans that aim to streamline the current 42 different pension schemes into a single point-based system, which would effectively raise the age at which workers can expect to receive a full pension and likely reduce benefits for millions of workers (Dodman, 2019). In response, unions have organised the most extensive protests in decades, with most strike action happening between December 2019 and January 2020. While social movements slowed in February, and were effectively ended by the Covid-19 pandemic, Macron has already announced plans to put his reforms at least partially back on the agenda (franceinfo, 2020). If this happens, a second rendition of the historic 2019-20 pension strikes does not seem unlikely (Ledsom, 2020).

While it remains to be seen if Macron will be able to impose his vision for French pension system, it is clear that, considering the powerful role of trade unions to the backdrop of a population that has grown accustomed and fond of high pension entitlements, any attempt to reform the conservative pension system has to account for these obstacles and find a way to circumvent them. Despite frequent protests, the French pension system has not remained entirely “frozen”. For example, in 1993 – just two years before Juppé's failed reform – Prime Minister Balladour was able to make significant changes to private sector pensions, including substantial reduction of benefits. The government achieved this without triggering social movements, by engaging in a “quid pro quo” with labour unions: Balladour had to make concessions that further cemented the unions' control over the pension system, in order to receive the “green light” for his cost-saving policies (Bonoli, 1997).

Additionally, policymakers have employed two main strategies to pass reforms and avoid backlash: incrementalism and long phasing in periods (Bonoli and Palier, 2007). Adopting new reforms in small steps makes changes more palatable and somewhat obscures who the political losers will be. Similarly, ensuring that the effects of the reforms will only be felt in twenty to thirty years is another way of preventing current

voters from mobilizing against the political changes. This suggests that while welfare state reforms are possible, once certain provisions are popular among a broad voter base, even necessary reforms tend to take a long time and require a great deal of political will to bypass institutional barriers, and even a certain level of intentional obfuscation in order to avoid popular backlash.

### CONCLUSION

This analysis finds that a shift to the service sector as primary employment source, combined with demographic aging and changing labour market participation is making it increasingly difficult for the welfare state to meet its previous commitments without raising taxes and/or increasing the deficit. Despite these pressures, welfare state reforms tend to be slow and politically risky. The system's tenacity can be explained by its broad political popularity and the bargaining power of unions, as well as a number of institutional barriers associated with path-dependency. It appears that several decades of state-led welfare provision have created a broad societal consensus that there are

certain social rights that citizens are entitled to. Even in the face of de-industrialisation, demographic changes and other developments that have put a financial strain on the system, significant retrenchment or restructuring remains difficult. While these obstacles seem to broadly affect all welfare states, the feasible reform paths vary between different welfare regime types.

To illustrate this difficulty, this paper has discussed the case of pension reforms in a conservative system like France. The recurring strikes and social movements in response to the government's attempts to retrench pensions can best be understood as the eruption of an ever growing tension. Moreover, the strikes in France signify that the welfare state has become an integral part of most mature democracies and policy-makers cannot expect citizens to give up their economic rights easily. At the same time, it does not seem like the status quo can be maintained either. In order for the welfare state to retain its relevance, it will need to mature and evolve in a way that allows it to meet the new social needs and changing challenges of a post-industrial society.

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