



Demographic Change : Country Profiles

France Demographic Profile: Liberté, Égalité, Fertilité

Long the demographic pioneer of Europe, France now has the highest birthrate in the European Union. How will it manage the other demographic changes coming this century?



France might have lost the World Cup to Italy, but the odds are changing. France is growing, while Italy has fewer children (Photo: Reuters)

As a Western, industrialized country, France has all the traits of a country with low fertility. Surprisingly, France now has the European Union's highest fertility rate - over two children per woman. In all of Europe, only Icelandic women are more fertile.

This only serves to underline France's position in the vanguard of demographic change. At the beginning of the 19th century, France's 28 million people made it the most populous country in Europe. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, however, France became the first country in the world to experience demographic decline, halted and then reversed by the unprecedented baby boom after World War II.

Explanations for France's current baby boom focus mostly on government incentives - tax breaks, subsidized daycare, and paid leave - designed to coax adults into having children. Some European governments, including Germany, are now trying to get their young adults in the mood with similarly generous policies.



Photo Gallery (Click on the Image to Begin)

"More children, less unemployment" reads a sign held high during protests in Paris against pension reform (Photo: Reuters)

Unfortunately, filling prams and preschools is not France's only demographic concern. Along with the rest of the continent, France is aging quickly. The baby boom cannot prevent the imminent retirement of its post-war baby boom generation, which will test France's pension

and health care system. By 2050, aging will cost France an additional four percent more of its gross domestic product for pensions, health care, and social services. But reforms, which invariably require people to retire later, have been met with strong resistance by the country's powerful labor unions.

Most recently, proposals to end "special regime" pensions for railway and utilities workers - allowing them to retire after 37 years on the job rather than the usual 40 - prompted strikes across the country. Nonetheless, President Nicholas Sarkozy vowed to push the proposal, along with other contested labor market reforms, like ending the maximum 35-hour workweek and adding another year to mandatory pension contributions

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Immigration and integration are also politically divisive demographic issues in France. France receives over 200,000 immigrants each year. The push to slow immigration has gradually turned France's immigration policy into one of the strictest in Europe. Meanwhile, integrating religious and ethnic minorities already in France will likely remain a key challenge for this and subsequent generations.

For a list of all articles and expert interviews in our demographic profile of France, click [here](#).

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