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## Emmanuel Macron: a French president whose populist tactics are derailing his own career

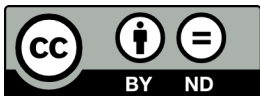
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French president Emmanuel Macron is facing a [political crisis](#) unprecedented in [contemporary times](#).

Pierre Rosanvallon, one of the country's most influential political theorists (and a man known for his moderation), said that France is currently "[going through its most serious democratic crisis since the Algerian war](#)". Macron's pension reform has been rejected by parliament but instead of acknowledging defeat, he used parliamentary manoeuvring to force the change through without the consent of parliament.

The reform involves raising the minimum state retirement age from 62 to 64, with a view to making the system sustainable. However, the official [advisory board in charge of the assessment of the pension system](#) said it was at no immediate financial risk in that its deficit trajectory would be manageable.

Many economists, including the left-leaning Thomas Piketty, oppose the reform because it would be unfair. Earners at the lower end of the scale would [be more burdened by the cost](#) because they typically start work at an earlier age.

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The reform has sparked vast protests, bringing together both radical and reformist trade unions. This unusual situation, in which organisations that are rarely on the same page have united against Macron, shows what a precarious situation he is in.

The overwhelming majority of the public (with a few exceptions, such as those who are already pensioners) have also rejected the reform. A recent [survey](#) found that 68% of the population are against it. While 24% are indifferent, an extraordinarily low 8% are in favour.

The pension reform was so unpopular that Macron was not able to convince enough centre-right or centre-left MPs to back it in parliament. Even members of his own party refused to support his bill.

As a result, Macron had to resort to a controversial [no-confidence vote procedure](#) to pass the bill. This involves forcing a bill through parliament without letting MPs vote on it on the understanding that MPs can then attempt to strike it down via a vote of no confidence in the government.

Macron survived the vote of confidence that followed the legislation and the reform therefore became law. But the cost has been hefty. Macron has been left politically isolated by the saga.

This whole situation was produced by what helped Macron become successful in the first place: his populist approach to leadership.

His divisive rhetoric and his refusal to make compromises with the traditional political establishment (the major political parties and trade unions) helped him disrupt French politics and move through a lightning offensive from a position of outsider to being president. However, it is the same disruptive style that produced the current political impasse.

While Macron is usually described as a liberal opponent to populism, he is in fact [a populist](#). His rise to power was in large part down to his use of an “us” and “them” narrative.

On one side were future-oriented progressives (those on the centre left and centre right who favoured globalisation) and the European Union. On the other were conservatives, “extremists” (a term that allowed him to group together the far right and far left) and the political elites from traditional parties.

In early signs of his populism, Macron showed a [clear tendency to make decisions from the top](#) without much consultation and to bypass institutionalised negotiations (such as with trade unions).

## **The opportunist runs out of opportunity**

Notably, Macron has, until now, found success by grasping opportunities as they present themselves. His [astute interventions](#) enabled him to take advantage of the [crisis](#) in traditional political parties in 2017 and present himself as a fresh alternative.

However (as he is a populist), Macron’s leadership is built mostly around himself rather than a strong political organisation. As a result, his own weakened political party failed to secure a majority in parliament in 2022. Macron was forced to form a minority government – a situation unheard of since the 1980s.

Adding yet further pressure, the constitution does not allow Macron to stand again as president in 2027. This has weakened his authority within his own party and made him a lame duck, as his MPs have even less incentive to support him in passing unpopular legislation. As a result, there are question marks over his ability to pass further legislation within his term.

Undermining democratic processes creates precisely the kind of political climate precisely within which politicians like Marine Le Pen thrive. Le Pen has lost to Macron in two presidential run-offs but closed the margin with Macron in the 2022 election and can certainly be expected to capitalise on the implosion of his administration.

With all this in mind, Macron would have been wise to adopt a more conciliatory style by reaching out to the centre left and centre right or trade unions as he developed his reform plan. However, he decided to plough on alone, deepening an already problematic situation in the French political system and ultimately triggering a democratic crisis.