



Written by [Ira Katz](#) on April 25, 2023

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What's Behind the French Riots?

When the French body politic is sick, the observable symptom is usually a riot. Demonstrations are so much a part of life in Paris that disruption in bus service by *manifestation* is programmed into the electronic display signs at bus stops. So what diagnosis can one make from the current bout of demonstrations and riots? Are these riots a sign of a passing sniffle, or an attack of profound ill health?

The explicit catalyst for the turmoil is the retirement-reform law proposed by President Emmanuel Macron and his prime minister, Elisabeth Borne. There are nuances of this law, such as increasing the pensions for the lowest wage earners, that most people don't really know about. I asked my French wife, an informed journalist, if she knew the details of the reform law. She did not. The essence that people take as the reform is that the retirement age will be increased from age 62 to 64. I found this quote from Marine Le Pen, the leader of one of the opposition parties (more below), at the website of the mainstream newspaper *Le Monde*: "Emmanuel Macron will now try ... to bring retirement to 64 years old. The French can count on all our determination to block this unjust reform."

From the government's point of view, this is a moderate and necessary reform. After all, the thinking goes, people are living longer. The French national debt is rising, especially after the Covid-era spending spree. Something needs to be done to put public finances in order. Certainly, from an American perspective, this appears to be a moderate proposal. For example, I spent 16 years working in France for a French corporation. I retired last year, in my American sense "early," at age 64.

So that is the controversy in a nutshell. As Americans, we can look down our noses at the lazy, ungrateful French who are always complaining and being disagreeable, marching in the streets of Paris. But I think there is much more to the story, and I will speculate on the implicit, deeper currents of French politics and society that are causing the rash of violence.

Consider recent French political history and the private and political figure of Emmanuel Macron. In 2005 the center-right President Jacques Chirac called a referendum on the treaty to establish a



AP Images

Taking to the streets: France has been racked by protests and riots since late January, ostensibly over unpopular pension reforms. But the reasons behind the protests may go much deeper.



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constitution for Europe. It was soundly defeated, with 55 percent voting “No” on a turnout of 69 percent. Nonetheless, the project for a European centralized state marched on without skipping a beat. Two rather listless, one-term presidential administrations of Nicolas Sarkozy and François Hollande followed Chirac from the right-center and the left-center, respectively. Major demonstrations against retirement reform also occurred during each of these administrations.

Macron is the product of elite schools such as the Lycée Henri-IV in Paris, where he completed high school. He obtained a master’s degree in public affairs at Sciences Po, and did training for a civil-service career at the highly selective École nationale d’administration (ENA). All of these schools are marks of elitism in everyday French society. After a stint in public administration, Macron was plucked out and put into a plum position with the Rothschild & Cie Banque, and in short order became a millionaire.

Macron had never run for any elected public office before becoming president in 2017, though he became a national figure as an economics minister during the administration of Hollande, when he made a name for himself as the prime mover for a reform of many French business practices that came to be called the “Macron Law,” which allowed more businesses to be open on Sundays and intercity bus travel. Incredibly, Macron had left the Socialist party to form his own, new party. His election was made possible by the miraculous removal of his key opponent, the Prime Minister under Sarkozy, François Fillon, by the French equivalent of an October surprise. It was found that Fillon’s wife had been paid for years in parliamentary jobs where she did minimal work. With Fillon wounded, Le Pen faced Macron in the second round of the presidential elections. She had no chance, as a sizable part of the electorate would never vote for the name Le Pen due to Marine’s notorious father. She publicly distanced herself from him, evidently for political reasons, though personal animosities roiling within the Le Pen family in all probability played a role in the split. Factual or not, there is a sense that Macron becoming president was more a process of top-down selection than bottom-up election.

During Macron’s first term there was popular unrest that began primarily due to high gasoline taxes; this quickly turned into the “yellow vest” movement. Weekly protests continued for months despite violent repression and some concessions from the government. The movement was conveniently ended with the advent of Covid restrictions. However, another protest movement began against the Covid restrictions themselves, especially the imposition of vaccine mandates and passports. Throughout, Macron expressed a royal attitude that approached contempt for many French people. He said, “*Eh bien là, les non-vaccinés, j’ai très envie de les emmerder.*” While the Google translation of this is, “Well there, the non-vaccinated, I really want to piss them off,” many took the use of the word “*merde*” to mean that he wanted to make their lives “sh*tty.”



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Little Napoleon: Emmanuel Macron is increasingly seen as representing the out-of-touch elite, and is facing intense criticism in France due to his pension reform, Covid policies, and support for Ukraine in its war with Russia. (AP Images)

The 2022 election cycle resulted in the same two candidates for the second round as in 2017. This time the distaste for Macron was palpable (the Le Pen vote increased from 33.9 percent to 41.5 percent), but there were still too many people who would never vote for Le Pen. However, there was a big surprise in the legislative elections that followed a few weeks after the presidential vote. Macron's party, which had won a large majority in 2017, fell far below majority status in the National Assembly. Furthermore, the two major parties (The Republicans, under various names, and the Socialists) that made up the center of the political spectrum for decades were not the key opposition parties. A group of far-left parties led by Jean Luc Melanchon won 131 seats. The single party with the second-largest number of seats was Le Pen's populist National Rally, with 89 seats (compared to 245 for Macron's party), making her the leader of the opposition. Also in opposition were the centrist Republicans, with 61 seats. Thus, not only was Macron's party in the minority, but the major opposition power was held by what is called the "*extrême droite*" and the "*extrême gauche*." During the Covid demonstrations, Macron and his supporters were derisively called the "*extrême centre*."

For the retirement reform, Macron primarily negotiated with the leaders of the Republicans to draft the bill. This not only annoyed the extreme parties, but also the *syndicats*. Americans would recognize the *syndicats* as labor unions, but they are in truth more all-encompassing social organizations. There are *syndicats* for virtually every type of group. For instance, in education, the teachers are represented by *syndicats*, but so are the students and even the parents. At any rate, the *syndicats* are angry and have organized regular strikes and large demonstrations for several weeks. The key disruptions have been in public transportation and trash pickup in major cities.

On the eve of the pension-reform vote, Macron applied article 49.3 of the French constitution, which allows the president to impose the law without a vote. The imposition of this article was followed by a no-confidence vote, which Macron survived with the help of some Republican members. With this issue, and on other issues such as Covid policies and the war in Ukraine, there has emerged a convergence of populist interests of the extreme left and extreme right against the center.

The application of 49.3 only served to increase public anger, and has turned some of the



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demonstrations into riots. However, for any street violence, “Black Bloc” Antifa anarchists or *agents provocateurs* should be considered as likely participants, if not the primary instigators. The garbage in the streets of Paris provided ready fuel for many fires. There is a sense that Macron is a character like Louis XVI who will be driven from office. As for that, only time will tell.

From at least the 2005 referendum to today, there is a sense that elitists such as Macron run the country for themselves and their European colleagues, not for the French people. The retirement reform is just the latest provocation for many of the demonstrators. All in all, the political unrest is a manifestation of the realignment of the old right-versus-left political divide into a globalist/elitist-versus-nationalist/populist divide that should sound familiar to many Americans.



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