

OCTOBER 2023

PENSION REFORM? A GIFT TO THE FAR RIGHT



AARON IRION

Pension Reform? A Gift to the Far Right

Aaron Irion

Photo: Made by John Chrobak using "Expose Premiera Donalda Tuska" by Platforma Obywatelska RP licensed under CC BY SA 2.0; "2010-10-02 - 100L4084" by Clem licensed under CC BY SA 2.0;"

The contents of articles published are the sole responsibility of the author(s). The Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies, including its staff and faculty, is not responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement expressed in the published papers. Articles do not necessarily represent the views of the Institute for European, Russia, and Eurasian Studies or any members of its projects.

©IERES 2023

It has now been six months since the dust settled in France's fight over a pension reform that, among other things, raised the retirement age from sixty-two to sixty-four. It is becoming ever clearer that the months-long opposition to the reform may benefit not only the country's left, who led the waves of protests and strikes, but also the far right – Marine Le Pen and her *Rassemblement National* (National Rally - RN), who are taking this opportunity to sell themselves as the party to take care of the French populace in the face of increased precarity and welfare retrenchment.

In April, as the fight was still raging and millions were pouring into the streets in defiance of French President Emmanuel Macron and his neoliberal reform, a shocking poll found that, were the Presidential election re-held, Le Pen would handily defeat Macron with a ten-point margin, even though only a year earlier Macron had defeated her by seventeen points.¹ In the aftermath of the reform, poll after poll has shown Le Pen and the RN's strength using a variety of metrics: Le Pen's favorables have outperformed Macron's since February;² by June, 40% of the country believed that the RN offered better solutions to the country's problems than Macron;³ and most of the recent polling shows that *Rassemblement* would win the European elections were they held today.⁴

This outcome is far from surprising when one looks to Europe over the past few decades. France, more than anything else, has simply been the latest in a line of European countries to run this experiment, and the latest to find this exact result. We should be careful assigning monocausal explanations to the dynamics described above. The truth is that the French far right has been increasingly mainstreamed for many years.⁵ The fact that the RN is achieving success now can only be explained by recounting a complex historical story. But we should also be clear-eyed about the role that the recent pension reform is playing in accelerating that success, and one way we can do that is by placing the French story into a wider context.

Across Europe, neoliberal parties have chipped away at the continent's welfare states, and pension reform has been one of the most dramatic manifestations of that project, punishing one of society's

¹ France 24, "Le Pen Would Beat Macron If French Presidential Vote Repeated: Poll," France 24, April 5, 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20230405-le-pen-would-beat-macron-if-french-presidential-vote-repeated-poll>.

² "Baromètre Politique Ipsos-Le Point | Ipsos," Ipsos, 2023, <https://www.ipsos.com/fr-fr/barometre-politique-ipsos-le-point>.

³ "Pour Plus de 4 Français Sur 10, Le Rassemblement National Propose Des Bonnes Solutions Aux Problèmes Du Pays," ELABE, June 21, 2023, <https://elabe.fr/le-pen-rassemblement-national/>.

⁴ See for instance, "Les Intentions de Vote Aux Élections Européennes - Ifop.Com," Ifop pour le Journal du Dimanche, September 2023, <https://www.ifop.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/120279-Resultats.pdf>.

⁵ Steve Bastow, "The Front National under Marine Le Pen: A Mainstream Political Party?," *French Politics* 16, no. 1 (2017): 19–37, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41253-017-0052-7>.

most vulnerable populations – the elderly. The result in many cases has been the undermining and obliteration of center-right and center-left parties and the ushering in of radical right parties. We should, then, not be surprised by the recent events in France, but rather take this opportunity once and for all to highlight the risk that pension reform poses: the emboldening and empowering of Europe’s far right.

Macron’s reform: Decades in the making

What did Macron’s reform entail and what was it replacing? The reform was obviously complex and filled with a number of technical elements, but three components in particular stand out. The first was that which received the most media coverage, namely the raising of the retirement age from sixty-two to sixty-four (or even sixty-seven in some cases, such as for individuals who interrupt their careers or begin working later). Secondly, the reform expedited a new contributory regime that upped the necessary contribution period (in effect, the number of work-years needed to receive a full pension) to forty-three years, effective 2027. Finally, so-called “special regimes” for specific subsets of workers – like those in the gas industry or transportation – are to be ended for everyone hired after the plan’s effective date.

In short then, it was a plan that made French pensions less generous, by asking the French public to do more to “earn them,” so to speak. The reforms will have economic effects, but also social and psychological ones. The reform may end what one journalist called the “cherished French exception,”⁶ an exception which in material terms meant that pension payouts in France were 20% higher than in Britain or Germany, that France’s retired population had a poverty rate of 4%, as opposed to the OECD average of 13%, and lower inequality to boot. While the structure of the pension reform may not directly shrink pension payouts, it is seen as regressive and punitive. The fight over it is as much about material conditions as identity – what it means to be French and *la valeur travail*.

For many in France, pensions are a stand-in for debates over the role of work itself, which is why when former President Francois Mitterrand lowered the retirement age from sixty-five to sixty in the early 1980s, he framed the policy within a larger struggle over “the time to live,”⁷ a framing which became resonant for proceeding generations of French people who view generous retirement as a social right. It is no surprise that the far-left Jean-Luc Mélenchon, in his rejection of Macron’s reform, invoked the language of time, too.⁸ It is this combination of material reality and social identity that explains why over 70% of the French public disapproved of Macron’s reforms.

Throughout the reform process, French government officials were quite cavalier about the unpopularity of their reform, e.g., Olivier Véran, a spokesman for the government, said, “We’re not reforming pensions to be popular but to be responsible.”⁹ Whether or not the reform was actually “responsible,” i.e., necessary, is up for debate and some analyses have found it to be unnecessary,¹⁰

⁶ Leigh Thomas, “Macron Pension Reform Ends Cherished French Exception,” Reuters, April 20, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/macron-pension-reform-ends-cherished-french-exception-2023-04-18/>.

⁷ Florence Dartois, “La Bataille Du Temps de Vivre”, UN Combat Socialiste Selon François Mitterrand,” ina.fr, 2023, <https://www.ina.fr/ina-eclairage-actu/francois-mitterrand-retraite-35-heures-temps-de-vivre>.

⁸ David Broder, “David Broder on Twitter: Beautiful Speech by @jlmelenchon on Free Time, Explaining What the Fight in France Is Really About,” Twitter, March 31, 2023, <https://twitter.com/broderly/status/1641910171914891264?s=20>.

⁹ Conor Murray, “Here’s What to Know about France’s Controversial Pension Reforms as Macron Survives No-Confidence Vote,” Forbes, March 21, 2023, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/conormurray/2023/03/20/heres-what-to-know-about-frances-controversial-pension-reforms-as-macron-survives-no-confidence-vote/?sh=6a3aa2e1675f>.

¹⁰ Romain Brunet, “Macron’s Pension Reform: Necessary Changes to an Unsustainable System?,” France 24, January 9, 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/france/20230109-macron-s-pension-reform-necessary-changes-to-an-unsustainable-system>.

while others have pointed out that it could be structured in a more just way (by raising taxes or placing the burden on corporations). The academic literature is rife with examples of how democratic discontent – the feeling that your representatives do not represent you – emboldens populists and the radical right, but it is somewhat rare for elected and government officials to outright say so, and to do the radical right’s work for it.

Nonetheless, the blatant disregard for popular democracy by the Macron government, supported by the once hegemon of the center-right *Les Républicains*, opens the door for more radical parties to present themselves as the true and only representatives of the people. This is especially true when one understands the pension reform as a precursor rather than an isolated reform. Throughout the process, economists and other commentators have framed the pension reform, to use one individual’s words, as “critical” for “demonstrating that France is reformable.”¹¹ The French public is aware of this, and aware of what “reformable” implies in this context: a more wholesale neoliberalization of the economy.

How then does the RN fit into the story of Macron’s pensions push? Answering this question requires going back further than the beginning of 2023. Macron’s pension reform plan dates back to his first campaign and term, where he attempted to pass it, before pulling back in light of the Covid-19 pandemic. Even then, Le Pen and the RN supported a vote of no confidence against the government, but their leverage was minuscule given their meager eight seats in Parliament. During the 2022 election, where Macron faced Le Pen, the latter used Macron’s pension plans as an object of attack, in an effort to win over working-class voters.

Macron’s pension reform package during the campaign was even more punitive than the one that eventually passed, and Le Pen opposed it, but did more than that: she proposed her own, except in her vision pensions were to be made *more* generous, not less.¹² The RN’s plan endorsed lowering the retirement age from sixty-two to sixty for those who began working at twenty years old, raising pension allowances for some seniors, and re-indexing pensions to grow at the rate of inflation. The RN’s opposition to Macron’s package was part and parcel of a broader program that was decidedly less neoliberal, even as it was simultaneously xenophobic, nationalist, etc. Often, Le Pen’s opposition strayed away from economic or technocratic explanations and rather embraced social and moral indignation. She called Macron’s reforms at times “simply completely unfair,”¹³ “terribly unjust and ineffective,”¹⁴ and an “unprecedented brutality,”¹⁵ among other things.

It is also important to note that Macron is not the first to try and reform French pensions, as I briefly detailed in another piece early this year.¹⁶ Over the last two decades, nominally conservative and social democratic parties alike have pushed for pension reforms that are more or less akin to one another, and to Macron’s. The rise of the French far right can be thought of as the “cost of convergence”

¹¹ Anna Cooban, “Forget the Pension Protests. France’s Economy Has Momentum | CNN Business,” CNN, May 1, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/04/30/economy/france-economy-pension-reform-protests/index.html>.

¹² “22 MESURES POUR 2022,” RN - Rassemblement National, 2022, <https://rassemblementnational.fr/22-mesures>.

¹³ News Wires, “Macron and Le Pen Spar over Pension Reform as French Presidential Race Tightens,” France 24, April 4, 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/france/20220404-macron-and-le-pen-spar-over-pension-reform-as-french-presidential-race-tightens>.

¹⁴ Leila Abboud, “‘We Must Work Longer’: Macron Prepares for Fight over French Pensions Reform,” Financial Times, January 9, 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/852db83e-fea6-40cc-ba3e-d89a90c29564>.

¹⁵ Marine Le Pen, “Marine Le Pen on Twitter: 🇫🇷 Cette #RéformeDesRetraites va Obliger Ceux Qui Travaillent Dur à Travailler 2 Ans de plus, Avec Une Mise En Œuvre d’une Brutalité Inouïe Pour Les Gens Qui Devaient Prendre Bientôt Leur Retraite. #LES4V,” Twitter, February 8, 2023, https://twitter.com/MLP_officiel/status/1623232949633142786.

¹⁶ Aaron Irion, “Flashpoint: The Far Right’s Response to Pension Reform in France,” illiberalism.org, March 17, 2023, <https://www.illiberalism.org/flashpoint-the-far-rights-response-to-pension-reform-in-france/>.

in this sense, convergence here referring to how center-right and center-left parties came to resemble one another over the course of the neoliberal era.¹⁷ In doing so, many voters came to believe that it did not matter which mainstream party they voted for – they are all the same anyway. In this atmosphere, some voters decided to take a chance on parties that decidedly were not the same as the mainstream convergers, i.e., radical parties like National Rally. For ostensibly left-wing parties – traditionally the parties of social welfare – in particular, the cost of neoliberalization has been high. In Berman and Snegovaya’s telling, it has not only resulted in “watering down the left’s distinctive historical profile,” but has also been “been crucial to the rise of a nativist, populist right.”¹⁸ It is no surprise then that the mainstream left and right parties in France are increasingly obsolete.

Le Pen’s positioning on pensions is indicative of her attempt to move her party away from its neoliberal past, and into a new character.¹⁹ It matters little whether this move is inspired by some genuine moral or political conversion, or even a genuine desire to protect the French working class *per se*. At base, what matter is that it tells us something about the changing political opportunity structures in France. It is, as much as anything else, political calculus.

Yet, as suggested by the figures cited in my introduction, it seems to be working. While we should not get ahead of ourselves and catastrophize about an imminent or guaranteed victory for the French far right, we should neither lean too heavily on the comfort of recent history, where the French public has always shown up to reject the far right in the end, even as it overperformed (2002, 2017, 2022). We should be very clear eyed about the fact that the far right *is* gaining popularity and *is* performing historically well, and that the next time could be different after all. And, more than anything we should be clear-eyed about the fact that this was all very predictable, as I will detail below using one comparative case study, though many others exist.

As in the East, so in the West

As I said, the sad fact is that one could have seen this coming. To illustrate that fact, it is worth looking to another European country in a very different historical context: Poland. Pension reform in Poland was part of a much more explicit and drastic neoliberalization project than in France, one that included mass industrial privatizations, privatizations in healthcare provision, etc. That being said, one can draw inferences about the political opportunity structures, the incentives, and the behaviors of the radical right in each country. We can do this not only because there are glaring similarities, but because we know that far-right parties learn from one another and forge international connections, including in the French and Polish case.²⁰

After 1989, with the fall of state socialism in Poland, succeeding governments embarked on a mass privatization program, turning the country into something like a laboratory of neoliberalism. This project reached healthcare, industry, and many more sectors but, critically, came for the country’s pensions regime. Even relative to other pension privatization schemes, the Polish example was quite brutal. It was not merely an economic decision, but one meant to foster a change of mentality in the

¹⁷ Sheri Berman and Hans Kundnani, “The Cost of Convergence,” *Journal of Democracy* 32, no. 1 (2021): 22–36, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2021.0013>.

¹⁸ Sheri Berman and Maria Snegovaya, “Populism and the Decline of Social Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 3 (2019): 5–19, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2019.0038>, 14,6.

¹⁹ Aaron Irion, “Right-Wing Welfare: A Pillar of Fourth Wave Far-Right Politics?,” *illiberalism.org*, February 13, 2023, <https://www.illiberalism.org/right-wing-welfare-stronga-pillar-of-fourth-wave-far-right-politicsstrong/>.

²⁰ Georgi Gotev, “Orbán, Le Pen, Salvini, Kaczyński Join Forces to Impact on the Future of EU,” *www.euractiv.com*, July 2, 2021, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/elections/news/orban-le-pen-salvini-kaczynski-join-forces-to-impact-on-the-future-of-eu/>.

Polish public, pushing them to embrace a mindset that was “able to react to market changes and devoid of human solidarity.”²¹ In other words, to turn them into capitalist automatons.

The 1999 Polish pension reform was one manifestation of this project and had a number of technical features. The most important being that it redirected a portion of many working peoples’ pension contributions to private *open pension funds* (OPF), something which had previously ceased to exist in the pay-as-you-go system. The monies in OPFs were invested in financial markets and therefore defined by a) volatility and b) the absence of an obligation on the part of the Polish state to guarantee a certain level of retirement benefit; and c) management fees that could not be guaranteed to be less than returns on investment. What this meant in practice is that, whereas the Polish state used to have a social contract with its citizens guaranteeing a defined level of old-age comfort, it now only mandated that they *contribute* a certain amount to their – hyperindividualized – future well-being.

Plainly speaking, this removed redistribution from the pension formula. No longer were funds redistributed from higher earners’ contributions (via their higher taxes) to less fortunate pensioners who had earned less over the course of their life. Rather, the latter group could now only count on the amount they had managed to contribute plus any investment earnings, all subject to the whims of the market of course. Rafał Woś has called this change “a transition from the so-called defined benefit system to the defined contribution model,” or “to put it bluntly - from the solidarity system in which subsequent generations of working people contribute to the pensions of today’s seniors and then expect the same from the next generations, to a world in which ‘everyone scrapes their own knecaps.’”²²

In that same 2016 piece, Woś cites Paweł Wojciechowski, then chief economist of Poland’s Social Insurance Institution (the state agency responsible for pensions), as saying “The money collected from citizens must remain a contribution, because only in this way will we force them to consciously take responsibility for their future. In other words, a citizen must be aware that a pension is earned, not received.” Like in the French case, with V éran’s comments, here again the language of responsibility is invoked, but not the responsibility of a government for its citizen’s wellbeing, but an individual’s responsibility for their own – however impossible that may be in the actually-existing world. This kind of hard-nosed neoliberal language may play well in certain circles, but alongside the unbelievable levels of popular opposition to said reforms, it looks more akin to taunting, and taunting often has consequences.

The introduction of OPFs was not wholesale, but part of a three-pillar strategy²³ that nonetheless amounted to a systemic reform,²⁴ and the partial privatization of social security. Some segments of the working population, e.g., farmers, miners, etc., retained special privileges vis-à-vis pensions. However, the partial privatization was accompanied by an “extensive propaganda campaign” meant to deter Poles from preferring public pension funds over OPFs, and created a feedback loop wherein the public pension system was presented as inadequate and unsustainable and so more and more

²¹ Piotr Żuk and Paweł Żuk, “Retirees without Pensions and Welfare: The Social Effects of Pension Privatization in Poland,” *Critical Social Policy* 38, no. 2 (2017): 407–17, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261018317731982>, 409.

²² Rafał Woś, “Jak Się Zmieniały Systemy Emerytalne Na Przestrzeni Lat,” *Polityka.pl*, November 22, 2016, <https://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/rynek/1683920.1.jak-sie-zmieniały-systemy-emerytalne-na-przestrzeni-lat.read>.

²³ Natalia Letki, Michał Brzeziński, and Barbara Jancewicz, “The Rise of Inequalities in Poland and Their Impacts: When Politicians Don’t Care but Citizens Do,” essay, in *Changing Inequalities and Societal Impacts in Rich Countries: Thirty Countries’ Experiences*, ed. Brian Nolan (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), 488–513.

²⁴ Jan Hagemeyer, Krzysztof Makarski, and Joanna Tyrowicz, “Unprivatizing the Pension System: The Case of Poland,” *Applied Economics* 47, no. 8 (2014): 833–52, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00036846.2014.980577>, 834.

Poles resorted to OPFs, making the public option look even more underfunded and unsustainable.²⁵ The attempt to discourage, if not ban, these special regimes, also rhymes with the French case.

A little over a decade later, the center-right government led by Donald Tusk and *Platforma Obywatelska* (Civic Platform-PO) made another change to the pensions system, though compared to the 1999 reform it amounted to tinkering – but consequential tinkering. In 2009, the Tusk government introduced a reform that clamped down on early retirements.²⁶ While at that time the statutory retirement age was sixty for women and sixty-five for men, certain categories of workers, like teachers, railroad workers and healthcare professionals, could retire several years earlier. If that sounds familiar, it is because it largely echoes the pre-2023 status quo in France, and the motivations of Macron’s reform echo Tusk’s.

In 2012, the same Tusk government made an even more drastic change, one that will also look familiar: it raised the retirement age.²⁷ The PO-led government’s plan was to raise the retirement age to sixty-seven for men by 2020, and sixty-seven for women by 2040, and indeed Poland was put on that path in the years immediately following the reform. It should be said that, even before the wholesale reversals that were coming down the pike, the Tusk government and its immediate successor began tweaking the post-1999 pension formula, acknowledging that it had caused not only budgetary woes but popular discontent.

What matters most to our story are the social and political effects of these neoliberal reforms. To begin with the social, scholars have shown that the 1999 pension reform increased inequality amongst male future pensioners, both in the upper and lower parts of the distribution. The same scholars show that adding women and those groups – miners, soldiers, etc. – that enjoy special, more generous, pensions formulas to the analysis would “probably increase intragenerational inequality even more.”²⁸ Moreover, as Oręziak recounts, as a result of the 1999 reform the ratio of average old-age pension to average salary in 2007 was 56% and was expected to drop to between 26% and 31% (depending on how one measures) by 2060 because the 1999 reform was not index-linked, i.e., it did not tie pension benefits to inflation.²⁹ Thus, the pension reform would have halved pensions by the middle of the century. Other analyses have shown that in the pre-1999 system, pension incomes amounted to about 60% of average salaries, while in the post-1999 landscape that figure dropped to between 30% and 40%. Żuk and Żuk plainly summarize what this meant for most Poles:

The new pension system was favourable to privileged groups with high salaries, including those professionally active throughout their lives, and whose health was not adversely affected by their jobs. In practice, however, this system hit the majority of the population – every break in work and corresponding break in contributions to pensions (sick leave, maternity leave) resulted in a reduction in pension entitlement.³⁰

²⁵ Żuk and Żuk, 410

²⁶ Agnieszka Chłoń-Domińczak, “Reversing the 2013 Retirement Age Reform in Poland,” European Social Policy Network Flash Reports, 2016, <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=15053&langId=en>.

²⁷ “Polish MPs Approve Plans to Raise Retirement Age to 67,” BBC News, May 11, 2012, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-18032956>.

²⁸ Elena Jarocinska and Anna Ruzik-Sierdzińska, “The Distributional Effects of the Pension System Reform in Poland,” *IZA Journal of Labor Policy* 13, no. 1 (2023): 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.2478/izajolp-2023-0002>, 17.

²⁹ Leokadia Oręziak, “Open Pension Funds in Poland: The Effects of the Pension Privatization Process,” *International Journal of Management and Economics* 38, no. 1 (2014): 102–22, <https://doi.org/10.2478/ijme-2014-0017>, 115.

³⁰ Żuk and Żuk, 412

At every step along the way, Poland's radical right openly opposed these reforms and, unlike in France, the absence of a radical left in the country allowed the hegemonizing *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (Law and Justice - PiS) to monopolize that opposition and capitalize on it.

To prevent the 2009 Tusk reforms, the sitting PiS President tried to exercise his veto power over the PO-led parliament, only for that same parliament to threaten him with the possibility of stripping presidential veto power altogether.³¹ Again in 2012, while in opposition PiS firmly rejected the raising of the retirement age. These conflicts were but an extension of those which had characterized PO-PiS disagreements going back to the 2007 election, where PO proposed exactly those reforms it would go on to carry out in government, while PiS framed pensions in terms of social solidarity and proposed generous reforms to pensions that were meant to improve pensioners' quality of life.

Seredyńska describes these divergent approaches as a juxtaposition between a focus on "improving institutional operations and the mechanism for collecting pension funds," in the case of PO, and "attention to the quality of life of citizens in old age and to its improvement," in the case of PiS.³² Paradoxically, even as the PiS approach was "more accessible" to most Poles, "thanks to a comprehensive approach presented by PO, aimed to ensure that, as the electoral slogan proclaimed, "everyone in Poland could live a better life," even the increase in the retirement age, usually met with reluctance, did not reduce this grouping's support,"³³ and PO won the election, and would win again in 2011 as PiS towed a similar line on pensions as it did in 2007. At the 2015 election, PiS maintained its rhetorical and programmatic line, but managed to win. What changed?

Capitalizing on discontent

The short answer is a lot. There are innumerable studies about what led PiS to victory in 2015, but one can say that the adverse interaction of the Polish public with actually-existing pension reform (and neoliberalism more generally), paired with a party (PiS) which had a lengthy track record of opposing said reforms – and therefore a measure of authenticity – was compelling for voters. After PiS' 2015 victory (which returned it to power after a brief 2005-2007 stint), Fomina and Kucharczyk astutely noted that its victory was achieved by mobilizing its core base around identity politics related issues, while also simultaneously emphasizing "the specific discontents that Civic Platform had overlooked," specifically "job insecurity, a poor small-business climate, and unsatisfactory public services (especially healthcare)," in addition to yes, pension-related issues.³⁴

Ultimately, Fomina and Kucharczyk suggest that PiS' strength is drawn from its "strong stance on issues connected to national identity and sovereignty and from its bond with the Catholic Church," rather than its socioeconomic policy positions. This statement would need demonstration, as we cannot easily bifurcate between strictly economic positions and those connected to national identity. In many ways, the focus on national identity manifests itself as a set of duties and obligations, i.e., people have duties to the state and to future generations and the state is obliged to take care of them too. This is the realm of the social.

³¹ Judy Dempsey, "Euro Membership and Higher Pension Age Embroil Polish Politics," *The New York Times*, December 8, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/08/world/europe/08iht-poland.html>.

³² Marta Seredyńska, "Political Discourse on Old-Age Pension Issues in the Election Programmes of the Largest Political Parties in Poland," *Social Security: Theory and Practice*, 2019, 3–20, https://doi.org/10.32088/0000_8, 9.

³³ *Ibid.*, 9

³⁴ Joanna Fomina and Jacek Kucharczyk, "The Specter Haunting Europe: Populism and Protest in Poland," *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 4 (2016): 58–68, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0062>, 60-61.

We have empirical studies that demonstrate this phenomenon; after 2015, Siemsen showed that “the probability of voting for PiS increases by 15% for voters who support redistribution” and that redistribution preferences *combined with* anti-immigration and anti-elitist attitudes explain PiS’ success.³⁵ More recently, Kotwas and Kubik noted in passing that “handout-driven welfare policies are widely perceived as the key to Law and Justice electoral success and something most voters support.”³⁶ At a minimum then, socioeconomic appeals are not the singular, but are nonetheless a critical, piece of PiS appeal.

To put a fine point on this, let us take one example from the several reforms described above. After the 2012 raising of the retirement age, over 80% of the Polish public, when polled, opposed it.³⁷ This figure looks shockingly similar to the one we saw in France as Macron embarked on his reform process. Knowing what we do about how preferences around redistribution shape Polish voting behavior, it is no surprise then that some of these folks were compelled by a governing party in-waiting which had opposed exactly this policy for several elections in a row. Moreover, while PiS was only founded in 2001 – after the privatization reform which came into effect in 1999 – many of its founding members were previously members of the conservative *Akcja Wyborcza Solidarność* (Solidarity Electoral Action - AWS) coalition that governed Poland between 1997 and 2001. Crucially, these early members of PiS were part of an AWS faction that *opposed* radical pension reform in the 1990s, despite its introduction by their own party, and they had abstained in protest from the vote on said pension reform.³⁸

PiS therefore had an air of credibility when it positioned itself in agreement with broad public opinion, and it was rewarded for doing so at the ballot box. For instance, as Markowski notes, in 2015 49% of seniors voted for Law and Justice, but that figure rose to 56% in 2019 after the party partially reversed pieces of Poland’s various pension reforms.³⁹ It has also managed to increasingly win over the working classes, and by 2019 it could be said that “PiS is the representative of almost 2/3 of the poorly educated, the elderly, and those living predominantly in rural areas.”⁴⁰

PiS has also more or less hegemonized the state’s obligation to offer social protection to the extent that, in the leadup to the 2023 election, opposition forces which once supported and enacted sweeping neoliberalization were forced to alter their programs to move closer to Law and Justice, but without the credibility to make that a meaningful position. The continued salience of pension reform in Polish politics is evident by the fact that Donald Tusk, once again the head of PO and leading

³⁵ Pascal Siemsen, “Voting PiS: Voting Left When Voting Far-Right Populist?,” *Polish Political Science Review* 8, no. 1 (2020): 87–99, <https://doi.org/10.2478/ppsr-2020-0006>, 95-96

³⁶ Marta Kotwas and Jan Kubik, “Destructive Ambiguity: How Polish Populist Incumbents Tinker with Electoral Fairness,” *illiberalism.org*, October 3, 2023, <https://www.illiberalism.org/destructive-ambiguity-how-polish-populist-incumbents-tinker-with-electoral-fairness/>.

³⁷ “Still Unconvinced: Poles about the Increase in Retirement Age - CBOS,” Fundacja Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej (Public Opinion Research Center Foundation - CBOS), 2012, https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2012/K_057_12.PDF.

³⁸ Oana I. Armeanu, “The Battle over Privileges and Pension Reform: Evidence from Legislative Roll Call Analysis in Poland,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 62, no. 4 (2010): 571–95, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668131003736920>, 589.

³⁹ Radosław Markowski, “Plurality Support for Democratic Decay: The 2019 Polish Parliamentary Election,” *West European Politics* 43, no. 7 (2020): 1513–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2020.1720171>, 1520.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 1520

opposition figure, was forced in advance of the 2023 elections to definitively say that he would not raise the retirement age again.⁴¹ PiS meanwhile pledged to lower the retirement age again.⁴²

It would be understandable for one of these claims to resonate more with voters; in a competition between a party which pledges to continue implementing popular policies and one that claims to simply avoid its past mistakes this time, it is not hard to understand why some Polish voters may stick with PiS. Indeed, polls in advance of the election consistently showed Law and Justice to be seven to eight points ahead of Civic Coalition.⁴³ In the end, the polls proved correct and, while Law and Justice captured the largest share of votes overall, it may be kept out of government by a grand coalition of three opposition groups: Civic Coalition, the Third Way, and the Left.⁴⁴ But the circumstances of Law and Justice's defeat bear noticing. It took eight years of PiS governance, required opposition parties to move closer to PiS in certain regards, required historic turnout (the highest in the country's democratic history) that cannot be counted on moving forward, and still was only achievable when three parties with ostensibly different ideological profiles banded together. Ironically, Third Way was explicitly formed as an alternative to *both* PiS and PO, and yet will now collaborate with the latter. It was, in other words, not a resounding defeat for PiS at all. Moreover, a three-party coalition bridging right and left has an obvious potential for instability, and snap elections could be called as early as next Spring, with unpredictable outcomes. Thus, in Poland neoliberalism may be the ghost that keeps on haunting, and in that sense it might offer a lesson for mainstream parties across Europe – it will take the stars aligning for voters to forgive you, if they ever do, so think long and hard about the tradeoffs inherent in neoliberal reforms.

Learning Lessons

Without flattening complex historical phenomena, we should be able to point to clear correlations and similarities across comparative case studies. In this case, those similarities are quite clear and we should be comfortable pointing out when history seems to, as the old adage goes, rhyme.

In both Poland and France, center-right governments have passed and promoted neoliberal pension reforms that bear striking similarities – raising the retirement age, upping the working years required to access benefits, closing “loopholes,” etc. – and radical-right parties have positioned themselves firmly against them, and committed to not only their reversal and to more generosity vis-à-vis pensions but also to a vision of the world which eludes technocratic, neoliberal, center-right parties: the world not of the individual but of the social. This is evident in the rhetoric and policy of these parties, even if its motivations are debated and even if we should be rightly skeptical of its authenticity and meaning. But the strong public opposition to pension reform, paired with a measurable increase in support for radical-right parties in the wake of its passage, suggests that broad swaths of the Polish and French public at least *perceive* that it is the far right which can best offer them respite from neoliberal individualization.

⁴¹ “Opposition Leader Promises Not to Raise Retirement Age,” The First News, 2023, <https://www.thefirstnews.com/article/opposition-leader-promises-not-to-raise-retirement-age-41801>.

⁴² Natalia Ojewska and Wojciech Moskwa, “Polish Ruling Party Pledges Lower Retirement Age as Ballot Nears,” Bloomberg.com, September 9, 2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-09-09/polish-ruling-party-pledges-lower-retirement-age-as-ballot-nears?embedded-checkout=true>.

⁴³ “Politico Poll of Polls - Polish Polls, Trends and Election News for Poland,” POLITICO Europe, October 15, 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/poland/>.

⁴⁴ Vanessa Gera and Monika Scislowska, “Poland's Opposition Wins Combined Majority in Key Election,” Time, October 16, 2023, <https://time.com/6324203/poland-election-results/>.

What differentiates these cases is the passage of time. In the case of Poland, we can view its multiple pension reforms with a historical clarity that is only available to us because of the decades which have passed. The effects those reforms have produced in the country's political economy suggest that neoliberal pension reform was not only economically damaging, but also politically costly, becoming one of many socioeconomic issues that gained saliency and eventually pushed many Poles into the arms of the radical-right Law and Justice. In France, we can only grasp at the possibility of a similar future. But the similarities are too potent to ignore.

If the *Rassemblement National* do win the next presidential election, or dramatically increase its parliamentary presence, Macron's pension reform will of course not be *the* reason why those outcomes occurred. Nor will the pension reform even be the proverbial straw that broke camel's back; rather, it is merely one of the most illustrative examples of a) how decades of neoliberalization breeds social discontent and b) an "own goal" by those who claim to want to, and should want to, deny the far right access to power.

I want to be clear here that it is not necessary to take the radical right at its word, or to grant it the terrain of social protection – quite the opposite. Mine is, first and foremost, an objective analysis of the ways in which neoliberal reforms embolden the far right, and not in any way a celebration of that fact. The extent to which I draw normative conclusions from this analysis is directly bound up with the extent to which I want to keep the far right out of power everywhere. This analysis is a cursory sketch, and yet draws a clear picture of how centrist parties that embrace neoliberal reforms in pensions and elsewhere can embolden the radical right.

What deserves to be studied in more detail is the role that radical-left parties (or lack thereof) play in this story. While the Polish and French examples recounted above share many similarities, there is one glaring difference: in Poland, the mainstream left, let alone a radical left, has been very marginalized for two decades, whereas in France, the neoliberalization of the mainstream *Parti Socialiste* produced a radical-left alternative, *La France Insoumise*. And yet, despite these differences, the radical right in both countries has been able to capitalize on anti-reform sentiment, not exclusively in France to be sure, but to a significant degree. A better and more systematic understanding of those dynamics is needed.

To close, today Macron's punitive, regressive and in some ways undemocratic pension reform is law, and it is now too late to change that. And while the months-long struggle against the reform last spring was inspiring, and probably in fact resulted in a less aggressive and punitive reform (remember, the initial reforms introduced in 2019 and in 2023 raised the retirement age higher and were more radical than the final product), it ultimately failed and shows us that despite some arguments at the time, these questions cannot exclusively be "decided in the streets."⁴⁵ The lesson that must be learned from France, and should have been learned from Poland, Hungary, and many other places, is that pension reforms are not just economically-unjust, unnecessary, or punitive – they are *politically dangerous*. Even if Europe's centrist political classes are uninterested in generous welfare states and pension systems, a sense of cynicism, calculus, and self-preservation could do them wonders. Trading pension reform for years of far-right governance is not a worthy trade, now or ever.

⁴⁵ Cole Stangler, "France's Pension Reform Battle Will Be Decided in the Streets," *The Nation*, January 18, 2023, <https://www.thenation.com/article/world/macron-france-retirement-pensions/>.