

France Report

Sustainable Governance Indicators 2024

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Executive Summary

France is an average country in Europe with respect to its sustainable governance performance.

Despite the continuing rise of the extreme-right party National Rally and continuous debates about the leadership style of President Emmanuel Macron, democratic institutions are solid and provide an effective context for discussion and the exercise of rights. This is complemented by a strong bureaucracy and a substantial devolution of power to local governments and regulatory agencies. Nonetheless, the overall climate is extremely pessimistic. All political actors play the game of ideological polarization rather than building well-articulated party organizations and policy programs. This makes coalition building extremely difficult. In the short term, the introduction of a minority government since 2022 has accentuated the tension between the overarching majority logic of the institutions and the limited room for maneuver of a government that has been largely unable to pass legislation by creating effective majorities.

The strong bureaucratic tradition provides for solid coordination at the government level, but at the expense of the capacity to coordinate with other actors, be it local governments or civil society organizations. Critical of the “deep state” structuring government actions, President Macron has sought to reform the elitist school training of high-ranking civil servants. This has had modest effects other than the explicit and loud resistance from the elitist corps of civil servants (*grands corps*). The rapid digitalization of governmental processes and resources has not led to more effective government in many regards. Furthermore, the traditional political and bureaucratic practices have had difficulty adapting to more evidence-based approaches. Despite the creation of a new scientific advisory board under the president, scientific approaches to policy design and policy evaluation still do not play a central role in the country’s governance.

The government’s performance in shaping and promoting sustainable policies is average in most areas, falling at a level comparable with the performance of other large continental European nations. Recently, the overall agenda of the government has turned toward a more conservative policy style. The government performs best with regard to its capacity to deliver a low-carbon

economy, thanks to intensive use of nuclear energy. This orientation has been reaffirmed in recent years, with the state turning away from the reduction in the use of nuclear energy planned in the previous decade. Meanwhile, renewable energies remain at the margins of the political agenda, especially since they are contested by the population, particularly with regard to wind turbines. What was once a key feature for France – its egalitarian ambition within the country and across the world – is now being increasingly neglected.

The key decisions of the past year include retrenchments in pensions and unemployment benefits in order to meet the welfare system's growing financial deficits. Yet these cuts have not markedly changed the negative dynamics of the public deficit, which has been expanding steadily over the past 50 years. COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine have provisionally suspended this burden on public finances, as the European rules on deficits were suspended. The return to normal leaves France in an in-between situation. Deficits are still huge, with no clear path toward their limitation despite the need for it. This more generally reflects the government's difficulties engaging in long-range planning. If plans are made, their overall consistency generally remains limited, and their effective implementation a matter of considerable uncertainty.

Key Challenges

France has a comparatively positive record in sustainable governance. Its CO₂-weak energy mix and its leading role in international climate negotiations make it a critical actor in global action against climate change. This being said, France faces considerable challenges and is not always well equipped to respond to them.

The main challenge concerns public acceptance of climate and environmental policies. The Yellow Vest Movement of 2018 – 2019 is still on everyone's mind. Even if the French public is generally supportive of environmental protection, the willingness to accept income losses or competitive declines is limited. Especially in the context of higher inflation since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, purchasing power has become a highly sensitive political issue.

Climate change denial is not very prominent in the French public sphere. However, arguments that effectively serve to delay the climate transition are

being aired more regularly. Right-wing movements and even elements of the government party have sometimes been tempted to resort to these types of arguments. The right and especially the far right are downplaying climate change, possibly creating electoral pressure on government parties.

In an exceedingly majoritarian political system, even small voter movements may have a strong impact on electoral outcomes. This has created a strong majoritarian culture in French politics that makes cooperation unlikely. Governmental offers of cooperation are usually seen as a synonym for complying with the government's preferred policy position. On the side of the opposition, this tends to produce a wholesale rejection of anything coming from the government, and a self-confinement to systematic opposition, even on issues where agreement would be possible or desirable.

Another problem linked to the majoritarian culture is that intermediate powers (i.e., local or regional actors, interest groups, professional organizations, civil society associations) are seldom involved in the policymaking process. This has led to a "top down" decision-making and government style, with only limited amounts of social concertation. In turn, the fact that civil society and socioeconomic organizations have little voice in the process leads to staunch opposition, regularly produces huge mobilization movements in the streets, and alienates large parts of the population from the political class. This problem of insufficient social concertation has been discussed for a long time. Although various attempts to adopt a more inclusive decision-making style have been made, they have typically been tactical or half-hearted rather than sustained.

A more structural problem concerns the lack of transparency. The existence of numerous privileges and exceptions to existing rules – including the absence of regulations on private jets or the watering of golf fields – creates frustration and even resentment. It tends to undermine public trust and makes it more difficult to achieve sustainable outcomes. Ultimately, much of this relates to the way the financial burden of climate transition will be distributed. Environmental policies can have a disproportionately negative impact on certain groups of people, such as low-income communities and marginalized groups. This can exacerbate social inequalities, which may in turn fuel political resentment.

Several directions should be explored to improve sustainable governance. These all rely on the assumption that most obstacles to sustainable governance are due to the country's excessively majoritarian politics.

A more proportional electoral system:

This would essentially entail a reform of the electoral system in the direction of more proportional representation. In time, this would help reduce the systematic rejection of government proposals by the opposition and vice versa. This would also reduce the temptation by presidents to unilaterally announce and force through their political agenda. The exact details of this reform would require discussion, as the two-round electoral system is deeply anchored in French politics. A good blueprint could be the electoral system for the European Parliament election, which relies on regional proportional-representation lists, even if the variance in regional populations will influence the degree of proportionality.

A modified electoral calendar:

An additional reform to achieve the same goal could consist of making the presidential and legislative elections coincide. Currently, legislative elections take place six to eight weeks after the second round for the presidential contest. This change would put the two elections on an equal footing, thus increasing the relative value of legislative elections and avoiding a situation in which legislative elections simply confirm the results of presidential elections.

Better impact assessment and policy evaluation:

The majoritarian character of French politics often results in a situation in which the executive disregards expert opinions and scientific evidence. Similarly, erratic changes, such as the temporary elimination of mathematics as a compulsory subject in the baccalauréat, can be costly both in the short and long run. A more professionalized policy-evaluation process – possibly by a state-funded independent national evaluation institute – would help shield policymaking from short-term electoral influences. This seems particularly important with regard to climate change and the environment in general.

Stronger and more regular integration of civil society organizations in the policymaking process:

A general commitment to the systematic consultation of concerned CSOs when launching new legislative projects could also help to repair the negative effects of solitary top-down executive policymaking processes and would help lend legitimacy to the results of legislation. There have been promising attempts in the past, such as the “Larcher bill” calling for the systematic integration of employers’ organizations and trade unions in social and labor policy processes, but these have largely been disregarded by the Macron administration since 2017.

All these directions proposed are based on the assumption that changing the rules would trigger behavioral changes among all actors concerned, including

the government, administration, political parties and CSOs – and that this in turn would lead to less confrontation and polarization, and more dialogue, negotiation and readiness for compromise. Yet this effect is far from guaranteed; any change will require an ongoing process of social learning, and progress will take time.

Democratic Government

I. Vertical Accountability

Elections

Free and Fair
Political
Competition
Score: 9

Political competition for access to power is open and not systematically biased. Overall, political practices and regulations both contribute to fair access and transparency.

Requirements to be a candidate in elections are generally limited (see Aceproject 2024). French nationality is required except for European and local elections; in such cases, being a citizen of an EU country is sufficient, as long as the potential candidate resides in France. The minimum age of eligibility has been 18 for all elections since 2011, except for the senatorial elections, for which the minimum age is 24. Potential candidates must not have been deprived of civic and voting rights, and must be registered on the electoral rolls. Residence within the electoral district is also expected – although this condition is generally limited to the obligation to pay local taxes in this territory. Candidates then have to deposit a file with the “préfecture” – the local office of the central government – or with the Constitutional Council (for the presidential election).

For presidential elections, this file includes a mandatory declaration of possible conflicts of interest as well as a disclosure of patrimony at the time of the election. Controversially, presidential candidates must also present 500 signatures by sponsors. These signatures can be given by officeholders at the local or national level, and are made public. Although some candidates fail to gather the requested number of signatures, this has not prevented a certain diversity, with 12 candidates participating in the first round of the presidential election of 2022 (Bendjaballah and Sauger 2023).

Over the course of the campaign, whatever the level, all candidate financial activities have to be registered and then reported (CNCCFP 2024). The

National Commission for Campaign Accounts and Political Funding (Commission nationale des comptes de campagne et des financements politiques, CNCCFP) is an independent regulatory agency in charge of organizing the collection and dissemination of this data. The data are published in the Official Journal of the Republic. Candidate accounts also must be certified. Donations from firms and organizations to candidates have been banned since the 1990s. Donations from private individuals are still allowed, with a cap set at €4,600 per individual for an election. All donations above €3,000 lead to the disclosure of the name of the donor. Political parties have similar obligations, with the CNCCFP supervising both candidates and parties. For parties, maximum donations are set at €7,500 for an individual and €15,000 for the household as a whole.

In practice, the variety of the background of candidates and the spectrum of policy positions advocated by political parties is very large, from the radical Trotskyist left to the extreme neo-fascist right.

Access to the media is strictly monitored by the national independent agency in charge of mass and new media, Arcom (Authority of the Regulation of Audiovisual and Digital Communication, Autorité de régulation de la communication audiovisuelle et numérique). Media time accrued by all political actors is accounted for (Arcom 2024). Outside of electoral campaigns, Arcom imposes an allocation rule of one-third of the time for the president and the government, with the remaining two-thirds to be split in a “fair” manner among all parties. Fairness is based on the importance of parties, taking into account past electoral results, opinion polls and all relevant political dynamics. During election campaigns, media time allocation is even more strictly monitored. For presidential campaigns, during the official campaign – the last weeks of the race – Arcom switches its principle of fairness to a principle of strict equality of time granted to all candidates in the election.

Disproportionate media coverage of individual political actors because of their background characteristics has not recently led to long-lasting discussions. However, the surge of business leaders in the media landscape has triggered more reflections on their role. While many have invested in the written press, the most controversial case is Vincent Bolloré. This prominent businessman has bought print publications and TV groups in recent years, including Canal+. He has been accused of systematic interventions in these media, demanding a more conservative editorial line. The relative success of the radical right Eric Zemmour has largely been attributed to Bolloré’s support.

For digital media, the most acute issue stems from the intervention of Russian hackers in electoral campaigns. This has been proven, for instance, in the case

of the 2017 election, in which the “Macron leaks” – the publication of several emails from Macron’s campaign team – was traced back to two groups of Russian hackers linked to Russian special operations (Vilmer 2020).

The fair media coverage principle and regulations on party and candidate funding are also mostly respected in practice. For instance, the public disclosure of financial accounts is centralized by the CNCCFP, and failure to meet its standards leads to the loss of state public funding, which is crucial for most significant parties. Of course, violations still take place. On the one hand, all pieces of legislation have their loopholes. For example, CNCCFP is currently working to track personal loans to candidates or parties, which are increasing and lack some transparency. On the other hand, scandals regarding the funding of campaigns have tainted several prominent candidates’ reputations. Nicolas Sarkozy was notably deemed guilty by courts of submitting fake invoices in his presidential campaign of 2012, and is awaiting trial for receiving funding from the state of Libya in his 2007 campaign. The participation of the audit firm McKinsey in Emmanuel Macron’s electoral campaigns of 2017 and 2022 is also currently under scrutiny by the National Judicial Prosecutor’s Office.

To some extent, the periodic losses by incumbents demonstrates the openness of the country’s political competition. Electoral swings are important, and new credible candidates can emerge in a matter of months at the national level. Even the politicization of the design of the political districts map – which is mostly in the hands of the Ministry of Interior – does not lead to massive gerrymandering but rather to inaction, as actors are worried by the possible accusation of manipulation (Sauger and Grofman 2016). Conversely, the ease of credibly entering political races could be seen as a potential problem in terms of political stability and effective accountability.

Free and Fair
Elections
Score: 10

The right to participate in elections is fully guaranteed. Every citizen age 18 or older enjoys voting rights provided by the constitution. This includes expatriates and convicts, if no specific deprivation of civic capacity has been pronounced. There is no option to vote by mail, but those not living in France can either vote abroad (in consulates or embassies) or by delegating power to a designated person in France. No progress has been made with regard to extending this right to vote to residents holding foreign citizenship, except in the case of EU citizens for both local and European elections (Service-Public 2024).

Voter registration is easy. It is almost automatic when young people register for the first time. Registration requires only an ID. It is usually estimated that some 10% of the electorate is not registered. This concerns two main groups:

those who refuse to vote and those who have changed residence and subsequently neglected to register in their new place of residence. The monitoring of voter rolls has largely improved since 2016, with the creation of the “Répertoire électoral unique” (INSEE 2024) – a national integrated file for electoral registers. The National Statistical Institute oversees the maintenance of this file, a task it performs quite efficiently.

Voting operations are organized at the municipal level under the scrutiny of the Ministry of Interior, which is in charge of the organization of elections. Voting stations are usually easily accessible by foot for most people, but no individualized service is available for those with disabilities. Local authorities sometimes organize stations for institutionalized persons (mostly for those in retirement homes). Prisoners have yet to vote by proxy in most cases.

Proxy voting is the only way to cast a vote without doing so in person. This has been made easier over the years. In 2022, 6.7% of registered voters had voted at least once by proxy voting (Stéphan 2022).

In practice, the organization of elections goes smoothly in most cases. Elections are organized on time and on the basis of well-established directives. Although the COVID-19 pandemic made local organization tasks more complicated, elections were held with limited difficulties even then, aside from concerns about further virus spread. Voting stations are open on Sundays from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. (up to 8 p.m. in large cities). Cheating at the voting booth may exist, but is not widespread. The only actual troubles encountered recently have stemmed from the use of electronic voting devices especially for those living abroad (Conseil Constitutionnel 2024). Major anomalies – such as the fact that a majority of validation codes were been distributed – led the Constitutional Council to nullify results in two districts in the legislative elections of 2022.

The simplicity of the electoral system, the fact that elections are in most cases held one at a time, and the involvement of local authorities and citizen volunteers (especially for counting votes) in the organization of the operations all contribute to making the electoral process transparent and uncontroversial. The absence of an impartial and independent electoral management body has not proved problematic in this regard to date. The decline observed in electoral turnout rates should not be attributed to issues relating to the organization of elections, but rather to more general social and political dynamics.

Socially Rooted
Party System
Score: 6

Quality of Parties and Candidates

The Fifth Republic is constructed as a majoritarian political system, with a two-round majority-based system for both direct presidential and legislative elections. As such, this system tends to create a significant imbalance between the expression of preferences by citizens and the political representation in practice (Grossman and Sauger 2009). The minority is systematically underrepresented in institutions, starting with the presidential office – which is by definition held singly. This has led to France being characterized as one of the most disproportional countries in Europe in terms of political representation. In the first round of the vote, there are few constraints on citizens' expression. Twelve candidates competed in the 2022 presidential race. But the mechanical effect of the runoff drastically reduces the political offerings.

This imbalance has been reinforced by various second-order elections that have been introduced in recent decades (Parodi 1997). These have tended to further open the competition to a variety of actors through, for instance, a proportional component for municipal, regional and European elections. But they also involve strict majority logic, especially with the bonus system for municipal and regional elections (Bedock and Sauger 2014).

The electoral system nevertheless also offers incentives for societal representation. Parity laws have either introduced strict rules for equal representation between men and women for all list systems or monetary penalties if parties do not field as many women as men in legislative elections. The first female president has yet to be elected. In the same way, the districting system for legislative elections fosters local representation. Senators, indirectly elected, even have an explicit mandate to represent “territories.” Decentralization and autonomy processes have pushed this local representation a step further, especially in Corsica and in overseas territories. There, local party systems have often been created to better represent local issues and specific aspirations to independence or resistance to such a move.

French parties, as organizations, remain weak compared to many of their European counterparts. The entire party system fell to pieces after the 2017 political earthquake. While this destructive phase has permitted Macron to sweep away the old political forces to the advantage of his new movement, it has also contributed to the weakening of the traditional mediatory institutions. This is true even of the president's own movement, *La République en Marche* (since renamed *Renaissance*), which has been unable to transform itself into a truly developed party with a full-scale organization and capable of fulfilling a mediatory role. Its roots at the local level remain strictly limited, all the more

so since the party has managed at most limited successes in local elections. Over the last few years, the situation has not improved; on the contrary, the Macron movement has lost appeal, and finds itself already in a structural crisis due to internal competition in the quest for a new presidential leader. The leftist parties are weaker and more divided than ever, while the extreme-right movements are flourishing. The hard-right National Rally, whose ambition was to appear more responsible and moderate, now has to compete with a newcomer, Éric Zemmour, whose radical rhetoric is based on the “French decline” and the invasion of migrants. The National Rally presently looks like the overall winner of this situation, embodying the only structured opposition to a weak governmental party (Rouban 2022).

The weakness of party organization and institutionalization does not prevent parties from innovating ideologically and attempting to respond to citizens’ expectations. The range is broad, from the radical Trotskyist left to the far right, ranging as well from environmental to nationalist parties. The overall positioning of these parties is generally clear. This was somewhat blurred by Macron’s move in 2017 to bridge the moderate left and moderate right traditions. More generally, precise party programs are scarce, and when they do exist, they are not intensively used in party communications. To some extent, all parties address the majority, broadly defined by the working or middle class. The “enemy” is what differs most between the parties. This is liberalism for the left, the extremes for the center, and immigrants for the radical right. Parties do not seem willing to build on group consultation or seek academic expertise, despite some isolated initiatives in this area. Most key decisions appear to be the result of leaders’ initiatives or based on short-term opinion poll feedback.

The variety of choices between parties does not generally preclude a feeling of disconnect between the population and its political elite. Part of this feeling might be attributable to the observation of significant differences between what is promised and what is actually delivered once in government. Even if pledges are often respected, the general outcomes of governmental actions too often fall short of citizens’ expectations.

Effective Cross-
Party
Cooperation
Score: 3

With France’s diverse party system, it is no surprise that several parties can be considered as challenging the existing institutional order. While almost no party directly contests liberal democratic principles, France is home to populist and radical parties on both the left and the right of the political spectrum. Populist parties received about half of the votes in the legislative elections of 2022. This results from both the continuing progress of the radical right and the new dominance of La France Insoumise on the left, working through the NUPES alliance. What is more surprising is that almost all parties have

contested the established order in one way or another. Macron's success was built on denouncing the incumbent elite's incapacity. Both the Socialist Party and the Republicans, once the dominant governmental parties, have not only lost most of their influence, but are also now under the influence of the more radical parties. PS has happily participated in the NUPES alliance. The Republicans have increasingly considered not only coming closer to the position of the National Rally, but even directly collaborating with it.

Since the elections of 2022, France has been governed by a minority government. This is the result both of the mediocre performance of the presidential party in the legislative elections and the incapacity to forge a governmental coalition that extends beyond the president's supporters. Despite several attempts to negotiate a more structured and durable agreement with the Republicans, both during the formation of the government and during the pension reform process, these efforts have failed. The government has considered no alternative to this coalition.

This more generally reflects the workings of a polarized party system. France has a long tradition of polarization. The divide between left and right has been a constant feature of French politics, reflecting ideological and social tensions as well as tensions between the center and periphery. All this has contributed to the country's antagonistic political and social structure. Consensual collaboration has been the exception rather than the rule.

Things may have changed following the 2017 presidential election, since the new president managed to form a coalition with elements from the center-right and center-left, pushing the remaining parties to the extremes of the political spectrum. But the idea of overcoming the sterile left-right polarization for the benefit of more consensual progressive policymaking seems to have failed. Macron's strategy has even increased polarization between his movement and the extreme right, marginalizing all other parties as he has tried to force moderates to rally around his flag. The result is that moderates have been split between rallying to Macron and rallying to more radical alternatives. This, in turn, weakens one of the constraining rules of the game in French politics – the so-called cordon sanitaire around the far right.

Zemmour's surge has helped in this regard, but it reflects more generally the evolution toward a three-bloc politics, not unlike the situation of the Fourth Republic, with centrist parties opposed to radicals on both extremes.

In the end, this process has failed in several respects. On one hand, reform has proved to be increasingly difficult. The pension reform and the bill on immigration have shown that the only ways to act have been either through the

so-called 49.3 procedure – which allows measures to be passed through the National Assembly without a vote – or with a drift in bill content toward the positions of the radical right. On the other hand, it has also contributed to the “normalization” of the hard-right National Rally, and has created the option of explicit collaborations if not coalitions with it.

Access to Official Information

Transparent
Government
Score: 8

The right of access to information is solidly assured since it was strengthened in 1978 through the establishment of an independent agency, the Commission d’Accès aux Documents Administratifs (CADA). This body guarantees that any private or public entity is entitled to be given any document requested from a public administration or service – regardless of the legal status of the organization (private or public) – if the institution operates a public service.

However, some restrictions have been established, mainly in relation to issues regarding the private sphere, the protection of intellectual property, or business information relevant to safeguarding competition between companies (Marique and Slautsky 2019). The main and more controversial issue is the refusal to issue documents by citing security or defense concerns – a concept that can be applied broadly, with limited room for court challenges.

The institution in question must deliver the requested document within a month. After that deadline, inaction is considered to be a rejection that can be challenged in court and/or by submitting a request to the Défenseur des Droits (Defender of Civic Rights, effectively the ombudsman). In some cases, the solutions adopted reflect political elites’ inability to adopt clear-cut policies; for instance, it is possible to review the declarations submitted by members of parliament of revenues and property, but divulging this information is considered to be a criminal offense. This is a telling illustration of the reluctance to set up a full transparency policy.

In general, a large range of governmental (or public bodies’) information, including official drafts, reports and audits, are freely accessible via the internet and on a dedicated platform, data.gouv.fr. Beyond the legal rules, two media outlets in particular – Canard enchaîné and Mediapart – have specialized in leaking information that public authorities would prefer to keep secret. This has become an important part of the transparency process.

II. Diagonal Accountability

Media Freedom and Pluralism

Free Media
Score: 8

The media system is lively and contributes positively to public debate. In principle, the legal framework sufficiently guarantees media freedom and even provides for pluralism. The reality is somewhat more complex.

Public media have a history of critical reporting, and again in principle, public authorities have little or no direct capacity to intervene. However, these services are today facing an uncertain financial future, and recent appointments have called the independence of the public media into question. Emmanuel Macron's administration abolished the "television tax" (redevance audiovisuelle) in 2022, possibly making public broadcasters more dependent on the good will of individual administrations. This adds to measures by the Sarkozy administration (2007 – 2012) that had curtailed those broadcasters' access to advertising markets.

Relatedly, recent decisions concerning public radio and in particular Radio France – France's largest radio service in terms of national audience – raised criticism regarding their possible political motivation. Specifically, the recent appointment of Adèle van Reeth as CEO of France Inter led to controversy after she canceled a popular daily comedy show, "C'est encore nous!" That show had regularly been very critical of the incumbent administration.

This said, there is no evidence of effective censorship or any form of constraints on critical journalism, despite a growing number of attempts by politicians to use legal channels to prevent the publication of news that could be politically costly.

Pluralism of
Opinions
Score: 7

There is a substantial diversity of opinions expressed in French media. Like elsewhere, there is considerable debate on the issue of media ownership and its consequences for media pluralism.

One evolution that has sparked some concern in the media landscape is the increasing influence of billionaire Vincent Bolloré. Having made a fortune in marine transport, he started expanding into the media sector 20 years ago. He now owns the largest private radio broadcaster, Europe 1; the TV channels CNews and Canal+; and a host of weekly and monthly magazines since the acquisition of Vivendi in May 2021. These takeovers have regularly been

followed by a significant reorientation of the editorial line. In particular, two of Bolloré's TV channels, CNews and C8, have regularly been accused of overrepresenting the far right or even actively promoting far right candidates like Eric Zemmour. In the summer of 2022, the takeover of the Journal du Dimanche (JDD), a Sunday weekly, was followed by the appointment of one of Zemmour's main supporters to head of the journal, leading to a months-long strike.

A more recent player in the media landscape is Czech billionaire Daniel Kretinsky, who bought a minority share of quality newspaper Le Monde. He has since acquired a minority share in the most important French TV network, TF1, and 45% of online media company Loopsider. He recently sold his stake in Le Monde. His motivations seem to be more commercial than political.

Public media are regularly criticized for their left-leaning orientation, while commercial media are supposed to be more conservative. A recent study has put these accusations into perspective. These differences are usually exaggerated, according to Cagé and colleagues.

Civil Society

Free Civil
Society
Score: 9

Freedom of association has been granted since the passage of the 1901 law on associations. Since a famous ruling of the Constitutional Court in 1971, this freedom constitutes one aspect of the constitutional freedoms. Associations may be created by citizens without any previous authorization; a simple declaration to the prefecture – the local authority representing the state – is sufficient to gain the status of a moral person. The only restrictions concern illegal behaviors, for instance those that may undermine national security, the integrity of the national territory or the republican character of the government.

Some restrictions have been added by the law on republican principles (24 August 2021), which was enacted in response to the increasing frequency of terrorist actions and the rise of movements backing such actions. The law allows for the dissolution of associations that provoke violence against persons or properties. However, any dissolution is subject to legal control by the courts. In a ruling made on 9 November 2023, the Council of State stated precisely the criteria that would be used to judge such a dissolution. Another restriction may be seen in the obligation for any association that applies for state subsidies to sign a moral contract in favor of the country's republican principles.

During the Macron era (2018 – 2024), 26 associations have been dissolved, an increase compared to seven during the era of President François Hollande (2012 – 2017).

While Amnesty International (2023: 168) has identified instances of religious or racist discrimination or restriction against associations, these rare cases concern associations engaged in illegal actions. All such measures are overseen and if necessary modified or canceled by the courts or the Council of State, and do not alter the general assessment of a large and real guarantee of the freedom of association (Vie publique 2024).

Contemporary France is characterized by a thriving civil society and a significant number of civil society organizations (CSOs). According to official data, there are currently 1.3 million different CSOs with 23 million members aged 14 or above. An average of 70,000 new CSOs are created every year. On the whole, the CSO sector employs about 1.8 million people.

While CSOs are massively subsidized by the state, the share of public funding is going down, forcing CSOs to look for alternative funding sources.

Effective Civil
Society
Organizations
(Capital and
Labor)
Score: 4

Business associations can formulate policy proposals and contribute to agenda setting. They have their own research capabilities and can successfully lobby government and parliamentarians. Two organizations have significant influence. The major employers union, the Mouvement des Entreprises de France (MEDEF), is a peak association federating sector-level associations. It represents 750,000 major firms. The other major organization is the Confédération Générale des Petites et Moyennes Entreprises (CGPME), whose membership base includes around 1.7 million small- and medium-size firms. This association often complains that the specific interests of small businesses are marginalized by larger national groups and the government.

Trade unions suffer from various shortcomings. First, membership rates are among the lowest in the circle of Western democracies, encompassing only about 8% of the workforce (5% in the private sector). A second problem is that the relatively small membership is split between several different and rival trade unions. The split within the trade union movement is political but also concerns different approaches to the role of trade unions in policymaking. Two corporatist and “conservative” unions – the CGT and FO – have taken advantage of their footing in the civil service and public sector, and tend to resist or reject any serious change. They have relied upon mass mobilization to block reforms, even if their ability to mobilize is diminishing except in a few sectors such as public transport. Whereas these organizations refuse negotiations and compromises with the government, two other trade unions –

CFDT and UNSA – have adopted more moderate positions, and try to balance advocacy for workers’ interests with a constructive role in negotiating reforms.

Nonetheless, this lack of representativeness is somewhat compensated for by the support they get in the “professional elections” that take place every five years. The turnout rate for the last “professional elections” reached 43.7% in the public sector and 38.2% in the private sector in 2022. This explains why these elections are so crucial. For the past two elections, the CFDT has led the polls, tightly followed by the more radical CGT. Furthermore, the government regularly validates partial agreements for entire economic sectors, with the result that collective bargaining agreements cover 98% of workers in France.

In general, the unions seek to compensate for their membership weakness at the company level by negotiating at the sectoral level or even at the national level, as well as through their capacity for social mobilization, quite frequently organizing mass protests in the streets. In so doing, they rarely manage to overcome their political split and rivalries; however, the opposition to pension reform in 2023 created a rare united front across the eight major trade unions. Despite the massive rejection by voters and trade unions and the absence of a legislative majority, President Macron signed the reform into law on April 15, 2023. The unions’ campaign thus ultimately failed, but the unitary approach improved their image, and a slight increase in membership was evident in the wake of the debates.

Government attitudes toward CSO proposals have not been constant. Over the last 20 years, governments have called for more involvement of social partner CSOs in the field of social and labor policies, and have been willing to take into account their proposals. Governments have also endorsed new rules enhancing the role of social negotiation and concertation. However, governmental practice has not always been in line with this rhetorical commitment. Moreover, since 2017, President Macron has tended to drastically reduce the role of economic and social CSOs in the policymaking process, stressing the monopoly of the political institutions – government, parliament – in policymaking.

Effective Civil
Society
Organizations
(Social Welfare)
Score: 4

Social welfare CSOs are particularly active among the poorest sectors of society, including migrants, youth, the elderly and the disabled.

The decrease in subsidized jobs has hit the welfare sector particularly hard. In addition, the abolishment of the wealth tax – another major measure of the first Macron administration – also diminished donations, as these were previously used to reduce taxes. The pandemic years have created additional difficulties,

with considerably more demand for services and a lower number of volunteers.

The major challenge such organizations face today is the need to find new funding in the context of declining public contributions. At the same time, public oversight has tended to become stricter, especially in the health sector, with the creation of regional oversight agencies that behave in a rather interventionist manner.

Social welfare CSOs' influence on policymaking is limited, and there are no signs that it has increased in recent years. Rather, they are policy takers, subject to changing government priorities in a strongly centralized country. Only the largest associations, such as the Red Cross and a few others, have the effective ability to influence public decision-making.

Effective Civil
Society
Organizations
(Environment)
Score: 3

There has been considerable activism in the environmental field these past few years. French youth mobilized strongly in 2019's Fridays for Future movement. In the following years, French chapters of Extinction Rebellion and Last Generation appeared.

Perhaps the most visible mobilization took place in opposition to the planned construction of a water reservoir near the town of Sainte-Soline in the department of Deux-Sèvres. Water reservoirs are viewed critically by environmental associations, but also by many locals, due to their consequences on the local environment. This movement led to two major demonstrations – accompanied by a massive police presence – in October 2022 and March 2023. Both demonstrations turned out to be very violent, while protesters accused the police of violently attacking them.

Following this demonstration, Minister of the Interior Gérald Darmanin ordered the dissolution of one of the most active movements behind the mobilization. The construction of the Deux-Sèvres reservoir was eventually authorized by the French administrative high court – the Conseil d'Etat – in April 2023.

These examples show that beyond a certain power of mobilization against public projects – mostly without success – environmental CSOs do not have substantial capacity to cooperate, form alliances, or help draft or shape public policies in this field. Nor have governments or the administration shown any willingness to grant them such a role.

III. Horizontal Accountability

Independent Supervisory Bodies

Effective Public
Auditing
Score: 9

The national Court of Auditors (Cour des Comptes) is a powerful and independent institution. It monitors the accounts of any institution that spends public money. The court is independent in the choice of the audits it undertakes. Since 2008, the institution being monitored can “contradict” or corrected the audit. A decree-law from March 2023 creates an “appeal court of auditors,” with the Conseil d’Etat – the administrative high court – acting as the final appeal court.

The institution appears to possess the means necessary to exercise its powers. It is a very prestigious institution, representing one of the most preferred posts in French administration, especially for the best students leaving the elitist National School of Administration (ENA, now INSP).

The president of the court is named by the Council of Ministers (the president and the government). It is thus usually a rather visible political figure who fulfills the necessary credentials, such as some past linkage to the court, ideally being a member of that administration. Since 2020, the position has been held by Pierre Moscovici, a former minister of the economy under the Hollande presidency, and a European commissioner. Once named, the court president cannot be removed, granting the officeholder substantial autonomy. Typically, the fact that the president is a leading politician gives the court some public visibility. However, to date, no president of the court has attempted to return to politics afterward.

Effective Data
Protection
Score: 10

The country’s national data protection authority, the Commission Nationale de l’Informatique et des Libertés (CNIL), is an independent regulatory authority with several core functions. It advises the government regarding data privacy and the proper implementation of EU regulations in this area (such as the General Data Protection Regulation, or GDPR). It can take the initiative to inspect data controllers to monitor compliance. Finally, individuals can appeal to the CNIL in instances of data privacy infringements. The CNIL can issue warnings and fines, and can even order data controllers to cease their activity. It is thus well equipped to pursue its goals. Despite a modest staff of 225 employees (in 2020) with a budget of €17 million, the CNIL is today a highly

respected institution that received 13,585 complaints in 2020 (an increase of more than 60% following the adoption of the EU regulations), leading to a total of 9,057 inquiries.

In practice, the CNIL has not refrained from taking on powerful adversaries, such as Google or Facebook. It has been very effective over the past 40 years and showed particular strengths during the COVID-19 crisis. Its role is widely supported by the public and political elites. In 2020, the authority conducted 247 review processes and imposed 14 penalties entailing financial sums amounting to nearly €40 million. Perhaps the most visible recent example of the CNIL's power is a €50 million fine imposed in January 2019 against Google for the violation of GDPR principles.

The primary limits to the CNIL data privacy protection efforts are its limited means and the challenges presented by a constantly changing information landscape.

Rule of Law

Effective Judicial
Oversight
Score: 8

Judicial oversight and review efforts are rather powerful in France, even if the caseload is comparatively low. This function is exercised by a specialized court – the Conseil Constitutionnel (Constitutional Court). The caseload has increased significantly since the court's beginnings in 1959, but remains modest compared to other European courts serving comparable functions. In the past 20 years, there has been an average of 173 decisions per year. However, this number is driven by post-electoral and electoral decisions, as the court is tasked with overseeing presidential and parliamentary elections. Outside election years, the caseload falls to less than 100 cases a year.

This comparatively low number is mostly due to the limited triggers for constitutional review. The only figures with the power to refer a case are the president, the prime minister, the presidents of the two chambers, and 60 senators or members of the National Assembly. Since 2008, the two supreme courts have also been able to raise constitutional questions raised by defendants before their courts. This procedure – a sort of preliminary constitutional ruling – now accounts for the vast majority of the caseload.

For traditional rulings, the Constitutional Court has to make a decision before a law comes into force. The underlying idea is that no unconstitutional bill should ever become law. While the caseload in this area remains small, the rulings that have invalidated all or parts of laws have been relatively important. This procedure has proven rather reliable, and the public image of

the Constitutional Court is very positive despite the fact that the judges mostly have a background within politics.

One issue that may present a challenge for the court's work is the strategic use of constitutional oversight by politicians. In some cases, invalidation can be anticipated, but the government may still prefer to pass the law for electoral or coalition-related reasons. This is a way of shifting the blame for non-adoption to the court, which may have the effect of undermining the court's legitimacy. For example, this happened when the National Assembly voted on a highly controversial immigration bill in December 2023. The government accepted amendments from right and extreme-right groups despite regarding them as unconstitutional (and hoped these amendments would be rejected by the court). In January 2024, the court rejected substantial portions of the bill passed by the legislature in December 2023, declaring them to be incompatible with the constitution. The court's president, Laurent Fabius (2024), publicly criticized this governmental tactic, declaring that "the court's role was not to offer political services."

Universal Civil
Rights
Score: 7

Civil rights and political liberties are in principle well protected in France. This was not always the case: Until the 1980s, France's record in this area was more mediocre. Since that time, however, France's judicial system has become a reliable defender of civil rights. The Constitutional Court unilaterally extended its competence to the protection of civil liberties in a famous ruling in 1971. The European Court of Justice and, more importantly, the European Court of Human Rights have played an active role in this process, and the growing independence of the judiciary has helped this evolution.

There have been several critical debates in recent years nonetheless. Following the terrorist attacks of 13 November 2015, the government enacted a state of emergency that allowed for house searches and house arrests, among other elements. The state of emergency was regularly extended until 2017, when several critical measures were voted into law and thus extended indefinitely. A new anti-terrorism bill in 2021 moreover curtailed the scope of data privacy.

Many issues regarding civil liberties came back to the forefront of public debate during the pandemic. While there was quite a bit of debate, the vast majority of the population was ultimately supportive of restrictions such as distancing, mask mandates and curfews. Although some parties and other political actors voiced opposition, this was not comparable to the protests mounted in Germany or the Netherlands.

Finally, a recurring debate in French society concerns the role of religion in the public space. A law from 1905 establishes the principle of separation

(laïcité). In recent years, this law has been regularly questioned as debates have emerged concerning headscarves, halal food and other religious signifiers, especially in public schools. With little or no exception, this debate concerns the Muslim population. In this context, and more generally, Amnesty International has reported that “racial and religious discrimination persisted, especially targeting Muslim individuals and associations” and blamed “excessive use of force by police continued without accountability” (Amnesty International 2023).

Effective
Corruption
Prevention
Score: 7

Corruption has historically been an issue in French politics, associated especially with low levels of campaign financing. Throughout the 1990s, a series of scandals led to lawsuits and sometimes to the conviction of leading politicians. Things have improved, but scandals continue to play a role in French politics. Most importantly, the leading candidate of the conservative camp in 2017, François Fillon, would probably have had a serious chance at winning the presidential election had it not been for two parallel scandals that clearly alienated a nontrivial share of his voters.

The first bill introduced by Emmanuel Macron’s government after the 2017 election dealt with the “moralization of politics,” barring parliamentarians from employing family members, and increasing oversight of their travel and representation budgets. This has apparently led to new and more in-depth monitoring of candidates to government positions.

There are nonetheless several ongoing issues. Former President Nicolas Sarkozy received guilty verdicts in two different cases in 2021, one concerning campaign finance and the other corruption. He has appealed both decisions, and new rulings were expected in the first quarter of 2024.

The Macron government has not been free of scandals, and Macron put an end to the traditional convention that indicted ministers would be expected to step down from government. Two ministers have recently faced trial. Minister of Labor Olivier Dussopt stood trial in November 2023 due to irregularities in public contracting when he was mayor of the city of Annonay. Minister of Justice Eric Dupond-Moretti was recently acquitted of charges of conflict of interest.

Overall, the situation appears to have improved over the long term, but the government has provided sometimes contradictory signals. A study by French Anti-corruption Agency (AFA), a state agency attached to the Ministry of Justice, shows an increase in recorded abuses between 2016 and 2020. At the same time, this recently created agency (December 2016) certainly has had a beneficial effect.

However, the failure to renew the public service status of Anticor (Le Monde 2023), the reference anti-corruption NGO in France, sent a contradictory sign. Thanks to this status, the NGO could easily intervene in civil lawsuits and force national prosecutors to take action.

Legislature

Sufficient
Legislative
Resources
Score: 7

French legislators usually have two members of personal staff each. They also benefit from the staff of legislative committees, who are usually highly qualified and selected through competitive exams. Finally, they may draw on the resources and staff of the Court of Auditors if needed. There is no substantive parliamentary research unit, but there is a library, and parliamentarians are increasingly resorting to hearings, even if the number of hearings remains modest in comparative terms. Generally speaking, the 2008 constitutional reform has improved the parliament's prerogatives.

Each legislature produces several thousand legislative reports, and the number has been increasing over recent legislatures.

Effective
Legislative
Oversight
Score: 8

Committees generally have free access to all requested documents. However, areas such as national security, the secret service or military issues are deemed sensitive, with access thus being more restricted. In such cases, the government might be reluctant to pass on information, or even tempted to use information-access limitations to cover up potential malpractices. For instance, in the past, the Prime Minister's Office has had substantial amounts of cash at its disposal that could partially be used for the electoral activities of the party in power. No information was available about where the money actually went. In the same vein, it is only since the Sarkozy presidency that the president's office budget has become transparent and accessible to parliamentary inquiry.

Committees can summon ministers for hearings, and frequently make use of this right. Ministers can refuse to attend but this is rather exceptional. Given the supremacy and the discipline of the majority party in parliament during the Fifth Republic, such a refusal does not result in serious consequences

Effective
Legislative
Investigations
Score: 6

The right to initiate investigations exists, but the executive has historically had the ability to evade the scrutiny of unwanted commissions. Since 2009 – following the constitutional amendment of 2008 – the opposition has had the right to form one investigative commission (“Commission d'enquête”) per year in the lower house. In the upper house, each group can nominate a commission every year.

These commissions have to fulfill a certain number of conditions detailed in the internal rules of the two chambers. In particular, such a commission must not interfere with judicial investigations, which usually means that a commission is not created after a judicial process is initiated, or is dismantled within six months of this time. The commission can have up to 30 members whose political affiliation must mirror the share of parliamentary groups in the plenary.

Commissions have the right to summon ministers and can call upon the Court of Auditors to assist them. In principle, noncompliance or refusal to appear may lead to fines and other judicial sanctions. This is very rare, however.

While these commissions undeniably have power, it is worth mentioning that several major issues in the past few years, such as the handling of the yellow vest crisis or the pandemic, did not lead to the initiation of investigative committees. Moreover, the general impression is that the principle of noninterference with judicial investigations – in the name of the separation of powers – ultimately prevents the creation of investigative committees on the issues with the most political importance. For the same reasons, the effects of these committees, which regularly produce lengthy reports, are rather minor, and they are very rarely critical of government action. Interestingly, the last serious study of these committees is more than 20 years old (Vallet 2003).

Legislative
Capacity for
Guiding Policy
Score: 4

There is no congruence between the structures of ministries and those of parliamentary committees. The number of parliamentary committees is limited to eight (up from six in 2008) while there are 25 to 30 ministries or state secretaries. This rule, introduced in 1958, was meant as, and resulted in, a limitation of deputies' power to follow and oversee each ministry's activities closely and precisely. The 2007 – 2008 constitutional reform permitted a slight increase in the number of committees and allowed the establishment of committees dealing with European affairs.

Since 2009, the chair of the Finance Committee is given to the opposition. It is virtually impossible for an opposition politician to preside over any of the other seven permanent committees.

The influence on lawmaking is important to the extent that this provides backbenchers the opportunity to negotiate with the executive. However, the executive has several instruments to enforce the passage of its original proposal. It may reject any amendments that reduce government income or increase expenditure (Art. 40 of the constitution). Moreover, it may, use a "package" vote (Art. 44.3) – a procedure that is no longer used very often.

The 2022 legislative election did not yield a clear majority for the presidential camp. This situation had not been experienced since the 8th legislature (1988 – 1993). Rather than strengthening the influence of committees on draft legislation, the situation repeatedly led to situations of gridlock, with the government having a hard time adapting. As a consequence, Macron’s government repeatedly resorted to the procedure specified in Article 49.3, which allows the government to declare a bill adopted unless the government is removed by a no-confidence vote. Prime Minister Borne had used this procedure 20 times at the time of writing (January 2024), illustrating how governments may have their way in the legislature even without a majority.

Governing with Foresight

I. Coordination

Quality of Horizontal Coordination

Effective
Coordination
Mechanisms of
the GO/PMO
Score: 8

Policy coordination once a policy proposal has been forwarded to the prime minister is developed at three levels. The first is the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), the second is the President's Office and the third, when the subject is either legislation or regulation, is the Council of State (Eymeri-Douzans 2022). This hierarchical organization gives the prime minister the option of modifying ministers' draft bills. For important issues, this steering function is shared with the President's Office, and entails strong cooperation and collaboration between the two secretaries-general – the directeur de cabinet for the PMO and the secrétaire général for the president – respectively at the Matignon and the Élysée. Both the president and the prime minister appoint civil servants from all ministries or from civil society as sectoral policy advisers. All ministerial domains are covered in this regard. Several hundred highly qualified people are involved in government steering, monitoring, oversight and advising functions.

However, it would probably be overstated to consider these various checks a method of evaluation. The PMO mainly coordinates and arbitrates between ministries, takes into consideration opinions and criticisms from involved interests and from the majority coalition, and balances political benefits and risks. The President's Office does more or less the same in coordination with the PMO. It is also quite often the case that the initiative leading to a bill's introduction comes from the presidential office. Rather than offering a thorough policy evaluation, these two institutions serve as a place where the ultimate political arbitrations between bureaucrats, party activists and vested interests are carried out. Evaluation is more implicit than explicit, since the impetus for reform tends to derive from dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs (Gaiti 2019).

Line ministers have limited independent room for maneuver. They have to inform the prime minister of all their projects. Strong discipline is imposed even at the level of public communication, and this rule is reinforced by the media, which tend to judge any slight policy difference as the expression of political tension or party divergence. As the Prime Minister's Office oversees the policy process, the officeholder's cabinet assistants in each area supervise, liaise and coordinate with their counterparts in line ministries about the content, timing and political sequences of a project.

The secretary-general of the PMO (as well as his counterpart at the Élysée) operates with some reserve. He or she can step in if the coordination or oversight process at that level has failed to stem the expression of differences within the government. Traditionally, the secretary-general is a member of the Council of State and – even though this figure could be fired at any time for any reason – there is a tradition of continuity and stability beyond the fluctuations and political vagaries of individual governments.

Given the presidential character of the Fifth Republic, the same type of control is exerted by the President's Office in coordination with the PMO. In practice, the two secretaries-general are the most powerful civil servants whose opinions might often prevail on ministry choices. Today, the choice of secretaries-general for line ministries has to be negotiated with the President's Office, when they are not imposed.

Coordination is strong across the French government. It is in the hands of the PMO and the President's Office, which liaise constantly and make decisions on every issue. Coordination takes place at several levels. First, at the level of specialized civil servants who work as political appointees in the PMO (members of the cabinet, that is, political appointees belonging to the staff of the prime minister), then in meetings chaired by the secretary-general, and finally by the prime minister in case of permanent conflicts between ministers or over important issues. In many instances, conflicts place the powerful budget minister or minister of finance in opposition to other ministries. Appeals to the prime minister require either a powerful convincing argument or a situation in which the appealing party is a key member of the government coalition, as it is understood that the prime minister should not be bothered by anything but the highest-level issues. But the prime ministerial route often serves as a shortcut to a direct appeal for a decision by the president.

The Council of Ministers meets once a week. There are also a large number of interministerial committees chaired by the prime minister or the president. Most of these committees meet upon request. While many of them hold meetings every week, these are usually attended by the ministers dealing with the topics discussed.

Effective
Coordination
Mechanisms
within the
Ministerial
Bureaucracy
Score: 7

If a line ministry wishes to get its proposals accepted or passed, it must liaise and coordinate with other ministries or agencies involved in the area of this legislation. If this consultation has not taken place, objections expressed by other ministers or by the Council of State might serve to kill a project. All ministries are equal, but some are more equal than others: For example, the finance minister is a crucial and indispensable actor consulted on virtually all projects. Usually, the coordination and consultation processes are placed under the responsibility of a “rapporteur” – usually a lawyer from the ministerial bureaucracy (which is also in charge of arguing for and defending the draft bill before the Council of State, whose intervention is crucial even beyond the purely legal point of view). The dossier is always followed by a member of the minister’s staff who communicates with his counterparts and tries to smooth the process as much as possible.

France is doing comparatively well in terms of digital government, according to a recent OECD (2020) study. Overall, the country receives above-average scores and is ranked 10th among the OECD countries, outperforming countries including Estonia, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden. Several digital information platforms have been built, but have had only mixed success (Cabut et al. 2022).

In 2011, an interministerial Directorate for State Information Systems and Communication was established. In 2014, to strengthen its capacity to steer and influence the sectoral administrations, the directorate was placed under the authority of the prime minister. A further impulse has been given to the directorate by the Macron administration’s emphasis on the technological revolution. In parallel, a report of the Court of Accounts, in support of past actions, recommended a major effort to improve investment and personnel training. The new secretariat is building on these actions with a view to providing users with a single identification number that would provide access to all public services. Several experiences have already been quite successful. For example, the digitalization of tax declarations, processes and payments has been so successful that for most taxpayers, the use of printed documents is no longer possible. Various efforts to improve coordination between administrations have been implemented. For instance, public procurement processes that involve several administrations have been streamlined, and

private companies can access the system using their registration number. Nonetheless, exchanges of information across minister portfolios still need to be more systematic.

In general, it is still quite often the case that governmental “couac” (i.e., mixed signals) happens, with ministries trying to push an initiative without prior clear consultation within the government. Marlène Schiappa, former secretary of state for gender equality, was thus nicknamed “Madam Controversy” before she finally resigned.

Complementary
Informal
Coordination
Score: 8

Informal coordination is generally efficient in achieving coherence in the government’s communication. More than his predecessors, President Macron has used the format of a “government seminar” to prepare for key events, such as the preparation of the new government plan for action in summer 2022. Governments commonly refer to ad hoc committees tasked with providing information on crucial issues. In rare cases, a report is requested from a single person. Committee members are mainly high-level civil servants, former or active politicians, or academics, and are often chosen based on their sympathy for the government in office at the time. Most reports are made public, but a few remain unpublished, particularly when the report’s proposals appear too provocative to be accepted by social partners.

More generally, most decisions with high political stakes lead to informal consultation organized by the president or the prime minister. Recently, the presidential party has generally been considered to be too weak to extend beyond the role of transmitter of the executive’s instructions. Yet the situation of minority government since 2022 has shed new light on informal consultations with other parties – mostly in this case with the Republicans. The pension reform and the bill on immigration demonstrated how complex such negotiations can be.

A crucial factor and essentially an invisible coordination mechanism is the “old-boy network” built by former students from the elitist “grandes écoles” (École Nationale d’Administration (ENA), École Polytechnique, Mines, ParisTech, etc.), or by members of the same “grands corps” (prestigious bureaucracies such as Inspection Générale des Finances, the diplomatic services, the Council of State and so on). Most ministries (except perhaps the least powerful or those considered as marginal) include one or several persons from this high civil servant super-elite who know each other or are bound by informal bonds of solidarity. These high civil servants – especially “énarques” from ENA – also work in the PMO and the president’s office, further strengthening this informal connection. The system is efficient but lacks transparency, from a procedural point of view (Gervais 2022). Reform of the

ENA, which has now been transformed into the Institut National du Service Public (INSP), as well as the “grands corps,” leading toward more professional experience before accessing this body, may change the situation in the long run (Gally 2022). In the short term, no visible effect has been perceptible beyond the protests of those directly concerned.

Quality of Vertical Coordination

Effectively
Setting and
Monitoring
National
(Minimum)
Standards
Score: 9

Mitigating a long tradition of state centralization, a broad near-consensus on the need for decentralization has influenced political debates for decades. This has taken the form of devolution of power to local governments (regions, departments, cities) as well as de-concentration – that is, distributing state authorities’ representatives throughout the territory (rather than only in Paris), and giving more power to the local representatives of these national authorities, especially the prefects (Biard 2007). In all cases, the central state continues to set objectives and define the possible ways of achieving them. If local experiments have been authorized and become more widespread, such as today’s experiments regarding the distribution of a minimal income, the national authorities oversee the definition of the design and process for these experiments. For instance, in the case of the minimal wage, national authorities have granted the possibility of conditioning the minimal income on a specific number of hours worked for the public service. Departments mainly were presented with the option of opting in for this.

Overall, standards and objectives set by the state are largely respected because of strict procedural obligations. The prefects and regional courts of account closely monitor local governments’ actions, and can denounce and – as has happened in several cases – either prosecute local officials or go over their heads in cases of insubordination. Moreover, local governments still have limited resources at their disposal. Local expenditures represent only 20% of total public expenditures in France, compared to the average of 31% in Europe overall (Ecale and Turban 2019). State-region contracts are also systematically used to define key targets and key performance indicators. Regions also use these indicators when subcontracting, for instance with regional train lines.

Resistance to the central authorities’ positions exists in different forms. Calls for more autonomy for local governments are frequent. Overseas territories as well as Corsica benefit from a large de facto room for maneuver. Resistance has also taken the form of direct opposition to legislation such as the law of net zero soil artificialization, which was vehemently opposed by Laurent Wauquiez, president of the Regional Council of Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes.

Effective
Multilevel
Cooperation
Score: 5

The Fifth Republic reinstated the Senate as the formal institution for the representation of “territories.” Its designation through mainly local officeholders was designed to give local governments a say on national politics. The holding of political mandates at both the local and national levels, also a rule until 2014, was seen as a means for consultation. Mechanisms for actual consultation and coordination of local governments by national authorities, however, remained few and far between. Most such dialogue has either taken place through ad hoc consultations when, for instance, President Emmanuel Macron invited 220 mayors to the Élysée to talk about urban violence after the riots of June 2023. In many cases, however, local officeholders complain about the lack of understanding from national authorities. Lobbying by the big associations representing local officeholders, such as the Association of the Mayors of France, is often intense. In 2022 and 2023, the absence of the president at this group’s congresses was seen as a sign of disdain and deep misunderstanding. Top-down approaches remain largely dominant. This being said, according to the self-rule index established by the EU and covering 57 countries (EU 2021), France is placed within the group of countries with the highest degree of local autonomy.

II. Consensus-Building

Recourse to Scientific Knowledge

Harnessing
Scientific
Knowledge
Effectively
Score: 6

The influence of research on policymaking, and the development of evidence-based policymaking more generally, strongly varies across policy areas in France. Generally speaking, the highly elitist character of the upper echelons of French administration is not favorable to academic input. The central role of “énarques” – that is, ENA graduates – tends to marginalize scientists. The use of research under this regime is mostly opportunistic.

The COVID-19 crisis illustrated this rather well. The executive created a scientific council on 10 March 2020, six days before the beginning of the first lockdown. It met about 300 times and produced a total of about 74 notes and opinions. Yet in the early days of the crisis, several problems of miscommunication occurred, for example when Prime Minister Edouard Philippe explained that general mask mandates were useless, on March 13 on prime time TV. Thereafter, however, the government tended to follow the council’s advice rather closely, at least for a few months. In particular, the advice to limit individual mobility in September 2020 was delayed by more than a month. The advice to lock down again after the Alpha variant began

spreading in January 2021 was not followed, and the publication of the note was delayed several months.

Things are probably better in those areas where expert opinions are generated in-house. This has historically been the case for members of the “grands corps” – that is, the most prestigious administrative departments – many of which are staffed by engineers from France’s top schools. This has been true for the energy sector, in particular, which is historically managed by the monopolistic public utilities firm EDF. Similarly, many major infrastructure projects and certain French success stories – such as the high-speed train TGV – were historically steered by this type of state engineer.

Things are much more complicated in the area of social sciences, where state appreciation of expertise is very limited. The exception is probably economics, as successive generations of economists appear to have had a continuing influence on policy within the critical ministries.

Involvement of Civil Society in Policy Development

Effective
Involvement of
Civil Society
Organizations
(Capital and
Labor)
Score: 2

The need to involve capital and labor organizations more regularly in policymaking processes has been discussed for decades. Over the past two decades, governments have sought the consultation of interest groups more systematically, and these practices have to some extent been adopted as legal obligations, creating institutional mechanisms of concertation between government, business organizations and trade unions. Moreover, the rules of social negotiations were modernized, notably by the Larcher law of 2007. This law required the government to present plans for social and labor legislation to the social partners, giving them an opportunity to negotiate and agree on possible solutions that could then be transformed into law.

This attempt to rejuvenate social dialogue and social concertation produced limited results. The problem is twofold: First, only some of the trade unions (the CFDT, UNSA) seek a constructive role in negotiating social reforms with the government; others (CGT, FO) tend to reject this sort of negotiation, sticking to their role of mobilizing social forces against governmental plans. Second, governments have not regularly sought social concertation, and often have not taken the positions of the capital and labor organizations into account.

If President Macron, who came to power in 2017, seemed to follow this approach at the beginning of his first mandate, it gradually became clear that he was particularly reluctant to concede the social partner organizations a role in the policymaking process. Regarding these organizations as defenders of the

status quo, and thus hostile to his reform ideas, he often relied on his parliamentary majority to pass his reform bills without real social consultation. For instance, during his first mandate, he ignored an unemployment insurance agreement that had been negotiated by the social partner organizations and adopted a government bill instead (2021). The pension reform in 2023, which was submitted to parliament without previous social consultation, led to months of protests and created a rare united front among trade unions. The government was able to overcome resistance on the streets and in parliament only by forcing the bill through parliament, resorting to the 49.3 procedure (see “Effective Cross-Party Cooperation”). This attitude by Macron has led the majority of capital and labor organizations to express their deep dissatisfaction with this “solitary” method of governing without allowing a voice to the representatives of civil society.

In summary, the government does not involve capital and labor CSOs strongly in policymaking processes, and does not seek to moderate disputes between capital and labor. If attempts to enhance the consultation process are made after deep social unrest (JDD 2023), they remain piecemeal.

Effective
Involvement of
Civil Society
Organizations
(Social Welfare)
Score: 4

Social welfare CSOs play a critical role in France. They participate significantly in the implementation of welfare programs, and several major associations are relatively powerful. This includes the French Red Cross, Emmaus and the Secours Catholique. Historically, some associations, such as the Fondation Abbé Pierre on housing rights and anti-poverty policy, have been able to exercise an effective influence on policymaking. This is, however, exceptional. Generally speaking, CSOs in this area – especially the most visible ones – are sometimes able to raise awareness of certain issues and thus influence public opinion. For instance, Restos du Coeur, a very popular CSO that provides free food to the needy, has regularly drawn attention to the issue of poverty. In the context of rising inflation in recent years, it regularly signaled that the organization’s projects were overwhelmed by demand, and unable to keep up. In 2003, its director announced that the organization was close to bankruptcy, leading to considerable public reactions but no major political initiative.

However, there are no institutional mechanisms ensuring active involvement of welfare CSOs in policymaking. Governments do not usually bring any of these CSOs into the policymaking process, even if they may be part of advisory groups or participate in parliamentary hearings. They have been influential only on specific occasions, for example when they attract considerable media attention, as illustrated by a recent study on access to healthcare for migrants by Pursch and colleagues (2020).

Effective
Involvement of
Civil Society
Organizations
(Environment)
Score: 4

Some environmental CSOs are very visible in France, including Greenpeace, Réseau Action Climat and Les Amis de la Terre. Cécile Duflot, a former leading green politician and minister under François Hollande, became director-general of Oxfam France in 2017, initiating a “green” turn for this association. Most of these associations rely on the propagation of their positions in the public, public events and the generation of expert reports to influence policymaking. Case-study research has shown that many of these organizations show signs of increasing professionalization and institutionalization (Berny 2018).

In recent years, new CSOs have emerged that are often more attractive to younger people, and are frequently much more radical than older counterparts. This includes the French chapter of Extinction Rebellion, Soulèvement de la Terre and Dernière Rénovation. They respond to the perceived inaction of public actors and the ineffectiveness of older organizations, and employ more radical methods of gaining public attention.

Though some cooperation between public actors and environmental associations takes place (Flahault, Robic 2007), governments have not regularly included them in policymaking. More radical actions – including the occupations and blockades carried out by newer organizations – have been met with a rather strict police reaction. Minister of the Interior Gérald Darmanin has regularly called them “eco-terrorists.” Ultimately, this has served to scale back the environmental program of the current government.

Openness of Government

Open
Government
Score: 9

France has made remarkable progress in the area of open government under the past two governments. According to a study commissioned by the European Commission in 2018, France comes third in terms of “open data maturity” and “quality,” after Ireland and Spain.

This is largely related to the success of the official data platform data.gouv.fr. According to government information, it currently contains 35,000 datasets shared by over 2,200 organizations. These are contributed by local actors, national administrations and universities, as well as private actors.

Following a report by the national Court of Auditors, the government pledged in March 2022 that all access to public data should be made free within a year. Moreover, the National Assembly, which has made available most of its transcripts of plenary sessions, will make more data available, merging its own infrastructure with data.gouv.fr. Different ministries have similarly pledged to make new datasets available in the near future.

Finally, data reuse has increased dramatically. The platform data.gouv.fr recorded more than 8 million visits in 2022 for close to 40,000 recorded data reuses.

Overall, progress in this area is very important, and France appears to be a trendsetter in this particular area (OECD 2023).

III. Sensemaking

Preparedness

Capacity for
Strategic
Foresight and
Anticipatory
Innovation
Score: 6

The central government is able to rely on a substantial apparatus for strategic foresight. Several services in this area are attached to the prime ministerial office. France Stratégie prominently provides the government with expertise in this respect, and holds a mandate to elaborate scenarios for the future. More specialized agencies focus on the areas of pensions (Conseil d'Orientation pour les Retraites), employment (Conseil d'Orientation pour l'Emploi) and the economy in general (Conseil d'Analyse Économique). Many ministries also have statistical offices and analytical teams.

Leveraging data with the aim of improving services and impacting society as a whole has also been a key policy goal in recent years. The Direction Interministérielle du Numérique (DINUM) is an interministerial task force for the digital transformation of government. The portal [data.gouv](https://data.gouv.fr) offers a repository of publicly available data from public authorities. More generally, the digital transformation of government has been pushed quite far, even leading to discussions about whether all citizens have the capacity to exercise their rights in such an environment. Coordination and the actual capacity to process all this information have also been regularly lacking.

Policy experimentation has been popularized as a form of testing new policies in all domains. However, this is most often viewed as a testing ground for a new policy rather than actual randomized controlled trials. Such experiments have sometimes been implemented in partnership with academic researchers, but these remain very limited in scope. In most cases, civil servants are not accustomed to this type of technique, and access to the highest-ranked civil servants still follows a rather traditional pattern of competition (Babinet 2020). Overall, these transformations of the modes of governance have had a limited impact on public management. If new public management has had tremendous

consequences for the workings of public authorities, the bureaucratic culture has not wholly adopted effective strategic foresight.

Analytical Competence

Effective
Regulatory
Impact
Assessment
Score: 4

The practice of compiling regulatory impact assessments (RIAs) has been followed since the 1990s, notably under the supervision of the PMO. This is one of the missions of parliament, in accordance with Article 24 of the constitution (amendment of 2008). Yet despite a growing interest in them, there is still no systematic RIA process, with comparable rules and methodologies. RIA processes remain largely optional and generally focus on social policies (Desplatz and Lacouette Fougère 2019). There are also partial substitutes, however. The finance and budget ministries try to systematically evaluate the fiscal impact of any new measure.

More recently, the government think tank France Stratégie has been charged with evaluating the impact of public policies. The think tank has published methodological guidelines for evaluating public policies, but these are seldom followed. Last-minute amendments to parliamentary bills tend not to be subject to this type of evaluation. This necessitates frequent post facto modifications to legislation, as unexpected or collateral effects have not been properly anticipated. The Court of Accounts produces regulatory assessments on an ex post basis that might help to revise legislation, but it cannot provide the benefits of an anticipatory strategy.

What is lacking is a systematic examination involving all the main stakeholders. The role of the Conseil économique, Social et Environnemental – which has been designed for this purpose – is generally considered too limited.

Effective
Sustainability
Checks
Score: 4

A national roadmap for the sustainable development transition was established for the 2015 – 2020 period. A more encompassing strategy was created for the subsequent period, called France 2030 (Ageri 2022), leading to the slogan of “France, green nation.” This also allowed space for more specific plans such as the national strategy for biodiversity. The switch from one to the other has shifted attention toward more economic development through technological innovation with a specific focus on nuclear energy as the centerpiece of the national strategy.

These plans encompass several concrete actions, from a call for proposals for 3,200 “innovating projects” to more specific pledges such as positioning 10% of the national territory under a strong protection strategy, halving light pollution and halving the use of phytosanitary products.

RIAs and overall evaluation assessments are limited in these plans. They are set as general objectives without binding commitments, and with no specific interim evaluations. Data to monitor changes is expected, but no specific means are established for the actual delivery of precise information. Agencies already in place are expected to provide expert opinions on all dimensions. The output of these evaluations remains of limited practical value (SNTEDD 2020).

Based on past performance, the full application of these plans is far from guaranteed. The reduction in the use of phytosanitary products has thus been announced several times, resulting in an observable trend to limit the increase in use. Pledges and indicators too often tend to be symbolic rather than driving genuine structural transformations.

Currently, the government's general strategy has centered on simplifying the decision-making process rather than creating more complementary points of oversight (Conseil d'Etat 2022).

Effective Ex Post
Evaluation
Score: 6

Ex post evaluation of public policies is the technique most adopted by administrations. Yet there is no practice of systematic evaluation, except for policies or laws in which the constitutive act stipulates the need for an evaluation. However, over the past 25 years, the Court of Accounts – which previously exerted a legal type of oversight – has transformed its mission and adapted its methods to evaluate public policies from a political, social, economic and financial point of view. The Court's reports have become reference documents not only for the political authorities (government and parliament), but also for the broader public. However, stakeholders are rarely closely associated with this evaluation process, even if consultations are mandatory in cases of large-scale local construction, for instance. This is one of the rare cases for which the publication of the results is also mandatory (Duran 2021).

In the last 10 years, the government has also sponsored a variety of academic initiatives for the evaluation of public policies. The Institute for Public Policies at the Paris School of Economics and the Interdisciplinary Laboratory for the Evaluation of Public Policies are examples. They are nevertheless rarely invited to propose evaluations at the government's initiative.

The divide between academics and the administration remains wide. Evaluation techniques have thus continued to diverge between these two worlds. Some entities, including the Court of Accounts and France Stratégie, publish evaluation reports. However, these represent only a portion of all

policy assessments produced; other institutions, such as the National Assembly, also regularly publish results of policy evaluations.

Overall, the impact of ex post evaluations often proves limited. One often-cited reason for this is the timing of policy decisions. Evaluations are often seen as coming too late in the process, with politics demanding quicker responses.

Sustainable Policymaking

I. Economic Sustainability

Circular Economy

Circular
Economy Policy
Efforts and
Commitment
Score: 7

France adopted a Roadmap for the Circular Economy in 2018, which includes 50 measures designed to move the country toward a 100% circular economy (Ministry for an Ecological and Solidary Transition 2018). Transitioning toward a circular economy has been clearly set as a target since the 2015 passage of a law dealing with the energy transition and green growth. This law set a target in which 65% of domestic waste was to be recycled by 2025. The law especially focuses on households. Mandatory recycling for businesses and the third sector is also in place. In this case, recycling aligns with the principle that emitters are to pay directly for the price of their waste. The construction and the food processing sectors are also subject to specific regulations. These regulations support the development of specific industries for recycling construction materials (concrete, wood, glass, etc.). The general outlook of these policies is coherent and in line with the general objectives. Yet, specific sectors such as returnable recipients have successfully resisted regulation.

The 2015 law also officially forbids the use of built-in obsolescence for products. However, this has had only limited success.

In international comparison, France is ranked in the best group for circular material use rate, whereas it is placed in the middle rank with regard to its overall recycling rate.

The transition toward a circular economy is driven by the Ministry of Ecological Transition and its different agencies. However, coordination has not been effective, with other ministries having paid little attention to the issue, or acting to slow down the process to protect the interests of their sectors.

Monitoring of the transition is limited. The last publication of key indicators dates back to 2017, for instance (MEE 2017).

Viable Critical Infrastructure

Policy Efforts
and Commitment
to a Resilient
Critical
Infrastructure
Score: 8

There is no comprehensive public plan for the protection and development of the critical infrastructures that are vital within many domains in France. That being said, plans exist within most individual sectors. In the transport sector, for instance, a planning committee (Conseil d’orientation des infrastructures, COI) was created in 2021, which includes political actors as well as experts. It provides the government with medium- and long-term strategic investment advice concerning the transport infrastructure. In 2023, the COI presented an infrastructure development strategy linked to the objective of fighting climate change. Drawing on this blueprint, the government announced an investment plan entailing expenditure of €100 billion by 2040 to develop transport infrastructures and reduce greenhouse gas emissions within the transport sector. Furthermore, alongside the train company SNCF, local authorities and the EU, the government will implement a New Rail Deal in the field of regional train services.

The presence of critical nuclear plants and nuclear weapons systems makes it vitally important to plan and implement protection strategies. Yet, given the degree of state secrecy in these areas, no public communications specifically address these issues. More specific domain protection has been developed for both the public and private sectors. The Agency for the Security of Information Systems (ANSI) monitors and coordinates strategies dealing with digital technologies. It publishes recommendations in this sector (ANSI 2020).

As most of this sector’s actions are not published in the public domain, it is very difficult to precisely assess plans. However, issues dealing with national security have often led to strong and effective responses. Whether the issue has been terrorist threats or natural or technological disasters, service continuity has generally been assured. However, public services (especially hospitals) are regularly subject to hacking attacks, indicating that room for significant improvement still exists. However, France is still ranked in the top 10 of countries worldwide in this domain by the Global Cybersecurity Index (2020).

Policy Efforts and Commitment to Achieving a Decarbonized Energy System by 2050
Score: 9

Decarbonized Energy System

Decarbonization of the energy production sector has been identified as one of the main targets for France’s green transition. The Paris Climate Agreement’s targets are viewed as the government’s primary commitments in this regard. France still figures among the developed countries with comparatively low levels of carbon emissions per capita. Yet the composition of the energy mix has not changed much in the last decade. The share of fossil fuels is still 47% (2021), which means France is dependent on imported fossil fuels. Progress with regard to developing renewable sources is slow – rising from an 8% share of the overall mix in 2011 to 13% in 2021 (European Commission 2023).

A number of sectors have developed plans both to reduce energy needs and to produce emissions-free energy. In the construction sector, renovations that improve structures’ insulation receive significant subsidies. In transport, a large-scale plan for long-term investment in the train infrastructure launched in 2023. This links the modernization and development of the infrastructure with the aim of decarbonizing transport. According to one plan, only electric and hydrogen cars will be sold by 2025. Emitting industries have their own plans to build carbon-capture systems and to electrify processes. The centerpiece of the French strategy is the development of nuclear plants able to produce electricity without carbon emissions. Shale oil extraction has been banned within the national territory, but imports are still allowed. Renewable energy is promoted, but with far less priority than nuclear energy. Nonetheless, the French electricity system is almost carbon-free.

The overall strategy for the reduction of carbon emissions is largely shared across the government, with the Ministry for the Economy being as active in this domain as the Ministry of Ecological Transition. These policies are seen as highly political measures, with direct and regular interventions by the prime minister and the president himself.

Progress toward decarbonization is closely and regularly monitored at the governmental level, and the results are publicized (MEE 2023).

Adaptive Labor Markets

Policies Targeting an Adaptive Labor Market
Score: 6

France has been characterized as a rigid labor market (Fougère and Kramarz 1997). Since 2017, the Macron administration has developed various policies aimed at making regulations more flexible, increasing professional mobility and creating a more fluid labor market. In this perspective, plans for professional training, both at the point of labor market entry and across a

professional career, have focused on the development of professional skills. Adaptation plans have been made mandatory in case of major layoffs. A reform of the employment agency, renamed France Emploi in January 2024, is designed to place unemployed people in work more efficiently. Public benefit programs for unemployed recipients have been partially reduced to incentivize a return to work. However, the lack of resources has undermined the implementation of individual-level support. Focus is often placed on maintaining strict oversight of unemployed individuals rather than on making reintegration possible.

After the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis, the danger of an economic breakdown and massive rise in unemployment led the government to substantially expand the existing – and modest – short-time work schemes. Together with massive and rapid support for businesses (tax cuts, financial aid, etc.), the measures successfully contributed to containing the development of mass unemployment. At the peak of the crisis, up to 8.4 million people working in 1.2 million companies participated in these short-time work schemes (UNEDIC 2022).

These policies have shown ambiguous overall results over time. The overall situation today is better than in 2016, before the Macron era. The employment rate has increased, the unemployment rate fell from 10.4% to 7.4% (2022), the youth unemployment rate fell from 24.5% to 17.3%, and the rate of involuntary part-time work has decreased. Nonetheless, France is still ranked in the lowest group of countries with regard to performance in this area (e.g., 26th out of 30 countries with regard to the unemployment rate).

Policies
Targeting an
Inclusive Labor
Market
Score: 6

Unemployment benefit policies have generally been seen as relatively generous. This issue has often been drawn into the political sphere, with people accusing institutions of providing assistance rather than insurance. Various programs have been set up to facilitate job transitions. President Macron has sought to simplify rules in order to increase flexibility and mobility in the labor market.

On the one hand, the government has enhanced regulations at the company level and given small and medium-sized firms more flexibility in adjusting their workforces. On the other hand, measures have removed barriers to employment, for instance by creating enhanced and strengthened job training schemes, lowering benefit levels for unemployed people, and instituting stricter conditions for out-of-work benefits to encourage quicker returns to employment. These efforts align with reforms to the French Employment Agency (renamed France Travail as of January 2024), which aim to enhance employment placement by improving coordination between various local, state

and private actors. Various regulations aim to incentivize employment and increase the number of hours worked. This approach is exemplified by the “employment bonus,” which targets individuals with low salaries and is received as a complement to income. Working hours beyond contracted hours are also de-fiscalized, and firms have the option to distribute specific yearly bonuses subject to low tax rates (Leite 2020).

Two groups face disproportionate barriers to employment. Among younger people (Berthet et al. 2021), barriers to employment for school leavers are particularly high because of the deep mismatch between the public general schooling and vocational training systems. This is a key contributor to the high unemployment rate among young people. For this reason, the Macron administration has invested substantially in the generalization of vocational training at all levels of education. The number of apprenticeship contracts has risen significantly in recent years, to more than 1 million (October 2023). Yet this policy has mostly benefited individuals with relatively high education levels – for instance, who hold upper secondary qualifications. For young students and workers with lower-level qualifications, apprenticeships are much more difficult to access. The unemployment rate among young people aged 15 to 24 has dropped from more than 25% (2016) to 17.3% (2022), but this is still one of the highest such unemployment rates within the OECD. Specific policies also seek to reduce school dropout rates, with limited success.

Another group experiencing barriers to saving and to getting back to work is elderly people. Even though the share of people aged 55 to 64 in employment has risen steadily in recent years (56.9% in 2022), it is still below the EU average (62.4%). In November 2023, President Macron set the objective of reaching 65% by 2030. Most of the problems are linked to working conditions and workforce policies within companies. The government has invited labor unions and employers’ associations to discuss and agree on measures in line with this objective. He has promised that the agreement struck via this process could be transformed into law. Negotiations were expected to begin in 2024.

The COVID-19 pandemic also presented an opportunity to significantly change the work-life balance for white-collar workers. While the 35-hour workweek institutionalized such change for blue-collar workers, COVID-19 has generalized remote work for many professionals. However, debates are ongoing as to whether this can continue in various firms, as deserted workplaces seem to trigger various issues with regard to labor organization.

Policies
Targeting Labor
Market Risks
Score: 7

Social protection has previously been provided for all workers. New forms of work – especially new independent status for small enterprises (auto-entrepreneurs) – limit such rights (Marzo 2021).

Trade unions have been in decline for decades. Effective representation, however, is regulatorily ensured for all big firms. Smaller firms, especially those with fewer than 50 employees, are not subject to most of these obligations.

Most social rights are portable, especially if workers changing jobs stay in the same sector. The latest development in this area has been the portability of the rights to training. Pension reforms have also served to align rights across the various sectors.

Financial disincentives to return to work have not significantly changed in recent years – they remain relatively high, and above the OECD average.

Sustainable Taxation

Policies
Targeting
Adequate Tax
Revenue
Score: 7

Tax rates are high for individuals and businesses in France, although this has not prevented the existence of a structural public deficit. Despite its high level, taxation does not seem to serve as a strong disincentive to different economic actors. It is largely based on indirect taxation, especially on consumption. Taxation on labor is significant, but it also supports a highly developed social protection system and extensive public services. Firms generally oppose high taxes, but benefit from a variety of exemptions. The effective average tax on business has decreased significantly since 2016, but still ranks above the OECD average. However, this has not harmed France’s attractiveness for international investors, as it was ranked sixth worldwide in 2022 (Business France 2022; Ernst&Young 2023).

In international comparison, the fiscal administration has been recognized for its high capacity levels, although it has also been one of the targets for the reduction in the number of civil servants. It maintains a broad ability to manage the complex fiscal system, which to date has been simplified only marginally. Tax evasion rates remain significant. Following monitoring and enforcement measures, authorities have collected €14.6 billion in additional revenues, indicating the broad prevalence of these practices (Court of Accounts 2023). While the end of bank secrecy with Switzerland has improved the situation on this front, the fight against “fiscal paradises” is far from complete.

Policies
Targeting Tax
Equity
Score: 8

France's tax system is highly redistributive. According to the French public observatory on inequalities (Observatoire des inégalités 2023), the Gini coefficient (rate between the average primary income of the richest 10% compared to the 10% poorest) is 19.6 for primary incomes; it drops to 5.5 through the effect of taxation and welfare transfers. This is one of the most redistributive effects within the OECD.

The tax system is overall fair across different actors with similar capacities. Looking at individuals, the main difference lies in the status of the person, depending on whether he or she is self-employed or a salaried employee. Taxation tends to be higher for the self-employed, but with more specific exemptions. A few professions, such as journalists, also benefit from partial tax exemptions with disputable grounds.

Taxation is progressive when it is direct. Income tax is paid by roughly half the population, and the highest marginal rate is about 45%. For companies, the logic of redistribution is less present. Larger firms tend to pay more taxes, but also have more ways to avoid them. Recent debates have particularly concerned the implementation of a new minimal tax rate for global companies (Laffite et al. 2021). Usually, labor-intensive companies tend to pay more taxes than capital-intensive companies. In all cases, the highest-earning individuals and companies tend to pay relatively less than other income categories. Bach et al. (2023) show that the tax rate declines from 46% for the 0.1% of the richest households to 26% for the 0.0002% richest.

Policies Aimed at
Minimizing
Compliance
Costs
Score: 7

The tax system is transparent in principle but complex in practice.

Forms are usually simple in the most straightforward cases. Digitalization of most functions has even made partially automatic completion of various forms possible, starting with the income tax form. However, such automation is far from systematic. Numerous specific cases and exemptions make it difficult for people to understand forms, and facilitate optimization strategies. People who are not accustomed to working with computers, a group which constitutes a significant section of the population, often find the digitalized functions difficult to use. A number of practical guides exist in these markets, as well as various consulting services. For private individuals, only a small minority of generally high income earners has to use this type of service. As the tax system also involves refunds, the fact that people do not claim what they are entitled to is significant.

For firms, the use of specialized internal and external services is almost mandatory. This is a specific burden for small companies, whereas bigger ones tend to have a streamlined process.

According to a calculation by PwC (n.d.) for 2020, taxpayers spent an average of 28 hours on corporate income taxes, 80 hours on labor taxation and 31 hours on VAT. The corresponding totals in Germany were 41 hours, 134 hours and 43 hours, and in Switzerland were 15 hours, 40 hours and eight hours.

Tax institutions represent a sizable state expense, estimated at more than \$5 billion in 2016 (Court of Accounts 2016). The Court of Accounts has argued that substantial reform is needed to increase the overall efficiency of the tax collection system. Simplification seems the best strategy. Specific litigation on tax issues does not seem problematic.

Policies Aimed at
Internalizing
Negative and
Positive
Externalities
Score: 7

The internalization of negative externalities is sometimes achieved by taxation even if this goal was not intended. The example of the high gasoline tax rates in France illustrates such a case. In recent years, the attempt to impose a duty on carbon emissions from transport has largely failed due to fierce resistance from the “red hat” (2013) and “yellow vest” (2018 – 2019) social movements. However, the principle that polluters should pay for their pollution is firmly stated in Article 110-1 of the Environmental Code. Its effective application is generally restricted to situations in which the pollution has a direct, immediate and visible impact even if various contributions have been put in place – for instance, to fund recycling industries for disposable products.

The internalization of positive externalities has mostly been applied to agriculture, with specific programs for contributions to landscapes or biodiversity. This is also the case for the energy-saving domains, as companies and individuals can receive direct reimbursements or subsidies for insulating buildings or buying appliances used to generate renewable energy. Furthermore, the government has subsidized electric vehicle leases for low-income households. Research by companies is also largely subsidized.

Sustainable Budgeting

Sustainable
Budgeting
Policies
Score: 4

France has run persistent budget deficits since 1973. No public surplus has been registered since then. Since 1992, France has seldom respected the Maastricht rule limiting the yearly public deficit to 3% of GDP (INSEE 2024). A clear trend toward an ever-increasing deficit appears quite clearly. Beyond the Maastricht treaty principle, there is no specific national rule prescribing a limit to public indebtedness. Consequently, public debt has regularly increased, and surpassed the symbolic threshold of 100% of GDP in 2020. The current government, like its predecessors, has generally tried to limit deficits, but none has credibly declared its intention to achieve a balanced budget.

Budget rules are tougher for local governments than for the central state, but even here constraints are limited.

Deficits do not prevent long-term planning. For instance, a law on budget planning for the years 2023 – 2027 was adopted in September 2023. The annual deficit is planned to decrease to 2.7% in 2027. In the same perspective, many programming laws – laws relating to general strategy and spending horizons in specific sectors for the coming years – are proposed for areas such as military equipment or research. Investments are planned. Some policymakers argue that specific investments, such as those for the green transition or defense, should not be included in evaluations of the Maastricht public-deficit objectives.

The budgetary process is rather transparent, with the constitution limiting the degree to which legislation with budgetary impact can be passed via regular bills. However, all budgets since 2022 have been adopted through the procedure specified in Article 49.3, which enables the government to pass legislation without the direct approval of parliament if the National Assembly does not manage to approve a motion of no confidence toward the government.

The preparation of the budget now always takes into account issues of sustainable development and the transformation of the state. For instance, the government has indicated it has made “unprecedented” efforts on behalf of sustainable development, with the budget dedicated to this goal rising from \$33 billion in 2023 to \$40 billion in 2024 (Jacque 2023). The consistency of this aim across all budget areas can, however, be discussed (Blatrix et al. 2021).

Sustainability-oriented Research and Innovation

Research and
Innovation Policy
Score: 7

Although the government has made rhetorical commitments to sustainable development and research, the two seldom form a national roadmap together. Of course, the national roadmap for research includes a dedicated section on the environment and sustainable development, entailing both a technological dimension and a social dimension. Conversely, the France 2030 roadmap for investment (which foresees €54 billion in investment expenditures) includes research as one of its policy domains. However, industrial innovation is considered more relevant in this regard. These roadmaps are not binding.

Overall, President Macron has sought to aid the business sector. “Start-up France” was one of his early leitmotifs, and his government has implemented

several regulatory reforms aimed at facilitating the creation and support of emerging startups. Innovation in eco-friendly technologies is only a limited part of this narrative. The biggest exception is nuclear power, for which the government has articulated a general strategy that involves funding large-scale nuclear plants and developing innovative smaller reactors. The France 2030 investment strategy has been the primary governmental program to support start-up development. Up to €5 billion has been dedicated to this program for the period 2021 – 2025, under the supervision of the prime minister. Calls for proposals have been used to select the companies that will receive funding and aid in their industrial development.

Research and innovation progress are monitored by the government office as part of the country's key indicators. A research law sets a series of objectives in terms of funding and achievements, for instance with regard to the country's publication and patent ratings. Yet observers often argue that France has declined compared to other countries in Europe and worldwide (Larousserie 2021). Grounds for this decline are found in the relatively low productivity of French research, which in turn results from equipment investments lower than in other comparable nations, and the country's loss of attractiveness due to low average incomes among the country's research professionals.

The European Innovation Scoreboard (EIS 2022) ranks France 11th out of 27 countries. France is seen as belonging to the second-highest group of countries – the “strong innovators” (behind the “innovation leaders”) – with a performance level slightly above the EU average. Similarly, the Eco-Innovation Index created by the European Environment Agency (EEA 2022), which assesses innovation linked to environmental objectives, ranks France seventh out of 27 countries, with a performance above the EU average.

Stable Global Financial System

Global Financial
Policies
Score: 9

France implements most international agreements designed to prevent high-risk financial activities, and also seeks to participate in defining these agreements. A minimal tax on financial transactions is in place, although it was slightly reduced during President Macron's first term. More generally, France participates in all euro zone institutions, and has tried to develop regulations enhancing stability during crises, whether these are more like the COVID-19 pandemic or the financial crisis of 2009.

In the context of the IMF, the French government has also acted in favor of restructuring sovereign debt in developing countries in order to promote sustainable development. For example, France organized a summit discussing

a new international financial pact in June 2023.

The Authority for Financial Markets (AMF) and the Bank of France have worked jointly to promote transparency among financial intermediaries. While this could have been regarded as a sign of collusion with banks to protect domestic markets, this also reflects France's overall integration within the EU institutions in this regard. For instance, specific actions were taken to regulate Bitcoin in 2022 and 2023 (Desbois 2023), aligning its fiscal status with other financial instruments.

President Macron renewed the fight against tax havens in 2023. This was done in order to curb tax evasion. While the government was tempted to establish specific exemptions in the hope of attracting international sports organizations to France in 2023, this attempt was short-lived. On the contrary, tax havens within the EU and outside the EU have been regularly denounced, with limited effective impact so far beyond the case of Switzerland.

II. Social Sustainability

Sustainable Education System

Policies
Targeting Quality
Education
Score: 7

France's education system is rather successful. Public expenditure on education amounted to 5.2% of GDP in 2022, slightly above the OECD average. Over the past 20 years, the share of university graduates among 25- to 34-year-olds has increased from 31% to 50%. Tertiary education very substantially increases employment opportunities; the employment rate reaches 86% for those with tertiary attainment, compared to 53% for those who did not finish secondary school, and 74% for those who did, but went no farther. Tertiary education also influences wages very substantially; wages among those with a tertiary qualification are on average 55% higher than among those with only a secondary degree.

Conversely, this means students with attainment levels below an upper secondary qualification are particularly disadvantaged in the French labor market. The public school system is not well aligned with labor market demands. Especially for young people with lower education attainment levels, it is particularly difficult to integrate into the labor market. While combined school and work-based learning programs (dual training) have become more common in recent years thanks to incentives provided by the Macron administration, they are still not sufficient. The traditionally high rate of youth unemployment in France is linked to this problem.

In the last PISA study (2022), French students overall performed slightly below the OECD average (but slightly above in the reading category). France ranks among the lower-performing countries (21st out of 30). Like most OECD countries, it experienced a decrease in performance over the 2018 – 2022 period, mostly as a result of the pandemic. Moreover, France is one of the countries in which performance most closely correlates to socioeconomic status, although the pandemic does not appear to have strengthened this link.

Higher education is dual, with a broad range of excellent elite institutions – prestigious lycées and grandes écoles – and a large mass university system, which is poorly funded and poorly managed and does not prepare its students well for successful entry into the labor market. Spending on universities is below the OECD average. More importantly, dropout rates are dramatic: Only 40% of initially registered students ultimately obtain a university degree.

Another worrying element concerns the growing share of private education, which currently accounts for about 17.6% of French students between the primary and high school levels. Recently, repeated teacher absences, especially in public secondary schools, have been a focus of public complaints. Average teacher salaries are below the OECD average, and pay increases have been slow to arrive.

While a number of reforms have been ongoing, they have created some degree of instability. For instance, a secondary reform temporarily offered students the possibility of opting out of math instruction for the last two years of high school. This has now been reversed, but illustrates a certain lack of direction and unclear general strategy.

Salary increases for teachers are slow at the start of their careers. After acquiring 10 or 15 years' experience, the statutory salary earned by primary school teachers and secondary school teachers was at least 15% lower than the average salary (2021 – 2022 school year).

Education with a focus on sustainable development has become a cross-subject pedagogical goal. Specific activities have included a competition between schools to save energy, gardening projects on school premises and a labeling project (E3D) that denotes institutions that have enacted a global sustainable development strategy.

Policies
Targeting
Equitable Access
to Education
Score: 6

Compulsory education in France begins at age three, which means 100% of these children attend preschool institutions. It ends at age 16, although 90% of the population is enrolled until age 17. There is a de facto training obligation until age 18. The overall child-teacher ratio is comparatively high at 23:1 (compared to 15:1 in the OECD overall), but the ratio falls 14:1 in primary schools, thanks to specialized preschool helpers.

Although public expenditure per student is above the OECD average at the secondary level, it remains lower at the primary level, despite catch-up efforts that have been ongoing since 2012 (Girard 2023).

The 2022 PISA study confirmed that French students’ performance was more strongly correlated with socioeconomic status than was the case elsewhere. France places in the lower third of OECD countries regarding math attainment and socioeconomic background. It also has an above-average share of low achievers across all three PISA test categories.

A recent study suggests that the influence of socioeconomic status on performance is evident beginning as early as preschool (see Goudeau et al. 2023).

Sustainable Institutions Supporting Basic Human Needs

Policies
Targeting Equal
Access to
Essential Services
and Basic Income
Support
Score: 7

By international and European standards, the French welfare state is generous and covers all possible dimensions affecting collective and individual welfare, not only for citizens but also for foreign residents. The impact of social transfers on poverty reduction is relatively high, with poverty rates remaining comparatively low. Therefore, programs providing minimum incomes, health protection and financial support to the poor and to families can be deemed satisfactory, as they effectively support social inclusion. The state moreover made considerable efforts to maintain income levels despite the pandemic. The minimum salary does guarantee a decent standard of living. This is less clear for the minimum social income (Revenu social d’activité, RSA), which currently amounts to €607 per month. Approximately 1.88 million French were receiving the RSA at the time of writing.

A problem remains concerning effective access to basic social services and basic income support. For instance, 34% of citizens eligible for the RSA minimum income did not apply for it in 2018 (Caisse des dépôts 2022). Public policies have sought to improve this situation. The national anti-poverty strategy launched in 2018 has simplified procedures, improved information via online services and mobile service buses that visit recipients’ neighborhoods,

and made other improvements. Progress seems to be slow, however (Caisse des dépôts 2022; Vie publique 2022).

The share of young people neither in employment or in training (NEET) remains very high, with France ranking only 24th out of the 30 OECD countries (with a high NEET share corresponding to a low rating). Similarly, the share of the population experiencing severe levels of material or social deprivation remains comparatively high, as does the share of the population that cannot afford a broadband internet connection.

Gaining access to housing is difficult and expensive. Housing is the largest expenditure item for the vast majority of households, accounting for nearly 21% on average, but often rising to near 30% for those without access to public housing (Fondation Abbé Pierre 2023, p. 253). Housing subsidies have been cut under the current government. Research has shown that access to housing is even more difficult for migrants, due to discrimination. New measures presented in 2023 focused on access to home ownership.

Policies
Targeting Quality
of Essential
Services and
Basic Income
Support
Score: 7

Minimum income requirements do – in principle – allow for the satisfaction of basic human needs, whereas the situation is more complicated for persons living on the basic social income (RSA). The latter will usually limit access to decent housing.

By law, every legal resident in France is entitled to a bank account. An individual that has trouble opening an account may demand support from the French central bank, whose services will designate a bank that must open an account on behalf of that person.

Public transport is accessible to more than 70% of French residents. Yet France's large size limits access to public transportation services outside urban areas. Moreover, rising fuel prices have raised the cost of private transport since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Although the government initially subsidized fuel massively to keep prices low, most aid has been phased out since early 2023. Residents can still apply for a conditional €100 subsidy.

Finally, significant inequalities remain in the digital infrastructure, with an estimated 4.5 million people lacking internet access. This also creates an increasingly pressing inequality with regard to people's effective ability to access (public) services that are increasingly and sometimes exclusively provided on the internet.

Sustainable Health System

Policies
Targeting Health
System
Resilience
Score: 7

France has a high-quality health system that is generous and largely inclusive. Since its inception, it has been a public system based on compulsory, uniform insurance for all French citizens, with employers’ and employees’ contributions calculated according to wage levels. In addition, a general social contribution taxes different sources of income. Together with widespread complementary insurance programs, these cover most individual costs. About 12% of GDP is spent on healthcare – one of the highest such ratios in Europe.

The pandemic tested the resilience of the health system. It has left a lasting imprint, and the insufficiencies exposed in the system have not been resolved despite a significant increase in public spending on health in 2021 to 12.3% of GDP, over one percentage point above pre-pandemic levels. Many hospital services are understaffed, as nurses resigned following the pandemic despite efforts to improve salaries. The physician-population ratio is lower than in most Nordic countries, but also lower than in Italy or Spain. In certain regions, it has become difficult to find a general practitioner to consult. This is especially true of rural and semi-rural areas, but also of poorer urban neighborhoods (OECD 2023, p. 10). As physicians are free to choose their places of practice, certain areas have been systematically avoided. A number of measures – especially financial incentives – have been implemented over the past decade with the intention of countering this trend, but with little success.

Some of these shortcomings may be due to coordination costs and inefficient management. The current administration has focused on primary healthcare with the aim of alleviating pressure on hospitals. Regional health authorities (ARS) are now co-managing health expenditures with the ministry at the regional level.

Policies
Targeting High-
Quality
Healthcare
Score: 8

Created in 2016, the French Public Health Agency (Santé publique France, SPF) is the principal agency in charge of public health policy. Its competencies include health promotion and education, public health surveillance, disease prevention, and health monitoring. It works in part through regional branches offices located within regional health authorities.

The SPF uses national information campaigns to promote healthy eating, physical exercise or smoking cessation. Since 2017, general practitioners have been allowed to prescribe physical exercise to patients with certain types of conditions, such as diabetes or heart problems. The SPF has also overseen the

implementation of an official food rating system, called “nutriscore,” which became mandatory in 2021.

The Ministry of Health has implemented three national cancer screening programs (breast, cervical and colon). Since 2004, all women between 50 and 74 have had access to a biannual mammogram and examination free of charge. A new Cancer Plan 2021 – 2030 aims to increase the number of tests and reduce avoidable deaths by 50,000 per year. The program has benefited from increased funding compared to earlier periods. Other forms of screening and follow-ups are provided by GPs and gynecologists, especially during pregnancy, with patients receiving 100% reimbursement.

There have been important efforts to promote “integrated care,” especially for the elderly, based on substantial experimental evidence. Several programs of this kind have been organized at the regional level. There is little available evidence at this stage as to their effectiveness.

Smoking rates remain high in France, with 24% of the adult population smoking compared to an OECD average of 17%. France also has relatively high levels of alcohol consumption with an average of 11 liters per adult per year (2019) compared to nine across the OECD as a whole. Rates of self-reported obesity are slightly lower than in neighboring countries, but have been increasing among adolescents. The food rating system appears to be having positive effects in this area.

The French healthcare system provides good access to care with low out-of-pocket payments (OECD 2023).

Two sources of inequality can be identified: one financial and one geographical. Cost-sharing, in which the statutory health insurance program often reimburses only a tiny share of the patient’s expenditure, may constitute an insurmountable burden for low-income households. This being said, there are specific schemes for protecting very low-income and chronically ill populations from cost-sharing and up-front payments. Furthermore, the situation has improved recently for basic dentures, hearing aids and optical services, but remains problematic when it comes to consulting certain specialists. However, most of the population relies on complementary health insurance programs that are not tied to incomes, and thus create significant differences in access.

These problems may become particularly problematic when combined with geographical inequalities. Even basic primary care can be very difficult to access in certain areas. Despite the advertised goal of creating

Policies
Targeting
Equitable Access
To Healthcare
Score: 7

multidisciplinary primary care units, there has not been a substantial improvement in coverage. Access times for outpatient settings may diverge widely; waiting times can be significant, and appear to be increasing. According to Eurostat figures, unmet care needs in France were slightly higher than the EU average in 2021.

Gender Equality

Policy Efforts
and Commitment
to Achieving
Gender Equality
Score: 9

Gender equality has improved over the past decades. The European Institute of Gender Equality ranks France fifth in the EU on this measure; within the OECD, France has average-to-good equality outcomes compared to the other countries. It does well in terms of school performance and the share of women among graduates of master's programs. The labor force participation rate among women is one of the OECD's highest.

During the pandemic period, more women than men took on caring duties. Survey data on the division of household chores show significant patterns of inequality in this area.

The gender wage gap remains above the OECD average, hovering around 15% (see *Vie publique* 2024). These gaps tend to widen when children arrive. The introduction of a comprehensive gender gap reporting system in 2019, the Professional Equality Index, could help improve the situation over time. Since 2021, market-listed firms have been obliged to achieve gender parity on their boards. This has placed France at the top of all OECD countries on this measure. In the political realm, the 2017 parliament had the most female members in French history, at around 40%. The 2022 parliament lagged behind in this regard. France has never had a female president, but Élisabeth Borne (2022 – 2024) was the second female prime minister in French history. Public rules stipulating gender equality for candidacies have various effects, with the best performance coming in local and regional elections (between 40% and 50% of mandates are held by women). In the 2021 local elections, 12 of the 42 biggest cities elected a woman mayor.

France encourages parental leave to be shared among both parents, but fewer fathers than mothers take advantage of the low flat-rate leave benefit. While substantial public support means that childcare itself is affordable, there is a shortage of public crèche facilities for children under three years of age. Mandatory schooling at the age of three allows mothers to return to the labor market, and the share of women working 30 hours or less is lower than the OECD average (21% compared to 25%).

Since 2013, data on gender violence has been systematically collected by governmental actors. The current executive launched an information campaign on this issue in 2019.

Strong Families

Family Policies
Score: 9

There is a long tradition of support for families going back to the 1930s. The comprehensive policy mix that has developed since then has been successful in providing childcare, financial support and parental leave, and has resulted in generous fiscal policies (income is not taxed individually, but in each family unit, dividing up total income by the number of people in a family).

Beginning in 2019, nursery schooling has been mandatory from the age of three, a policy that will strengthen inclusion for immigrant children. In addition, families using childcare support at home are given rebates on their social contributions. The fact that income taxes are calculated on the basis of the family unit and not individually is also very favorable to families, since (nonworking or lower-paid) spouses and children lower the amount of taxable income per head. These policies have been effective. Not only is the birth rate in France one of Europe's highest – despite a slight fall from an average of two births per woman before 2014 to 1.83 births per woman in 2020 – but the percentage of women integrated into the labor market also compares favorably to that seen in the Scandinavian countries, Europe's leaders in this domain.

After a series of reforms under President Hollande that restricted child allowances for high income earners, Macron's presidency has added both more restrictive and more generous measures (e.g., parental leave has been extended from 14 to 28 days) without major impact on the existing pattern of family policy. Child poverty rates and the risk of poverty are greater than the OECD average and remain a concern.

Sustainable Pension System

Policies Aimed at
Old-Age Poverty
Prevention
Score: 7

The French pension system is relatively generous and largely prevents poverty among the elderly. Public expenditure on pensions as a share of GDP is high. It reached 14.7% in 2020 – a peak due to the pandemic – but is expected to decrease and stabilize at a level of 13.7% by 2030. The 2023 pensions reform ended four special schemes outside the general regime (reserved for specific professions) with the aim of enhancing pension system equality, although this will apply only to future beneficiaries. Another highly contested part of the reform affected the pension age for virtually everyone. To prevent future

financial deficits, the minimum age of pension eligibility was increased from 62 to 64. In line with this, the number of contributing years necessary to benefit from a full pension was increased. The reform also – very slightly – increased small pensions as a means of reducing old-age poverty, but the effects of this portion of the reform are disputed.

The heated debate about the benefits of the recent pension system reform has focused particularly on the necessity of the reform. There is now consensus that the persistent deficit will not be resolved by the reform, but that this deficit is viable in the medium term (Bozio 2022).

Individuals in nonstandard employment or with interrupted employment biographies sometimes face significant disadvantages regarding their pension income. For instance, the pension of independent (self-employed) workers is on average more than 30% lower than that of conventionally employed workers (OECD 2022). A study by the national statistics institute INSEE found that 16% of individuals between the ages of 55 and 69 did not have either a pension or work income in 2021 (INSEE 2023). There are specific compensation mechanisms for individuals who have had a full employment career but with low wages, for example, to guarantee a minimum pension of €61 (Paribas 2024).

For people with interrupted employment biographies, the situation differs according to the specific cases (for instance, due to the reasons for and duration of unemployment). However, the state does offer solidarity mechanisms compensating for the loss of pension rights, for instance for people who have experienced a period of unemployment lasting at least five years (COR 2023: 221ff, 235 ff).

One major challenge associated with the reform bill is the need to increase the employment rate among older workers. The employment rate among those 55 years and older is about 10 percentage points lower than the OECD average. The reform has thus created a major source of economic uncertainty for older workers. Part of the problem is that change has to come from the workfare policies relating to older workers at companies. To facilitate a solution, the government initiated a round of negotiations between employers' organizations and trade unions at the end of 2023. Results are not expected before mid-2024.

Before the 2023 pension reform, the elderly were provided for rather generously. Rather liberal early retirement schemes used to allow firms to get rid of high-salary employees and replace them with early-career workers who might work at higher levels of productivity. This policy has changed as a result

of successive reforms, culminating in the 2023 reform. As a result, early retirement schemes have been gradually abolished, the legal age of retirement has increased, and the number of years of contribution necessary to receive a full-term pension has gone up. The long-term effects of this reform are difficult to predict, but one of the crucial goals is to increase the employment rate among older people. In terms of intergenerational equity, the generations born after 1980 will have to pay more for their pensions than older generations. Their replacement rate (the percentage of their pension compared to their past working incomes) will be lower, but the duration of their employment will also be shorter, and they will on average receive their pensions for a longer time (COR 2023: 209 – 219).

Pension policies do not account for intergenerational differences in wealth. It is true that wealth distribution appears to cluster among older generations that are living longer and transfer their wealth later than previous generations.

Sustainable Inclusion of Migrants

Integration Policy
Score: 6

France has traditionally maintained an open policy toward immigrants, relying on the *jus soli* tradition. Every person born in France is considered French or is eligible for French citizenship. Integration policies in terms of long-term residence permits, access to citizenship and family reunification are open and generous. Presently, most new legal immigrants come to the country through family reunification programs. This migration is thus not based on language or professional skills, which possibly makes integration more difficult.

Integration of the so-called second – in fact, often the third – generation of immigrants, especially those whose families are from Maghreb countries, has also proved difficult for many reasons, including education system failures, community concentration in urban/suburban ghettos, high unemployment rates, cultural identity issues, labor market discrimination and so on. As a consequence, France ranks in the lower group of OECD countries with regard to secondary education attainment levels and integration into the labor market, performing below the OECD average. The Migrant Integration Policy Index (2020) offers a look at better results for France, with stronger outcomes in the areas of health, access to citizenship and anti-discrimination policy, but this assessment relates to 2019.

Since that time, immigration from Eastern Europe, the southern Balkans and more recently from the Middle East has become a very sensitive subject. It is exploited by the National Rally party (former the National Front) and more generally by the extreme right, which has been able to set the political agenda

and force a focus on migration and identity issues. President Macron has declared his intention to review France's immigration policy, combining acceptance and integration policies for immigrants and refugees with accelerated asylum-application procedures and more rigorous efforts to repatriate people whose applications have been rejected. The process of screening requests has improved, but there has also been a deliberate policy to restrict residence permits. As it is very difficult to implement administrative or judicial decisions to expel illegal migrants, the number of migrants living in a kind of legal and social limbo without legal residential status – “sans-papier” – is growing.

A migration bill adopted in December 2023 introduced several important new measures. As it was unable to secure a majority in the lower chamber, the government had to accept several restrictive measures from the right (and, de facto, from the extreme right). In particular, the new version introduces the obligation to have a job or to have resided legally in France for five years in order to claim certain types of social benefits. The bill also creates yearly “quotas” of foreigners. Finally, bringing back an old debate introduced by President Hollande, criminals with dual citizenship who have been convicted of homicide may be stripped of their French citizenship.

As drafted, the would have introduced a sharp turn in French migration policy. Many of its measures were controversial from a constitutional point of view. Therefore, President Macron referred the law to the Constitutional Council, which rejected a considerable number of measures (40%) as unconstitutional in its ruling on 25 January 2024. The government then implemented the reform without the rejected articles.

Effective Capacity-Building for Global Poverty Reduction

Management of
Development
Cooperation by
Partner Country
Score: 7

France has a long tradition of supporting poor countries both financially and through the promotion of favorable policies. It ranks fifth worldwide in terms of the provision of official development assistance (ODA, \$15.9 billion in 2022), and has recently increased its contribution, reaching 0.56% of gross national income in 2022. A total of €505 million went to Ukraine alone, while €92.8 million was related to the COVID-19 response. Bilateral ODA is mainly tied to issues of peace and justice (OECD 2022). Gender equality has become a significant objective in almost half of the aid provided, and in 21% of the country's humanitarian aid. France has also subscribed to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Several elements need to be specified in this context: First, France has proved reluctant to regard free trade as one of the most effective instruments of

support. As a consequence, France is often an obstacle to the lowering of tariffs and trade barriers, for instance in agriculture. Second, French aid is concentrated on African countries (36.8% of the total in 2021), where the country has traditionally had strong economic interests. A significant portion of France's multilateral contributions are also earmarked for African countries. The temptation to link aid to imports from the donor country is quite common. France is active within the framework of international organizations, but for the above reasons, its policy preferences are deeply influenced by path dependencies such as past colonization and the global network of French-speaking countries.

On a different front, France has tried to impose a tax on air travel to finance the fight against AIDS in poor countries. However, it has convinced only a few countries to follow suit. During the French EU presidency beginning in January 2022, President Macron highlighted the need to launch a significant EU investment plan in Africa, and pushed for such an initiative. This initiative seems judicious as, given the continent's persistent underdevelopment despite sustained growth, there is a need to increase EU support to sub-Saharan countries where poverty and Islamist terrorism are together pushing an increasing number of people to migrate to Europe. Given the demographic pressures ahead (Africa will soon have 1 billion inhabitants) and the attractiveness of Europe, development in Africa is an emergency issue both for Africans and Europeans.

III. Environmental Sustainability

Effective Climate Action

Policy Efforts
and Commitment
to Achieving
Climate
Neutrality by
2050
Score: 7

France's specific energy mix, with its strong reliance on nuclear energy, explains the country's comparatively low levels of CO₂ production. France is the 10th biggest greenhouse gas emitter in the OECD in absolute terms, but the sixth-lowest in per capita terms or per unit of GDP.

In 2019, France passed the laws on Energy and Climate with the advertised goals of achieving climate neutrality by 2050 and seeking a 40% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030. While criticism of climate action is important, there was an effective reduction in CO₂ emissions in 2022 following an increase in 2021. This was partly due to the increase in fuel

prices in the context of the Ukraine war, as well as to a relatively warm winter; these factors led consumers to use less fuel for transport and heating. Paradoxically, there was an increase in CO₂ emissions in the energy sector at the same time, mainly due to technical difficulties encountered in nuclear energy production resulting from aging infrastructure. Emissions in the transport sector have similarly increased without reaching pre-COVID levels for the time being.

The Haut Conseil pour le Climat, an independent executive body, issued a critical opinion in July 2022, arguing that France was falling behind its advertised goals. More specifically, the council argued that out of the 25 goals contained in the national low-carbon strategy, only six have been associated with adequate implementation measures. The council also criticized the share of the national budget devoted to climate measures, and the decreasing support for climate change mitigation policies.

The council called for enhanced planning, improved reduction of greenhouse gases, better support for a transition toward a low-carbon economy, and a stronger mobilization of French diplomatic functions around the issue of climate change. The transformation of private transport patterns was also important, it said.

Regarding adaptation, 2022 showed that France is particularly exposed to the consequences of climate change, but is insufficiently prepared. The country is experiencing a higher-than-average temperature increase (1.9°C compared to 1.15 worldwide).

Effective Environmental Health Protection

Policy Efforts
and Commitment
to Minimizing
Environmental
Health Risks
Score: 5

Environment-related issues do not currently appear to be at the top of the political agenda. The French Agency for Food, Environmental and Occupational Health and Safety (Agence nationale de sécurité sanitaire de l'alimentation, de l'environnement et du travail; ANSES) lists environmental health as one of its main goals. France's national plan for environmental health (NPEH) identifies several central goals. The fourth NPEH covers the period from 2021 to 2025 and pursues four different goals: 1) improving information and training to help citizens identify exposure risk and adopt the right precautions; 2) reducing citizen exposure to environmental risks affecting health – this includes air quality, noise and parasites such as bedbugs, which have been high on the public agenda in the past few years; 3) expanding the action of local political authorities – the idea is to encourage and support local initiatives; and 4) improving the understanding of the links between health and the environment.

For the time being, this policy has remained largely exploratory. Few resources are effectively committed to environmental health. Mostly, such activities are integrated either into health or environmental policies.

This is confirmed by a variety of indicators. France ranks around the OECD average on most relevant indicators, including exposure to particulate matter and ozone. Drinking water quality is particularly worrisome in some parts of the country due to years of uncontrolled soil pollution through intensive agriculture. While there is growing awareness of these issues, policy remains reticent at best.

Effective Ecosystem and Biodiversity Preservation

Policy Efforts
and Commitment
to Preserving
Ecosystems and
Protecting
Biodiversity
Score: 6

France has a long-standing commitment to biodiversity preservation and restoration. It is the EU country with the largest area of protected terrestrial and marine territory in the EU. Some of its national parks have existed since the first half of the 20th century.

In 2020, the French Biodiversity Agency was created. Its task is to coordinate policy efforts regarding the protection of the environment. It is also supposed to collect primary data and engage in further research in the area of biodiversity. Finally, its experts are tasked with supporting policymaking, while also providing support to the managers of protected spaces and other societal actors. It is too early to evaluate this new agency’s performance, but it has been furnished with significant financial and human resources, resulting mostly from the reorganization of preexisting agencies and services.

Compared to other OECD countries, France does extremely well with respect to protecting terrestrial biomes and marine areas. The situation is much more complicated with regard to the use of sustainable pesticides. This is due to the difficulty of reorienting the agricultural sector toward more sustainable modes of production. Similarly, species protection is also comparatively weak in France. The enduring political influence of agricultural producers is clearly a brake to progress in this area, despite the periodic determination shown by members of the French executive.

Effective Contributions to Global Environmental Protection

Policy Efforts
and Commitment
to a Global
Environmental
Policy
Score: 7

France was a key player in the negotiations that led to the Paris Agreement, the landmark climate agreement adopted by the United Nations in 2015. The Paris Agreement has become the main reference point in international climate governance. After coming to power in 2017, President Macron repeatedly pledged his attachment to the Paris Agreement.

According to government figures, France provided €7.6 billion in climate finance in 2022 (€2.6 billion of which was for adaptation), exceeding its target of €6 billion. The French government has also contributed to the Climate Risk and Early Warning Systems (CREWS) initiative – an early warning system for vulnerable countries. The French development aid agency, Agence Française de Développement (AFD), was among the first development banks to align with the Paris Agreement.

Despite these figures, France, like the United Kingdom and other countries, is not on track to reach net zero emissions by 2050. Moreover, given France’s leadership in the past, its current hesitations may weigh heavier than those of other countries in the international arena.

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