**A Case Study of the French Pro-Natalist Policy**

France’s population is entering an increasingly critical state due to a rapidly decreasing support ratio, a low fertility rate and a falling birth rate. An increasing proportion of France’s population is now over the age of 60, whilst there are fewer economically active people and even fewer people having children. This presents an economic problem as the economically active people must pay taxes towards the pensions of the older population and towards social care, which helps care for the elderly. With less young people in work, there’s less money funding the elderly which will, eventually, lead to a decline in the standard of care which the elderly can receive, simply due to a lack of funds. Currently, over 21% of France’s population is over 60 and it’s predicted that by 2050, ⅓ of the population will be over 60. The economic impacts of this low support ratio are huge. It’s currently costing the French government €12.9 billion to pay for the social security & health care of the elderly due to the large proportion of old people to employed young people. Since 1901, the support ratio of France has fallen a large amount. In 1901, the support ratio was 7.8 persons aged 15-64 to one person aged 65 years or older. In 1950, this number had fallen to 5.8, largely as a side effect of the two world wars. By 1995, the ratio had fallen to just 4.4 young people to one old person.

In addition to the rapidly decreasing support ratio, France’s population also faces the problem of a falling birth rate & low total fertility rate. The fertility rate of France in 1960 was 2.75 children per woman, well above the replacement level of 2.1. However by 1992 the total fertility rate had fallen to 1.67, substantially lower than the replacement level. This low fertility rate is due to an increasing proportion of educated women who are pursuing careers. Today, 81% of women in France are employed. Women are now focusing on their careers rather than on raising families, resulting in women putting off having children until they’re 30 or deciding to just not have children, especially middle class women. This has the effect of lowering both the fertility rate and the birth rate to levels below replacement level, resulting in smaller successive generations. This, combined with an ageing population, presents the problem of a low number of economically active individuals in the future, resulting in a decreased support ratio and raising costs to care for the elderly which ultimately increases the strain on France’s treasury.

In order to combat the falling fertility rate, France has employed an aggressive pro-natalist policy which employs a system of monetary incentives and rewards for women giving birth to multiple children which seems to have helped raise France’s total fertility rate to 1.98, the second highest in Europe next to Ireland, but still below replacement level. In 1939, the French government passed the “Code de la famille”, a complex legislation that introduced a set of pro-natalist policies in order to attempt to improve France’s flailing fertility rate. One of the key aspects of the legislation was a series of incentives offered to working women, in order to encourage them to have children. The legislation introduced a long maternity period of 20 weeks to 40 weeks depending on the number of children the woman has already given birth to. In addition to the long maternity leave, women also receive full pay during the maternity period, the idea of which is to ensure that women don’t lose out on their careers should they have children. In addition to fully payed maternity leave, the legislation also introduced a series of generous grants to women having children, especially multiple children. When a women has her third child, the French government will pay her up to €1,000 per month, depending on how well off she already is, as a reward. This is just €200 less than the French minimum wage. This, combined with next to free public transport (families are given a “large family card”, halving metro costs), €174 a year for extra-curricular activities and free entrance to public swimming pools and other public facilities, essentially means that the poorest families in France can raise a child for virtually nothing and the most well off can raise one for around €500.

In addition to grants and discounts on public services, the French government also offers subsidised state run childcare for children of 3 months, again, ensuring that women can continue to work after giving birth with minimal financial penalties. The level of subsidisation works on a scale of €0 to €500 a month, again, depending on the family’s income. Families also receive full tax subsidisation until the youngest child reaches 18, further reducing the financial impact of having multiple children. Finally, for when women reach retirement age, the French government offers full pension schemes for mothers of multiple of children.

Recently, the French government announced plans to raise the retirement age from 60 to 62 (by 2018) in an attempt to increase the support ratio by reducing the number of people who are classed as elderly. In addition to the increased retirement age, people will need to work 41.5 years in 2020 to claim a full pension versus the 40.5 years they must work now.

The code de la famille has evolved a lot since it was initially introduced in 1939 and continues to do so today in order to further improve the fertility rate. In 1967, for example, an aspect of the legislation which banned the sale of contraceptives was removed, likely due to contraceptives’ effectiveness at stopping the spread of STDs.

The critical questions regarding the code de la famille is if it has been successful so far and if it will continue to be successful in the future. The legislation is costing the French government massive amounts of money to fund, which is increasing the strain on the treasury further. If the legislation was to fail, it could bankrupt the country. Opinions on the success of the policy vary wildly. The pro-natalist policy is politically neutral and all parties of the French government support it and most will call it a success. The ex-Prime Minister, Dominique de Villepin claims that baby booms and immigration will help to make “France the most populous country in Europe by 2030.” Despite the optimistic approach, he provides no evidence to support his claim. The UN estimates that France’s population will be 69.2 million by 2030 (it’s currently 64.8 million people) and 69.8 million by 2050. Germany’s, on the other hand, is estimated to be 77.9 million by 2030, casting doubt on the ex-Prime Minister’s statement. This is significantly below the French government’s goal of 75 million which suggests that, at the moment, the pro-natalist policy is not going to have the desired effects. There are currently no predictions available for the total fertility rate however given it’s current trend of increasing, it could surpass replacement level by 2050 assuming there are no unexpected events such as wars or famines.

Looking at data currently available regarding France’s population, the code de la famille would hint at success. Frances fertility rate has risen from 1.67 in 1992 to 1.98 today and, whilst this is still below replacement level, it indicates that the code de la famille is raising the fertility rate as desired. However, the cost of this pro-natalist policy is diminishing its success. Given France’s current budget deficit of 7.5% its GDP and the current situation regarding the euro, the country could struggle to fund the pro-natalist policies in the near future, which could limit its success and ultimately result in the policy failing, worsening the issue of paying for the elderly’s social care.

There is evidence to suggest that some of the improvement in Frances fertility rate is due to immigration and not due to the pro-natalist policy. When immigrants arrive in France, they are generally young and of child bearing age which could be causing the improved fertility rate instead of the pro-natalist policies. However, France’s net migration rate is only 1.46 migrants per 1,000 of the population which wouldn’t be high enough to effect the total fertility rate to the extent it has been.

Overall, the success of the policy is debatable. The policy is costing the government billions of euros on top of what it is costing the government to support the ageing population. The UN is predicting that the population will not increase to the desired amount and analysts predict that France will not be able to raise the fertility rate above the replacement level. The French government, on the other hand, argues that they will reach their goal of 75 million by 2050 using data collected by the itself. It’s difficult to tell whether the French government’s data is truthful however as, if the pro-natalist policy is not working, it could be damaging to the government’s integrity revealing this. Judging by the available data though and the predictions put forward by the UN, it would seem that the policy is going to receive little success. The population will only increase by 0.6 million between 2030 and 2050 and the fertility rate is not expected to exceed the replacement level. This, combined with the high cost makes the population seem relatively unsuccessful in the long run.