# Flash Economics

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# Is France genuinely a "gerontocracy"?

It has become commonplace to describe France as a gerontocracy, that is, a society that devotes considerable attention to the elderly whilst paying scant regard to the young. Indeed, pension expenditure and healthcare spending for older French citizens account for a significant share of GDP, whilst the quality of the education system remains low, the proportion of young people who are out of school and unemployed is high, the tax burden necessary to finance social security is heavy, and research and development expenditure remains insufficient.

However, this situation stems from:

- The increase in life expectancy, which is good news;
- The low share of education expenditure, excluding teachers' pension costs, in French GDP, and structural weaknesses in the organisation of the education system;
- The rejection of raising the retirement age by a large majority of French citizens (including young people);
- To a lesser extent, the level of annual working hours;
- and the greater generosity of the French pension system in terms of replacement rates.

It is well established that if the employment rate in France (69.5% in the first quarter of 2026) were at the level of Germany's (77.7%), employment in France would be 11.8% higher, and GDP would probably be around 10% higher. The share of pension expenditure would then no longer be 14.8% of GDP, but 12.6% of GDP, i.e. a level close to the European average.

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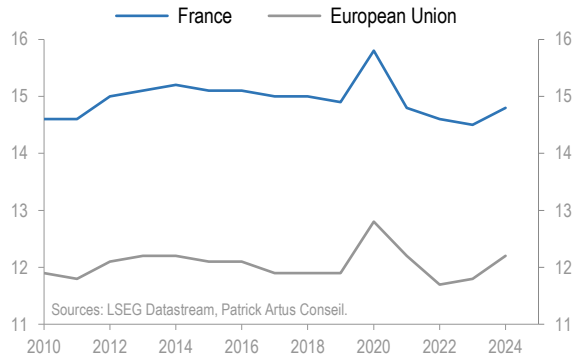
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## France seemingly devotes greater attention to the elderly than to the young

The argument that France is a **gerontocracy**, a society governed by older people that prioritises them at the expense of the youth, can be defended on the grounds of:

- **The high weight of pension expenditure** (**Chart 1**). In 2024, pension expenditure (the sum of old-age and survivors' benefits) stood at 14.8% of GDP in France and 12.2% of GDP in the European Union. In 2023, according to the OECD, pension expenditure across all OECD countries was estimated at 8.8% of GDP;

**Chart 1**
**Public pension expenditure (as % of nominal GDP)**




- **The high weight of healthcare expenditure for older people** (50% of healthcare expenditure concerns people over the age of 60);
- **The weakness of the education system** (**Table 1**); hence the very high proportion of young people **not in education, employment, or training** (NEETs, **Chart 2**);

**Chart 2**
**Youth not in employment, education or training aged 15 to 29 (NEET, as %)**

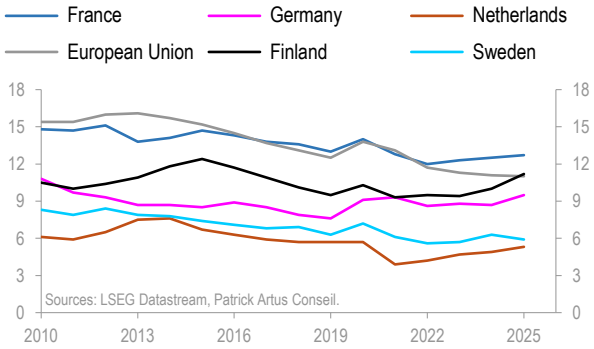


Table 1: Results from the OECD PISA surveys (overall score, in descending order of the 2022 survey)

| Country | 2012 | 2015 | 2018 | 2022 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Japan | 540 | 529 | 520 | 533 |
| Canada | 522 | 523 | 517 | 506 |
| Switzerland | 518 | 506 | 498 | 498 |
| Finland | 529 | 523 | 516 | 495 |
| United Kingdom | 502 | 500 | 503 | 494 |
| United States | n.d | 488 | 495 | 489 |
| Sweden | 482 | 496 | 503 | 487 |
| Germany | 515 | 508 | 500 | 482 |
| **France** | **500** | **496** | **494** | **478** |
| Spain | 490 | 491 | 482 | 477 |
| Italy | 490 | 485 | 477 | 477 |

Source: OECD

- **Of the very high weight of social security** and the taxes that finance it (**Chart 3**), whilst research and development expenditure remains too low (**Chart 4**).

Chart 3
Public expenditure on health and social protection
(as % of nominal GDP)

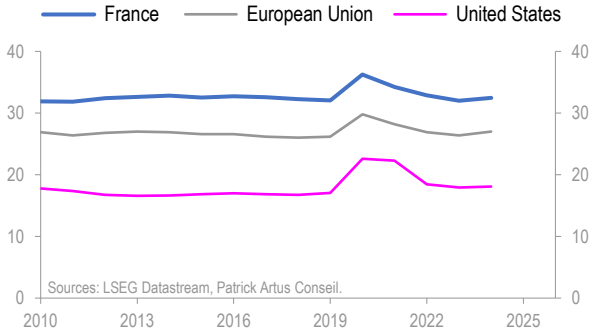
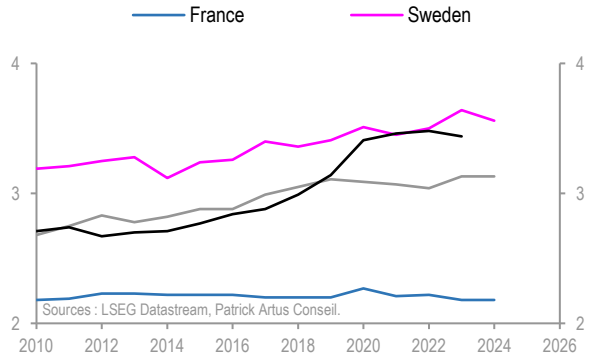



Chart 4
Total R&D spending (as % of nominal GDP)




**France thus appears to prefer social expenditure (pensions, healthcare) that benefits older people at the expense of future oriented expenditure** (quality of the education system, research and development).

## However, the notion that France is a gerontocracy warrants closer examination

### 1. The growing weight of healthcare expenditure in France stems primarily from the increase in life expectancy

The **share of people 60** and over in the total population has risen from 18% in 1970 to 28.5% currently, and is projected to reach 33% by 2050. The increase in healthcare expenditure stems primarily from the rise in life expectancy (**Chart 5**) and from the fact that healthcare consumption is significantly higher among those aged over 60 (**Table 2**).

Chart 5
France: life expectancy at birth (years)

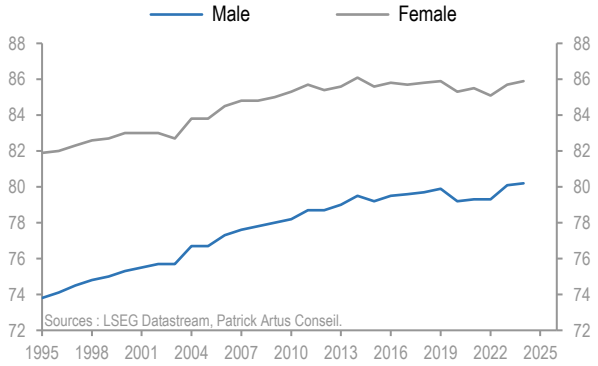



**Table 2: France: healthcare expenditure by age group (in euros per year)**

| Age group | Expenditure in euros |
|---|---|
| 0-1 | 2135 |
| 2-16 | 870 |
| 17-59 | 1802 |
| 60-74 | 4195 |
| 75-79 | 6448 |
| 80 and over | 8,355 |

Source: Social Security

**The increase in life expectancy is good news**, and one must accept that it implies higher healthcare expenditure.

## 2. Education expenditure is insufficient, and there is furthermore a problem with the organisation of teaching

, Education expenditure as a share of GDP is seemingly fairly high in France: 5.3% of GDP, compared with 4.1% in Italy, 4.6% in Spain, 5.2% in Germany and the Netherlands, and 5.9% in the United Kingdom. However, **education expenditure in France includes teachers' pensions**, which is not the case in other countries. Excluding teachers' pensions, education expenditure in France amounts to only 3.7% of GDP and is therefore well below normal levels.

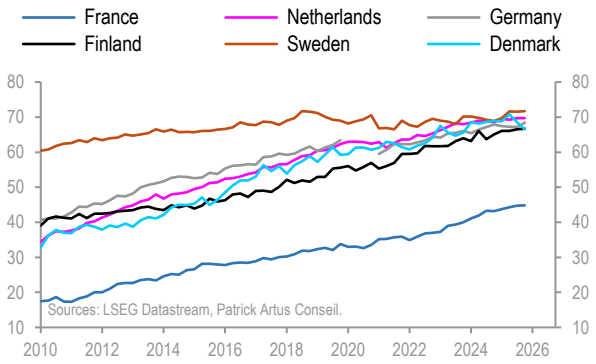
Furthermore, the French education system also suffers from **organisational problems**: insufficient teacher training, priority given to selection above raising the overall level of all pupils, excessive reliance on didactic teaching, school days that are too long for pupils…

## 3. A large majority of French people reject raising the retirement age or sub-indexing pensions to prices

According to the Elabe survey of 17 June 2025, 61% of French people oppose extending the contribution period, 63% oppose raising the legal retirement age, and 65% oppose increasing contributions. Propositions affecting current retirees are also overwhelmingly rejected, with 78% opposing the sub-indexation of pensions and 86% opposing a reduction in pensions. **This rejection is shared by younger generations**. Among 25–34 year-olds, 67% oppose the sub-indexation of pensions, 65% oppose raising the retirement age, and 62% oppose extending the contribution period.

There is therefore collectively preference for **maintaining a low employment rate among those aged over 60** (**Chart 6**).

Chart 6
Employment rate of population aged 60 to 64 (as %)




## 4. Annual working hours are not low in France when the entire employed population is taken into account

Taking into account only **full-time employees**, annual working hours are lower in France (1,664 hours) than in Germany (1,785 hours) or across the European Union as a whole (1,784 hours). This remains the case when both full-time and part-time employees are considered, with annual working hours of 1,545 hours in France compared with 1,625 hours across the European Union as a whole. However, when **the entire employed population, both employees and the self-employed, accounted for**, working hours in France (1,595 hours) are higher than those recorded in Germany (1,539 hours) and slightly below those of the European Union as a whole (1,667 hours).

## 5. The net replacement rate is not abnormally high in France

**The net replacement rate is the ratio of mandatory pension scheme benefits** (public and private) **to average individual earnings** (net of taxes and social contributions). Net replacement rates across various OECD countries are presented in **Table 3**.

**Table 3: Net replacement rates of mandatory pension schemes (public and private) as a % of average individual earnings**

| Country | Replacement rate |
|---|---|
| Netherlands | 96 |
| Spain | 86 |
| Italy | 79 |
| **France** | **70** |
| Sweden | 66 |
| OECD | 63 |
| United Kingdom | 54 |
| Germany | 53 |
| United States | 51 |
| Japan | 42 |

Sources: OECD

Replacement rates are low in Japan, the United States, Germany and the United Kingdom. Replacement rates exceed the OECD country average in France, Italy, Spain and the Netherlands. The pension problem is a **demographic problem**; in France, **the number of contributors per retiree** fell from 3.14 in 1975 to 1.77 in 2022 and will be about 1.50 by 2050.

## Summary: in reality, France is not a gerontocracy; the key problems do not stem from excessive attention paid to the elderly

We have shown that:

- The high share of healthcare expenditure directed towards those aged over 60 stems from the increase in life expectancy, which is good news;
- Not only is expenditure on education, excluding teachers' pensions, abnormally low, but the education system also faces structural problems (teacher training, pedagogical methods);
- The French reject raising the retirement age, this rejection being particularly strong amongst young people;
- The annual working time (when self-employed workers are considered) is not particularly low;
- The net replacement rate is not particularly high.

We arrive at the usual conclusion: France's fundamental problem is not that it is a gerontocracy, but that it is **a country with a low employment rate**.

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