2 France since 1958

2.1 Introduction

Chapter 2 considers the evolution of France's political system during the Fifth Republic (1958–2016), paying particular attention to the terms in office of the seven presidents since 1958. The chapter combines a basic chronology with a focus on the ongoing construction of the Fifth Republic through referring to three distinct levels of analysis: first, individual political leaders (mainly, but not exclusively the seven presidents of the Fifth Republic); second, evidence relating to the evolution of the polity (via institutions, party fortunes and policy records); and third the evolution of France's role in international affairs (Europe being the subject of Chapter 13). The aim is not to offer a detailed, archive-rich political history, but to provide a sense of the contingent, evolving nature of the Fifth Republic, France's second longest serving regime since the 1789–99 French Revolution.

The events surrounding the creation of the Fifth Republic had their origins in the Algerian crisis, which had sapped the energy of the Fourth Republic since November 1954. On 13 May 1958, rebellious military officers, backed by rioting European settlers, finally overthrew the legal government in Algiers. The conspirators threatened to extend the rebellion to mainland France, unless General de Gaulle was called upon to lead the nation's affairs. To reinforce their point, French paratroopers invaded Corsica on 28 May 1958, and plans were advanced for a military movement on Paris itself. Under threat of military invasion and possible civil war, the National Assembly invested Charles de Gaulle as the last premier of the Fourth Republic on 1 June 1958. De Gaulle immediately suspended the constitution of the Fourth Republic and was granted authority to draw up a new constitution, which was overwhelmingly ratified by referendum in September 1958. General Charles de Gaulle became the Fifth Republic's first president in January 1959.

2.2 De Gaulle's republic

The allegation of an illegal seizure of power, made by Mendès-France, Mitterrand and others, deserves brief attention; de Gaulle's ascendancy took place against

the backdrop of a possible military coup d'état. Yet powerful forces within the old Fourth Republic aided de Gaulle's accession. De Gaulle was invited to form a government by the incumbent president, Réné Coty, underlining that even men who swore by respect for the Republican tradition were anxious to avoid the prospect of civil unrest and political collapse. This move was supported by public opinion.

The related problems of Algeria and the consolidation of de Gaulle's authority dominated French politics from 1958 to 1962 (Williams and Harrison 1965). De Gaulle called referendums on four occasions between 1958 and 1962 to appeal directly to the French electorate, above the heads of the parties and other intermediary institutions. The transitional political circumstances of the period 1958–62 enabled the general to rule in a manner which opponents denounced as personal rule (*pouvoir personnel*). By governing in such a largely personal manner, de Gaulle created the basis for the emergence of the presidency as the most powerful institution in the new regime.

Propelled to power to maintain Algeria in French hands, General de Gaulle came to accept the case for Algerian independence. Why did this occur? We can identify domestic- and foreign-policy explanations. In terms of foreign policy, de Gaulle was conscious that France's new anti-imperialist discourse (see below) rested uneasily alongside the continuing French colonial presence in Algeria. The prospect of Algerian independence fulfilled domestic political functions as well. De Gaulle was determined to reduce the weight of entrenched interests preventing the state from representing national unity (Jaume 1990). No interest was more powerful than the army, which had brought the Fourth Republic to its knees. The Algerian conflict was finally resolved in April 1962, when the French electorate ratified the Evian Agreements granting Algerian independence.

The various actors involved in the crisis of May–June 1958 each assumed that de Gaulle could be moulded to their own designs. Most deputies were convinced they could control de Gaulle once the immediate crisis over Algeria had passed. The French army and the settlers both believed that de Gaulle would never cede independence to Algeria. Subsequent events revealed that each was misguided. By granting Algerian independence, and by repressing attempts to reassert the army's power, de Gaulle crushed the political power of the military in French politics. With the resolution of the Algerian crisis, many politicians saw no reason to retain de Gaulle's services. Recognising the threat, de Gaulle provoked a conflict with the old parties by organising a referendum to introduce the direct election of the French president. By obtaining popular support for the direct election of the president in October 1962, de Gaulle inflicted a severe political defeat on the parliamentarians nostalgic for the Fourth Republic. The October 1962 referendum was followed by the Fifth Republic's second parliamentary elections, held in November 1962, provoked by President de Gaulle's dissolution of the National Assembly elected in 1958. Gaullist control was further strengthened when an overall pro-Gaullist (Union pour la Nouvelle République [UNR] and Républicains Indépendants) majority was elected to support President de Gaulle. The events of October–November 1962 thus reinforced the model of the strong presidency.

The October 1962 constitutional referendum on the direct election of the presidency was of great importance for the future development of the regime. The

directly elected president could now boast a popular legitimacy at least equal to that of the National Assembly. Direct election would give the president the necessary popular legitimacy to be able to ensure that other institutions fell into line with presidential wishes. Invigorated by a direct bond with the French people, the presidency was to act as the key element of legitimacy underpinning the Fifth Republic's political system. This presidential reading of the Fifth Republic held sway largely unchallenged until 1986. The emergence of a strong presidential leadership provided a focus around which other features of the emerging political system became organised. Paradoxically, however, by subjecting the president to direct election, de Gaulle succeeded in politicising the presidency, subjecting the office to political competition, rather than protecting the institution from partisan rivalries.

The period spanning from June 1958–November 1962 was of fundamental importance in understanding the future evolution of the regime. In key areas of policy, the standard was set not only for the remaining years of de Gaulle's presidency but for those of his successors as president as well. By any comparative measurement, de Gaulle must rank as the most important president of the French Fifth Republic, as well as one of Europe's leading statesmen during the post-war period. Among the many aspects of de Gaulle's legacy, we should mention:

- the creation of a strong presidency;
- the realignment of the French party system;
- the resolution of the Algerian conflict;
- the adoption of a more independent foreign policy;
- the consolidation of the Franco-German alliance at the heart of the European Community; and
- the fostering of a new spirit of national self-confidence and economic prosperity.

At the heart of Gaullism lay a certain idea of France, with clear implications for how the political system should be organised (Lacouture 1965; Knapp 2005). De Gaulle's patriotic, even nationalistic beliefs required a form of Republican government sufficiently strong to enable France to regain international respect after the divisions of the Fourth Republic. In de Gaulle's terminology, this was a precondition for France 'being herself'. Ever since his Bayeux speech of 1946, de Gaulle had consistently advocated a strong presidency, able to represent the interests of the whole French nation, above what he portrayed as the particularistic interests represented by political parties. The first aspect of Gaullism was, thus, a reformed political system based on a strengthened executive, embodied by a strong president. The presidency lay at the central core of the political system; all other features depended upon presidential impulsion, initiative or approval.

A second key feature of Gaullism lay in the sphere of foreign policy. At the heart of de Gaulle's foreign policy lay a belief in greater national independence and a determination that France should be recognised as a great power (Viansson-Ponté 1994a, 1994b; Vaisse 1998). The decision to produce an independent French nuclear deterrent, the attempt to reassert French national sovereignty

within a 'Europe of the Nation-States' and the efforts to adopt a more independent, pro-Third World policy with respect to France's former colonies in Africa and elsewhere all testified to de Gaulle's obsession with protecting the 'rank of France' as a great power (Cohen 1986). Under Gaullism, French foreign and security policy was much more distant from the Atlantic Alliance and the United States. In 1966, de Gaulle announced that France was withdrawing from the integrated military command structure of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), the military alliance between the US and the main western European countries (Bozo 2012). National independence was also evoked to justify de Gaulle's announcement in 1961 that France would build its own independent nuclear deterrent rather than buy missiles from the Americans. These spectacular initiatives managed to fascinate and irritate France's allies at the same time, as did a number of rather eccentric French foreign-policy initiatives in eastern Europe, Africa, China and South America.

The counterpart to greater independence from the US was an attempt to strengthen France's role within Europe. This took two forms. First, de Gaulle attempted to strengthen the Paris–Bonn axis as the driving force of the EEC. In 1963, a Franco-German cooperation treaty was a clear step in this direction. The other aspect of European policy was to promote France's interests at the expense of those of the United Kingdom, regarded as an American Trojan Horse within Europe (Gordon 1995). De Gaulle's vision of a dominant France within Europe depended upon frustrating the UK's desire to join the EEC. De Gaulle vetoed British entry to the community on two occasions, in 1963 and 1967.

The third aspect of Gaullism was the arrival of a period of economic prosperity, after the lean years of the late 1940s and 1950s. To attribute the economic take-off to de Gaulle is unfair to the Fourth Republic, which put into place the mechanisms for economic revival, but the figures were flattering for the French economy. French growth rates outpaced those of every EEC country during the eleven years of de Gaulle's rule. Economic growth averaged 5.8 per cent in France during the period 1958–69, against 4.8 per cent in Germany, 4 per cent in the United States and 2.7 per cent in the United Kingdom.

2.3 May '68: the Fifth Republic in crisis

The Gaullist period is incomplete without an analysis of May '68, which almost overthrew not only de Gaulle but the Fifth Republic itself (Hanley and Kerr 1989). The Gaullist regime claimed three great domestic achievements to its credit: political stability, social consensus and economic growth. In each of these areas, however, there existed reasons for dissatisfaction. The counterpart to political stability was the domination exercised by the Gaullist party at all levels of the state. The accusation that de Gaulle had presided over the creation of the Gaullist state (l'État-UNR) rang increasingly true with important sections of public opinion, as well as with non-Gaullist politicians. Direct election of the presidency aggravated de Gaulle's problems: he had been re-elected in 1965, but only after being forced to a second ballot which had heralded the revival of the

left-wing opposition. Since 1965, de Gaulle had lost the aura of supra-partisan grandeur with which he had surrounded his rule, to become rather like any other political leader. In 1967, the pro-Gaullist coalition (UNR and Giscard d'Estaing's Républicains Indépendants) scraped to a one-seat overall majority over the combined forces of the left and the opposition centrists. The political edifice constructed by de Gaulle appeared far from being invincible almost one decade after his accession to power.

The Gaullist claim prior to May '68 to have created social consensus was called into question by the May events. Economic growth had been real enough, but its fruits had been unequally distributed among different social classes. Above all, however, the events of May '68 reflected the spirit of the age, the outburst of one generation (the baby-boomers) against the social and political values embodied by the ruling elites (Bénéton and Touchard 1970). The radical protest movement of May '68 was not confined to France; similar movements occurred across western Europe. France of the 1960s was a more open society than its predecessors, more receptive to influences from abroad. Nowhere in Europe did these protest movements overthrow existing political institutions. In France, the events of May '68 seriously damaged de Gaulle's authority and were followed by his retirement one year later; but 1969 also witnessed the peaceful transition of power to President Pompidou and the strengthening of the Fifth Republic.

What became known as May '68 was in reality a series of movements reflecting rather different concerns but sharing in common a sense of frustration with the existing order and an ill-defined expectation of change. The May '68 events were initially a generational phenomenon; only later did they acquire obvious class overtones. The student events began on 3 May 1968, when police ejected protesting students from the Sorbonne. From 3 May onwards, confrontations between students and police became regular incidents; the student protest did not die down until mid-June 1968. Of greater importance, student activism acted as the catalyst for the outbreak of a series of spontaneous strikes among workers: by mid-May, over 10 million French workers were on strike, with the country at a standstill. The motives behind these strikes were confused. Workers asked for a salary increase, but they also demanded more power within the firm. The May movement reached its height in the confusing events of 24–30 May 1968, when there appeared to be a vacuum of power amid rumours of de Gaulle's flight from the country. Thereafter, the radical protest movement died down, and the conservative reaction set in. The turning point occurred on 30 May 1968, when de Gaulle returned from Germany, announced the dissolution of the National Assembly and called fresh general elections. A vast pro-Gaullist demonstration on the Champs-Élysées symbolically celebrated the turning of the tide. In the ensuing National Assembly election of June 1968, a landslide Gaullist victory was registered, symbolising the reaction of the provinces against Parisian radicals and a humbling of the left-wing opposition parties (Audigier 2012). The evidence from the counter-revolution of June 1968 suggested that more French people were appalled at the disorder manifested in May '68 than were supportive of the new demands formulated by the students and certain groups of workers.

The May '68 movement became a reference point, almost an ideology, for various new social groups created, or expanded by post-war social change.

Representatives of these new social groups called into question traditional moral values, replacing them with calls for liberty, autonomy, the right to difference and anti-authoritarianism. The May '68-inspired movements served mainly to place new issues on the political agenda. Many of the demands formulated by activists in the 1960s found themselves in party programmes during the 1970s. Pacifist, ecologist, regionalist, feminist, extreme-left and other 'alternative' groups assumed considerable importance during the 1970s. The election of the Socialist Mitterrand as president symbolised the hopes of some of these various radical movements.

The short-term outcome of May–June '68 was a victory for the party of order over the party of movement. On a political level, de Gaulle survived for one more year but never recovered the public esteem he had enjoyed prior to May '68. The real Gaullist victor of the events of May–June '68 was premier Georges Pompidou, who retained his calm throughout the crisis and organised the Gaullist electoral victory. His barely veiled intention of succeeding de Gaulle as president hastened his dismissal as premier in June 1968. Pompidou's performance meant that he was henceforth a credible successor waiting in the wings. For the first time, it appeared as if a vote against de Gaulle would not bring down the Fifth Republic.

The 1969 presidential election was caused by de Gaulle's resignation in April 1969, provoked by the electorate's rejection of a referendum on the dual, complicated and mainly unrelated issues of the reform of the Senate and the creation of regional authorities. In the referendum of April 1969, a small majority of those voting refrained from supporting de Gaulle, thereby immediately precipitating the general's resignation. The events of May '68, and the subsequent evolution of the Fifth Republic revealed that even a leader as prestigious as General de Gaulle could not retain the confidence of the French people indefinitely.

2.4 Georges Pompidou, 1969–74: the acceptable face of Gaullism?

After de Gaulle's resignation, the Gaullist Union des Démocrates pour la République (UDR) immediately rallied behind Pompidou, whose election as president in 1969 helped to legitimise the transition to the post-de Gaulle phase of the Fifth Republic (Roussel 1984; Muron 1994; Maus 2001). The apparent ease of the succession was important for the regime, but misleading politically. Pompidou's political authority was contested not only by the left-wing opposition but also from within his presidential majority (Quagliariello and Modugno 2001). The problems encountered by Pompidou with his own parliamentary majority pointed to the frailty of the Gaullist coalition in the absence of de Gaulle (Charlot 1970). They also suggested that a president's political authority is only really established when a parliamentary majority has been elected to support his action as president (Avril 1984).

Did historic Gaullism die with de Gaulle? Whatever his personal qualities, Pompidou did not possess the general's historic stature. Historic Gaullists suspected Pompidou on account of his political past (the fact that he was not involved in the Gaullist Resistance). Conservative Gaullists were suspicious of

Pompidou's choice of the reforming Jacques Chaban-Delmas as prime minister in 1969. In addition to an independent-minded premier and pressures from within the Gaullist party, President Pompidou had to contend with the political pretensions of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, the leader of the independent Republicans, the most important non-Gaullist formation within the presidential majority. Giscard d'Estaing was opposed by leading Gaullists, who suspected him of wanting to strengthen his party at their expense.

The style which Georges Pompidou brought to the presidency was markedly different from that of de Gaulle. While de Gaulle had been shaped by his Catholicism, his experience in the armed forces and the French Resistance, Pompdou, with his past experience in banking and industry, was far more open to French business interests. In his presidential practice, Pompidou was more openly interventionist than de Gaulle. This manifested itself in several manners: a closer supervision over the ruling (but fractious) Gaullist party, a more open intervention in election campaigns and candidate selection, a closer supervision over key aspects of domestic policy (notably industrial and urban policy) as well as continuing domination over foreign policy. Presidential supremacy was recalled under Pompidou on several occasions, the most spectacular being his sacking of premier Chaban-Delmas in 1972 only days after the latter had received an overwhelming vote of confidence from the National Assembly. Pompidou's more interventionist style concealed a weaker political source of legitimacy. The 1973 National Assembly elections gave the first hints of the UDR's declining popularity with public opinion, a tendency that became fully apparent during the 1974 presidential election. Finally, death prevented Pompidou from exercising the full seven-year term of his presidential term in office.

In key spheres of policy, the record of the Pompidou presidency was shaped by the legacy of de Gaulle's eleven-year rule, although there were departures from the Gaullist heritage as well. The main elements of continuity with Gaullism lay in the sphere of foreign policy and interventionist economic management. Under Pompidou, France continued to enjoy rates of economic growth superior to those of most of its European partners (Flockton and Kofman 1989). The major policy evolution with respect to de Gaulle lay in the field of European policy. President Pompidou was far less enthusiastic than his predecessor about the Franco-German axis, although he was constrained to recognise its importance. Franco-German relations were soured somewhat by the difficult personal relations existing between Pompidou and the German chancellor, Helmut Schmidt. By contrast, Pompidou maintained a good personal relationship with British prime minister Edward Heath: one of the key decisions of his presidency was to remove de Gaulle's veto on British entry to the EEC. A more sympathetic attitude towards Britian was combined with a more conciliatory tone towards the United States. Pompidou made it clear, however, that there could be no question of France rejoining NATO.

The left-wing opposition was transformed during Pompidou's presidency. The 1969 presidential election had represented the nadir of the French left: the official Socialist candidate polled barely more than 5 per cent, trailing well behind the Communist, Duclos (21 per cent). In July 1969, the old SFIO finally transformed itself into the new Socialist party, Parti Socialiste (PS), which began to

revive in the 1970 local and 1971 municipal elections (Bell and Criddle 1988). In June 1971, at the Congress of Epinay, François Mitterrand, the former united left presidential candidate in 1965, captured control of the new party with the help of allies from the old SFIO. Mitterrand finally defeated Mollet, the former SFIO leader, who had remained consistently hostile to the Fifth Republic. Under Mitterrand's leadership, the new PS committed itself to forming an alliance with the PCF. To achieve this alliance, Mitterrand agreed to the PCF's demand for a common programme of government, a detailed policy manifesto signed by the two parties. This committed the left to radical structural reforms, involving extensive nationalisations, decentralisation and increased workers' rights. Mitterrand was convinced that in order to become electable the PS had to attract Communist voters (as a credible new radical party) as well as centre voters (as the only alternative to Gaullism). In June 1972, the PS, PCF and the Mouvement des Radicaux de Gauche signed the common programme of government. With the common programme, the left alliance seemed the only credible alternative to the governing coalition. The left alliance made significant gains at the 1973 National Assembly elections, although insufficient to challenge the presidential majority.

On balance, historic Gaullism died with de Gaulle. The pitious performance of Chaban-Delmas in the 1974 presidential election provided the death-knell of resistance Gaullism; Chirac's Rassemblement Pour la République (RPR) was a different type of organisation altogether. The 1974 presidential election confirmed the declining fortunes of historic Gaullism: the UDR candidate Chaban-Delmas obtained 15.5 per cent, as against 32 per cent for his conservative rival Giscard d'Estaing and a strong showing for the united left candidate Mitterrand (42 per cent). Pompidou's greatest symbolic achievement as president was to have facilitated the peaceful transition to the post-Gaullist period, while preserving the Fifth Republic. The second president also ensured continuity with de Gaulle's legacy in most policy areas, while modifying their contentious aspects in a manner generally beneficial to France.

2.5 Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, 1974–81

The narrow election of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing as the third president of the Fifth Republic (with 50.8 per cent, as against 49.2 per cent for Mitterrand) marked a watershed in the evolution of the regime. For the first time, control over the key institution escaped the powerful Gaullist party. Deprived of its control over patronage, and its monopoly of the most powerful office, the UDR collapsed, undermined by the manoeuvres of Jacques Chirac, who led a group of forty-three rebellious UDR deputies in support of Giscard d'Estaing from the first ballot of the presidential election (Pozzi 2007).

Giscard d'Estaing's initial choice of prime minister was heavily influenced by the conditions of the presidential election. The new president named Chirac as prime minister as recompense for his assistance during the presidential election. President Giscard d'Estaing calculated that appointing Chirac would ensure

him of the UDR's support while at the same time allowing him to dismantle the 'UDR-state'. But Chirac remained a Gaullist, refused to be treated as Giscard d'Estaing's stooge and resigned from office in August 1976. He then took control of the UDR, rebaptised it Rassemblement Pour la République in December 1976 and concentrated on restoring the party's fortunes at the president's expense. Raymond Barre, a university professor with no formal party affiliation, who governed France until the 1981 presidential election, replaced Chirac as prime minister in August 1976.

The public face presented by Giscard d'Estaing (especially during the early period) was that of a liberal reformer, determined to modernise the French economy and society. This optimistic portrayal was outlined in detail in his 1976 work *La Démocratie française*. The president declared himself in favour of an 'advanced liberal society', a synthesis between a dynamic and open capitalist economy and a society rejecting all forms of social exclusion and relying on the participation of all social groups. Capitalism was portrayed as the ideal system for promoting consensus between social classes: it was important to reform capitalism, not to replace it, as argued by the united left alliance. For supporters, Giscard d'Estaing's formulation provided a decent, humane and reformist vision. For critics, however, these platitudes bore little relationship to the reality of spiralling unemployment, inflation and economic crisis. Whichever interpretation we make, Giscard d'Estaing lacked the means for his political ambitions. From the outset, the political foundations of the third president's rule were fragile (Duverger 1978). Elected by the narrowest of majorities, Giscard d'Estaing's supporters comprised a small minority of the pro-presidential coalition. Throughout his presidency, and especially after 1976, President Giscard d'Estaing was unable to rely upon a disciplined parliamentary coalition to back his governments. Essential measures had to be pushed through by relying on the use of restrictive articles of the 1958 Constitution designed to favour the executive over parliament (especially Article 49.3, which allows a government to stake its survival on the adoption of a particular measure).

During his 1974 presidential campaign, Giscard d'Estaing promised change with continuity and without risk. In the course of the first two years of his presidency, the third president introduced several reforms tending to liberalise French society and to modify the operation of its political system (Duhamel 1980; Frears 1981; Berstein et al. 2003). After 1976, this mild reformist spirit was replaced by a cautious social and economic conservatism. The predominance of conservative Gaullists within the presidential majority limited the social reforms that could be enacted in the months following his election. The key reforms of 1974–6 (abortion, divorce, reform of the Constitutional Council) depended upon the votes of left-wing deputies for their enactment. The hostility of the president's conservative supporters dampened his reformist ambitions from 1975 onwards. Several announced reform projects were never introduced: for instance, on decentralisation, the reform of the judicial system or a modification of state controls over the media. The onset of severe economic crisis after the oil crisis of 1973 greatly reduced the margins of manoeuvre available to French governments, as to those elsewhere. After a failed economic relaunch under Chirac, Premier Barre introduced a series of tough anti-inflation plans. On a

comparative European level, the economic policies pursued by Barre's governments were similar to those being carried out by governments of comparable nations across Europe, whether controlled by conservatives, social democrats or Socialists. Barre's deflationary economic policy was much maligned within France, however, especially by the Socialist–Communist opposition, but also to some extent by the Gaullist RPR.

The period 1974–6 represented an interventionist phase of the French presidency. Continuing the practice of his successors, President Giscard d'Estaing addressed 'directive letters' to his prime ministers, outlining their duties for the following six months. The principle of presidential initiative was pushed further under Giscard d'Estaing than either of his predecessors; no sphere of policy was excluded from the possibility of presidential involvement. Examples often cited included the president's decree that the tempo of the National Anthem should be speeded up in official meetings; the decision to intervene the halt the construction of a new motorway on the Paris left bank; the decision to replace the prefect of Paris with a directly elected mayor (Frears 1981). This latter policy backfired when Chirac, by now a bitter rival, defeated the president's own candidate for the prestigious post of the mayor of Paris in 1977.

The appearance of presidential activism under Giscard d'Estaing disguised the fact that the political foundations of the third president's power were weaker than those of either of his predecessors. The more spectacular presidential interventions occurred during the early phase of his presidency, notably while he could still rely upon the support of the Gaullist premier Chirac. From 1976 onwards, Giscard d'Estaing turned his attention to more traditional presidential interests: foreign policy, European affairs and defence. In foreign-policy matters, Giscard d'Estaing appeared as the least Gaullist president of the Fifth Republic. The third president called into question de Gaulle's commitment to the nuclear doctrine of 'the weak's defence against the strong' and moved closer to NATO's rival doctrine of 'flexible response'. In other areas, President Giscard d'Estaing displayed a greater continuity of policy with his predecessors. One such area lay in the sphere of European policy and Franco-German relations. Distancing himself from Britain, President Giscard d'Estaing established a close relationship with Chancellor Schmidt of West Germany. The fruits of this renewed period of Franco-German collaboration were visible. The creation of the European Council in 1974 provided a regular forum for the heads of EEC states to meet and take politically contentious decisions. The establishment of the European Monetary System (EMS) in 1979 provided a mechanism for closer European economic and monetary cooperation that made possible later moves to Economic and Monetary Union (EMU).

President Giscard d'Estaing overestimated the strength of his position. His dealings with African heads of state were criticised for involving excessive peddling of influence. His acceptance of a gift of diamonds from Colonel Jean-Bédel Bokassa, the self-styled emperor of the Central African Republic, was particularly ill advised, as Bokassa had been implicated with serious abuses of human rights. As the 1981 presidential election approached, Giscard d'Estaing was convinced of forthcoming electoral victory, but he was defeated by the Socialist Mitterrand in May 1981.

The historical importance of the third presidency lay in its symbolic function of assuring the transition to the post-Gaullist phase of the Fifth Republic, at a period when a majority of the French were not prepared to envisage a full-blown left-wing alternative.

2.6 François Mitterrand, 1981–8: the chameleon

François Mitterrand's election as president in May 1981 was the catalyst for a series of important changes in the political operation of the Fifth Republic (July 1986; Ross et al. 1987; Friend 1989; Giesbert 1990; Favier and Martin-Rolland 1990–9; Cole 1994; Raymond 1994; Gaffney 2012). The political institutions of the Fifth Republic experienced a double evolution during the 1980s under Mitterrand's aegis: the first alternation in power between right and left in 1981; the first 'cohabitation' between left and right in 1986. The transfer of power from right to left in 1981 legitimised the Fifth Republic in two important senses. It proved that the regime could withstand the democratic alternation in power; it represented the final rallying of the left to the presidential institutions created by de Gaulle. The advent of 'cohabitation' in 1986 was equally significant since the regime did not collapse under the pressure of competing political forces controlling the presidency and the National Assembly. For the first time, the 1958 constitution was actually applied as it was written: the president presided, but the government governed.

The powerful presidency created by de Gaulle between 1958 and 1969, and consolidated by his successors, was initially further strengthened by Mitterrand's election in 1981. By dissolving the conservative-dominated National Assembly immediately after his election and securing the election of an absolute Socialist majority, Mitterrand was able to secure a more complete control over the main institutions of political power than had been enjoyed by his two immediate predecessors. During the period from 1981 to 1986, Mitterrand mastered not only the presidency but also the National Assembly, as well as the leadership of the presidential party. No president since de Gaulle had been able to claim as much. The early years of Mitterrand's presidency were characterised by a high degree of presidential interventionism. As personally representative of *le changement*, Mitterrand symbolised the arrival of a new political order and was involved in many of the principal policy decisions of the early period in office. President Mitterrand himself, for example, insisted that the government maintain its electoral commitments with respect to the nationalisation programme of 1982, rather than moderate its proposals. Presidential interventionism was particularly marked during the early reformist years of the Mauroy premiership (1981–4), but gradually Mitterrand intervened less frequently in matters of domestic politics. His most critical arbitration occurred in March 1983, when he opted that France should remain within the EMS, at the expense of abandoning the Socialist government's Keynesian attempt to reflate the French economy.

Mitterrand was elected as president in 1981 committed to a break with capitalism. He was re-elected in 1988 advocating the merits of consensus, national

unity and the modernisation of capitalism. Mitterrand came to office as a champion of the people of the left. In the French context this meant alliance with the Communist Party, Keynesian reflationist economic policies, nationalisation and support for traditional industrial sectors. The first two years of Mitterrand's presidency stand out as a period of reformist effort unprecedented in scope at least since the post-war tripatite government of 1944–7. The reforms undertaken by Mauroy's government combined classical redistributive left-wing policies in the sphere of social, economic and industrial policy with 'quality of life' reforms in other areas (notably decentralisation, enhanced workers rights, various liberal civil-rights measures). The main reforms enacted included the nationalisation of leading industrial groups and banks, the decentralisation measures and the accomplishment of wide-ranging welfare reforms (partly financed by redistributive taxation measures). By 1983, there had been a change of direction when economic reflation was rejected in favour of a strong franc policy and a commitment to European integration. The combined pressures of the international economy, spiralling trade and budget deficits and a sharp increase in inflation and diplomatic pressures from EEC partners all pressurised the French Socialists to change course.

From 1984 onwards, Mitterrand's attentions were increasingly focused on issues of foreign policy, defence and, above all, Europe. In appraising Mitterrand's foreign policy, Stanley Hoffmann concluded that it was 'Gaullism by any other name' (Hoffmann 1987: 294). In key areas of foreign policy, Mitterrand was more faithful to the model of national independence promoted by General de Gaulle than his immediate predecessor had been: his acceptance of the strategic doctrines underpinning the French independent nuclear deterrent was case in point. The importance placed by Mitterrand on bilateral Franco-German relations also recalled that of de Gaulle some twenty years earlier. The parallel with de Gaulle should not be overplayed, however. The Euromissile crisis of 1982–3 revealed Mitterrand as a stauncher supporter of the Atlantic cause than past French presidents, far less prone to idealism in relation to the Soviet Bloc countries. In European policy, in symbolic and substantive terms, Mitterrand's Europe was far more integrationist than that espoused by de Gaulle (Friend 1989). From 1984 onwards, Mitterrand concentrated on portraying himself as a great European statesman, with a coherent vision of Europe's future. Mitterrand was genuinely convinced of the merits of a unified Europe and proved more willing to sacrifice elements of national sovereignty in the interests of European integration than any of his precursors had been.

The 1986–8 'cohabitation'

By calling upon Chirac, the leader of the victorious RPR–UDF (Union pour la Démocratie Française) coalition to form a government in March 1986, President Mitterrand respected the democratic logic that the victors of the most recent general election should be confided with the responsibility of governing the nation. Any other outcome would have been undemocratic. Presidential supremacy disappeared once a determined prime minister armed with a parliamentary majority faced the president.

During the 1986–8 'cohabitation', Chirac's RPR–UDF coalition engaged in a radical programme of economic liberalism, combined with a strong dose of social and political conservatism, with obvious overtones of Margaret Thatcher in Britain or Ronald Reagan in the United States. Despite the popularity of certain measures (such as privatisations), in its haste to reform French society Chirac's government misread the state of French opinion and created the impression of a government governing in the interests of one social class, symbolised by the decision to abolish the wealth tax introduced by Mitterrand in 1982. Chirac's mixture of economic liberalism and political conservatism failed in its central declared objective of reducing unemployment. Assisted by the political mistakes of Chirac's government and his own clever political positioning, President Mitterrand's popularity began to recover sharply. During the 1986–8 'cohabitation', Mitterrand discovered a new role: that of 'arbiter-president'. The government was to be encouraged to govern, but, as the arbiter of the nation, according to Article 5 of the 1958 constitution, Mitterrand reserved for himself the right to criticise government policies by speaking in the name of the 'French people'. This new stance worked: Mitterrand was easily re-elected against a divided right-wing challenge in the 1988 presidential election.

2.7 Mitterrand's second term, 1988–95

How Mitterrand won in 1988 was obvious: he attracted the support of a vital fraction of the centre-right electorate alienated by Chirac and unprepossessed by the other conservative challenger Barre. Why Mitterrand stood was more difficult to discern. His 1988 presidential platform contained no firm proposals in the sphere of domestic policy, limiting itself to justifications of past presidential actions. The economic policy of the strong franc, pursued vigorously by Socialist and centre-right administrations after 1983, appeared to deprive governments of much leeway in conducting policy elsewhere. Mitterrand was more ambitious in respect of Europe, which the incumbent president made a leitmotif of his second presidential mandate. Mitterrand's European mission, which reached fruition with the adoption of the Maastricht Treaty in December 1991, consisted of a steadfast vision of closer European integration, for which the French president deserved much credit or blame, depending upon one's viewpoint (Cohen 1991). At the same time, the political and diplomatic weight of the French president was challenged after the historic event of German unification in 1990, which appeared to alter the balance of European power in favour of Germany.

During his second term, Mitterrand was constrained to allow his fourth premier, Michel Rocard, a relatively free hand in domestic policy-making from 1988 to 1991. Rocard left a robust reformist record to his credit, symbolised above all by the creation of the minimal income (*revenu minimum d'insertion*), a welfare safeguard for the poorest members of French society. Rocard's enforced resignation in May 1991 reaffirmed Mitterrand's pre-eminence as president, but the move was misunderstood by public opinion. Under the premiership of Rocard's successor, Edith Cresson, President Mitterrand was forced to intervene more

than he would ideally have liked, in order to support publicly his beleaguered prime minister, who lasted barely a year, replaced in 1992 by Pierre Bérégovoy, Mitterrand's sixth and final prime minister (who tragically died by suicide in May 1993). In the 1993 National Assembly election, the Socialists were humiliated, reduced to under 20 per cent and sixty-seven seats.

The final chapter in Mitterrand's long presidency began with the coming to office the Balladur government in March 1993. Mitterrand had little visible domestic policy input during the second period of 'cohabitation'. Presidential influence continued to manifest itself in relation to foreign policy, however, most notably with regard to Mitterrand's refusal to agree to renewed nuclear testing in the South Pacific and in his continuing attachment to certain symbols of Gaullist nuclear policy that even RPR military advisers considered outdated.

Mitterrand shaped the Fifth Republic more than any other president apart from de Gaulle. France was a country rather less different from its European neighbours in 1995 than in 1981. His main achievements were in those spheres where his action had been least expected:

- He promoted European integration beyond the limits consented by former French presidents.
- He contributed under pressure towards the modernisation of French industry and financial capitalism.
- He partially reconciled the left to the market economy.

These real achievements bore only a tenuous relationship with his '110 propositions' of 1981, testament to the limited margins of manoeuvre for national political leaderships in an increasingly interdependent and global age.

2.8 Jacques Chirac, 1995–7: the abrupt presidency

The second episode of 'cohabitation' (March 1993–April 1995) was played out against a background of fratricidal rivalry within the Gaullo-conservative camp, in the form of presidential competition between premier Edouard Balladur and Chirac, leader of the RPR. The division of the French right into two or three families is not new: in 1981 and 1988, right-wing divisions facilitated Mitterrand's victory. The original feature of the 1995 presidential campaign stemmed from the fact that both Chirac and Balladur came from the ranks of neo-Gaullist RPR movement. That most RPR deputies supported Chirac even when his cause appeared forlorn is testament to the attraction he exercised over the RPR, a movement he had built up since 1976 (Knapp 1994). The results of the first ballot left Balladur trailing in third place, behind the Socialist Lionel Jospin and the Gaullist Chirac. The election of Jacques Chirac as the fifth president of the Fifth Republic (by 52.7 per cent, against 47.3 per cent for Jospin) witnessed the recovery of the Elysée Palace after a period of twenty-one years in the wilderness for Gaullism.

Though Jacques Chirac's presidency lasted for a full decade, to refer to the abrupt presidency is apposite (Charlot 1995; Collovald 1999; Colombani 1999). Elected comfortably in 1995, Chirac lost effective power two years later, after his dissolution of the National Assembly elected in 1993 backfired. President Chirac's difficulty partly lay in the manner of his election in 1995. Chirac's clever presidential campaign mixed and matched themes usually associated with the political left (such as employment and wages) with the desire for an end to '14 years of socialism'. Influenced by the theses of French sociologist Emmanuel Todd, Chirac diagnosed a 'social fracture' within French society, based on the exclusion of minorities, bad housing, low salaries and – crucially – unemployment. The remedies to this situation, inherited from the harsh economic policies of the Socialists, involved stimulating economic growth and proposing measures to fight unemployment. Promising the reduction of unemployment, the healing of the 'social fracture' and an economic relaunch during the campaign, once elected president Chirac attempted to navigate a delicate path between campaign promises and economic and international realities. There was some incongruity between the substance of Chirac's campaign discourse and his nomination of Alain Juppé as prime minister. A highly respected former minister of foreign affairs (1993–5), Juppé was named prime minister partly in order to reassure financial markets and foreign capitals, wary of Chirac's campaign promises. A firm supporter of European integration, Juppé reaffirmed straightaway France's intention of meeting the Maastricht convergence for a single European currency by 1999. Though his campaign had sounded a Euro-sceptical note, President Chirac himself made a strong commitment in October 1995 to preparing France to participate in the single European currency and announced a package of economic austerity measures to accompany this choice. The perception held by many (especially his younger and working-class supporters) was that Chirac had abandoned his progressive message at the first obstacle.

This move was followed shortly afterwards by the publication of the Juppé Plan to reform the health and social-security systems. The Juppé Plan, addressing intractable core issues of health care and social security in a period of demographic change, was made public without any prior negotiation with the 'social partners'. By the end of 1995, the Juppé government was fighting for its survival. With hundreds of thousands of protesters taking to the streets to contest the Juppé Plan, France reverted to one of its periodic crises. Though Juppé survived the strikes of November–December 1995, his government had to water down the proposed reforms. Premier Juppé never recovered his prestige in the eyes of public opinion.

During the 'abrupt presidency', Chirac's main activity was centred around his positioning as an international statesman. President Chirac's decision in June 1995 that France would resume unilateral nuclear testing in the South Pacific recalled earlier Gaullist episodes. To the extent that Chirac chose a highly symbolic aspect of foreign policy to make his mark, this represented a sign of continuity with past presidents. In other respects, however, President Chirac made his mark where least expected. Once the nuclear-testing decision had been assumed, Chirac proved to be innovative in the sphere of foreign and defence policy. That a Gaullist president should announce the end of conscription, the slashing of

defence budgets and the partial reintegration of France into NATO marked a bolder break with the Gaullist legacy than any moves attempted by Chirac's three predecessors.

Why did President Chirac dissolve the National Assembly in 1997, one year ahead of schedule? With the benefit of hindsight, the decision seemed foolhardy. There was no obvious threat to the stability of the Republic, the president already had an overwhelming parliamentary majority, and the reason advanced – to qualify France for the euro – did not require the action proposed. The real explanation was linked to his reading of the presidential function and the need for a parliamentary majority to be elected to support the president. The National Assembly elections had originally been planned for 1998, but Chirac used his right to dissolve parliament using the pretext of preparing France for entry into the euro. He failed. The tool of presidential dissolution is a double-edged weapon to be used with caution. The unexpected defeat of the French right had immediate consequences, including the capture of the Gaullist RPR by President Chirac's opponent Philippe Séguin (aided and abetted by former premier Balladur). Most important of all, Chirac's abrupt presidency gave way to a new period of cohabitation.

2.9 Jospin and the plural left coalition, 1997–2002

The government led by Jospin came to power rather unexpectedly in June 1997, after President Chirac's dissolution of the National Assembly elected in 1993 went badly wrong (Cole 2002; Boy et al. 2003). The Jospin government was original in many senses. It was the first five-party 'plural left' government, operating within a novel institutional context: that of the first 'cohabitation' involving a Gaullist president and a Socialist-led government. It boasted a policy record that encouraged emulation from certain of its European partners (Italy) and aroused hostility from others (Blair's New Labour administration especially). Even its fiercest opponents acknowledged that the Jospin government had engaged in original policy experiments in economic, social and employment policy, of which the enforced reduction of the working week to thirty-five hours was the centrepiece (Milner 2002). The Jospin government also undertook audacious measures to break down social and cultural blockages within French society (the civic contract, Pacte Civil de Solidarité [PACS] and professional equality [*parité*] reforms) and to modernise French politics. Whether in the domain of economic policy, the thirty-five-hour week or European policy, the Jospin government believed in the virtues of affirmative state action. At the same time, the Jospin government adopted a reformist approach to state–society relations, marked especially by liberal reforms in relation to gender equality and sexual preference. Opinion polls suggested a mainly positive reception for the Jospin government and for the personality of Lionel Jospin in particular, who was more popular than Jacques Chirac for all but a few months of the 1997–2002 period.

From 1997 to 2002, there was a five-year long 'cohabitation', which confirmed the basic rules of this form of institutional coexistence between the two heads of

the French executive. More resolutely than during the previous two episodes, the Jospin government dominated the domestic agenda, with President Chirac powerless to prevent the implementation of policies with which he was in major disagreement (such as over Corsica). On the other hand, attempts by Premier Jospin to venture openly into the realm of foreign policy were unsuccessful. Jospin's controversial visit to the occupied Palestinian territories while on an official visit to Israel in 2000 was a case in point. President Chirac publicly rebuked his prime minister for supporting the Palestinian cause, since he had no constitutional authority to do so. In the realm of European policy-making, the shared responsibility between Chirac and Jospin produced a good deal of confusion in other European capitals, as did their inability to define a coherent French position during the negotiations leading to the Nice Treaty in December 2000. Most polls carried out during the 2002 presidential election campaign suggested that, other things being equal, the French would prefer not to have 'cohabitation'.

2.10 Chirac's second term, 2002–7

Jacques Chirac was re-elected as president on 5 May 2002 with a crushing majority – 81.75 per cent – against his far-right rival, Jean-Marie Le Pen (Cole 2002). This electoral success was crowned by an overall majority in seats for the new-style presidential party (the Union pour une Majorité Populaire [UMP]) at the subsequent parliamentary election, the best performance of a right-wing presidential rally since the heyday of Gaullism. The converging of the presidential and parliamentary majorities and the subordinate relationship of the latter to the former appeared to signal a return to a suitably modernised but pre-eminently presidential practice.

In other respects also, an interim evaluation of Chirac's second term would appear to suggest a return to Gaullist traditions. The primary focus of President Chirac's activity was in the traditional presidential sphere of foreign policy, European affairs and defence. In foreign policy, the 2002 conflict in Iraq fully mobilised Chirac's energies. Opposition to the war provided a window of opportunity for Chirac to establish a direct relationship with the French people in the pure Gaullist tradition. President Chirac's refusal of the war in Iraq was overwhelmingly supported by public opinion. Foreign-policy convergence allowed a much closer relationship to be established with Germany and for the Franco-German partnership to be invested with renewed vigour in other areas of joint Franco-German interest (notably the negotiation of the new European constitution). A foreign policy tinged with anti-Americanism and multilateralism, a reinvigorated Franco-German partnership, closer European defence collaboration: all these features bore a striking resemblance with classic Gaullism.

In the domestic arena too, there were parallels with past Gaullist practice. President Chirac appeared removed from the day-to-day details of domestic politics, content to steer the direction of government policy from a distance. Invested with the support of over 80 per cent of French voters in May 2002, President Chirac was anxious not to dispense precious political capital in

mundane domestic politics (but also, in line with tradition, to focus on specific areas of personal interest such as road safety and cancer). In the pure tradition of the Fifth Republic, the Chirac–Raffarin relationship was an uneven one: the president indicated the main orientations that the premier had responsibility to implement. While President Chirac concentrated upon defending the rank of France in the European and international arenas, Prime Minister Raffarin drove the difficult, politically unpopular dossiers, such as pensions reform (in June 2003). Raffarin publicly assumed the asymmetry in this relationship on several occasions. He was bound by Chirac's campaign promises, especially in relation to tax cuts and to the prioritising of domestic economic management over European solidarity (the Growth and Stability Pact). The one policy area associated with the prime minister was that of decentralisation, which we consider in Chapter 7.

The key blow to Chirac's authority occurred as a result of defeat in the referendum on the draft constitutional treaty of May 2005. President Chirac called on the French people to decide upon the future of the draft treaty that had emerged from the workings of the convention on the future of Europe, chaired by former French President Giscard d'Estaing in 2003–4. The treaty cut across existing political parties: if the FN and the PCF were predictably against the treaty, the mainstream left and right parties, the PS and the UMP, were each divided. The result was a clear no (54.5 per cent against 45.5 per cent). In the detailed opinion analysis, the popular classes – industrial workers, low- and middle-ranking clerical workers, small business – clearly rejected the treaty, while the managers and intellectual professions supported it. Once again, France was cut into two. The European consequences were considerable: a rift between the French president and the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, elected for the first time in 2005, a weakening of French influence in Brussels and some other European capitals. Challenged on the domestic and the European fronts, President Chirac was powerless to prevent the ascendancy of his ambitious (younger) rival, Sarkozy, who obtained the UMP presidential nomination in (late) 2006 and who was elected president on 7 May 2007.

2.11 Nicolas Sarkozy's fast presidency, 2007–12

Nicolas Sarkozy (Fig. 2.1) pushed furthest the break with the inherited roles of the presidential office, dispensing almost entirely with the fiction of a supra-partisan, non-interventionist president that was the principal legacy of de Gaulle (Emmanuel 2007; Marlière 2009; Hewlett 2011; Cole 2012; Raymond 2012; Nay 2012). As Knapp (2013) demonstrates, the Sarkozy period (2007–12) was replete with paradoxes: of the hyper-president who undertook a thoroughgoing reform of the institutions, or as the neo-liberal who gave a new lease of life to *dirigiste* practices. One interpretation of the Sarkozy presidency that recurs in most accounts is that of the difficult fit between the inherited understanding of the presidential office and Sarkozy's personal style of governing. The received Gaullist presidential style was slow, ponderous, Olympian and ecumenical. Sarkozy's 'fast presidency'

Figure 2.1 French president Nicolas Sarkozy addressing a press conference during a NATO summit in Strasbourg (2009). © Idealink Photography/Alamy Stock Photo.

was light years away from this model, with the consequence that the president was held directly responsible for policy failings (Nay 2011, Giesbert 2010). Part of the equation was the personal one. The 'bling-bling' president engaged in personal excesses in the first few months of his presidency (from the post-election celebration at Fouquet's to the luxury holidays offered by close business allies) that provoked widespread disapproval and seemed to contravene received understandings of how a president ought to act (Cole 2012). The first eighteen months had a lasting impact, negatively assessed in all opinion polls, on Sarkozy's image (Gerstlé and François 2011). More than the government's policy performance (Premier François Fillon remaining more popular than Sarkozy for most of the five-year period), the consistently low poll ratings were a devastating verdict on the president's style of governing. On the other hand, these events celebrating material success and business values were interesting in that they represent the 'real' Sarkozy, the former mayor of (rich) Neuilly who valued material success and achievement as a badge of esteem (Foessel and Mongin 2007). Sarkozy's open support for 'neo-liberal' values and symbols would not be subject to such opprobrium in all political cultures, but they were a far distance from the former Catholic-inspired distrust of material wealth of de Gaulle and Mitterrand, or even the radical Socialist provincialism of his predecessor Chirac.

Beyond his personal fitness for office and fast individual style, Sarkozy was the first president genuinely to 'govern' in accordance with the new institutional rules of the *quinquennat* (the five-year presidential term introduced in 2000), which established a clear hierarchy for the presidency at the centre of interactions. The case of his predecessor Chirac was rather different: elected with over

80 per cent against the FN leader Le Pen on the second round in 2002, the political logic of the *quinquennat* was much less apparent than under Sarkozy. The nature of Sarkozy's election in 2007 embedded a clear principle of presidential hierarchy, interpreted by President Sarkozy and Prime Minister Fillon as meaning that the president ought to be at the centre of almost all political decisions. There was a marked presidentialisation of the core executive and personalisation of inner-executive relations after May 2007 (see Chapter 4). If reshaping the presidency was central to Sarkozy's 2007 campaign message, however, by 2012 the office had tamed Sarkozy. The 2007–12 period witnessed an evolution from the early highly interventionist president to the consciously more focused figure seeking to symbolise national unity and crisis management. Initially ambivalent to Gaullist symbols, by the end of the first term in office Sarkozy embraced the Gaullist model as a means of restoring the authority of the office itself. As many political leaders before him, Sarkozy looked to salvation in the European Union (EU), in the international political economy or in foreign-policy interventions (such as in Libya) to make a difference, through adopting the presidential posture that only the head of state can assume.

Nicolas Sarkozy's election as president of the French Republic on 6 May 2007 was clear and unambiguous. If the disillusion rapidly set in, this was in part due to a capability–expectations gap, in the absence of a clearly defined political programme or consistent legitimising discourse. Marlière (2009) describes Sarkozy's ideological syncretism in terms of an ideological theme park, with the French president borrowing from the key Bonapartiste, Orleanist and legitimist traditions on the French right. In one important sense, Sarkozy can be likened to Tony Blair in the UK, sharing with the former UK premier what Garton Ash (2007: 18) describes as a 'post-ideological and pragmatic conception of politics, mixing themes associated with left and right, more concerned with what works than with ideological coherence'. In both cases, plural ideological references were primarily mobilised to justify action.

There was plenty of action, as Sarkozy exercised explicit policy leadership. Most of the key reforms of the 2007–12 period were directly associated with Sarkozy; from the reforms to the thirty-five-hour week and flexible working (2007) and the tax shield (2007), through the detailed interventions in the field of state reform (2007–12), the universities (2007), the environment (2008), local government (2009–10) and the pensions reform (2010) (de Maillard and Surel 2012; see also Cahuc and Zylberberg 2009 for a critical view). The pace of the early period could be explained because the incoming president was fully vested with the legitimacy of a decisive electoral victory. But there was no consistent specific style associated with Sarkozy. If the state reform programme, the General Revision of Public Policy (Révision Generale des Politiques Publiques [RGPP]), was implemented in a top-down manner, the ambitious programme of environmental reforms (the 'Grenelle') was conceived as part of a protracted process of negotiation with key economic and environmental interests. And if the key 2010 reform of pensions was implemented against the bitter opposition of the trade unions, the latter were regular visitors to the Elysée and associated with other important changes (for example, the rules for determining which union lists are representative in professional elections). The overall evaluation of Sarkozy's

reformist record, tempered by the impact of economic crisis, is rather paradoxical. If Sarkozy's presidency was a reformist one, almost all of the key reforms introduced in 2007–8 had been modified or abandoned by 2012.

At the same time, Sarkozy's presidency was gradually transformed by having to respond to an unprecedented economic crisis, from the 2008 credit crunch through to the seemingly interminable sovereign debt and euro crises of 2010–12. The state of permanent crisis provided opportunities for reverting to a more transformational conception of the presidency – or at least offered a transformational moment in 2008 and 2009. Using the crisis as a personal resource, Sarkozy distanced himself from US capitalism, called for new economic regulation, fiscal coordination and a more protective role for the state. The international turn allowed Sarkozy to reposition himself in domestic politics and to move on from the early portrayals of him as Gallic version of neo-liberal Margaret Thatcher.

Chapter 13 contains a more detailed discussion of Sarkozy's European policy. In foreign policy, the French leader demonstrated considerable political skill in mobilising the opportunities provided by crisis management: specifically in relation to the events in Georgia in 2008 and the 2008 banking crisis. The 'fast' presidential style reaped rewards in the field of international relations. Sarkozy reacted very rapidly to the outbreak of the war in Georgia in August 2008, travelling to Moscow to meet with Dmitry Medvedev and Vladimir Putin, and agreeing a deal that recognised Russia's 'right' to defend its borders in return for forestalling a full-scale occupation of Georgia. In terms of the financial crisis, Sarkozy also acted fast. At the United Nations (UN) on 23 September 2008, Sarkozy took the initiative to call for a G20 summit, comprising a meeting of the twenty principal leaders from across the planet, a meeting that took place in November 2008. Sarkozy cooperated closely with UK premier Gordon Brown; by mid-October, the key EU countries had agreed a plan to save the banks. Sarkozy attempted to play the role of the transformational leader until the end.

By attempting to place the French presidency at the centre of crisis operations, within and beyond Europe, Sarkozy renewed explictly with traditional French perspectives whereby French presidents should be intimately involved in shaping the key history-making decisions. His 2008 decision to bring France back into NATO, for example, was imposed on reluctant Gaullist deputies (Lepri 2010). But not even a successful and highly personal war in Libya in 2011 could provide relief for the embattled Sarkozy, ultimately demonstrating the limits of foreign-policy prestige in domestic politics (Drake 2013).

2.12 François Hollande's 'normal' presidency, 2012–17

Virtually no one would have credited the idea that François Hollande would be elected president when, after eleven years at the helm, he finally ceded his place as first secretary of the PS in 2008. Hollande's reputation thus far had been of a fairly consensual leader of the PS from 1997 to 2008.

His failure to unite the party in 2005 (over the European referendum) meant that he was excluded as a serious player in the PS internal primaries in 2006, won

Figure 2.2 President of France François Hollande pictured speaking after the European Council (2012). © Peter Cavanagh/Alamy Stock Photo.

by Ségolène Royal, the Socialist candidate in 2007. With the benefit of hindsight, this appeared as a blessing in disguise. Breaking the umbilical cord with the PS organisation provided a window of opportunity. Hollande displayed a constant self-belief in his prospects of obtaining the PS nomination for 2012 and, ultimately, winning the presidential election. He declared his intentions early on (in 2009) and linked his re-election as president of the Corrèze departmental council in the 2010 cantonal elections to the pursuit of his candidacy. Surpassing this initial obstacle, Hollande then benefited from two key unplanned events: first, the disgrace of Socialist front-runner Dominique Strauss-Kahn after the 'events' in a Sofitel hotel room in New York on 14 May 2011; second, the decision to push ahead with primary elections in October 2011 to select the PS's presidential candidate. The Socialist primaries mobilised almost 3 million electors and designated Hollande as the clear victor. Hollande's 2012 presidential campaign was fought in large part as an anti-Sarkozy referendum, designed to preserve an early opinion-poll lead that was mainly built upon a popular rejection of Sarkozy. His candidacy was based on his strategic political positioning as being a 'normal' candidate and president, a style deliberately adopted to be the counterpart of the flamboyant Sarkozy (Raffy 2012; Cole 2013).

Once elected president, however, Hollande experienced a rapid descent from popularity, much faster and more thorough than any previous president. The failure to act during the first 100 days represented a lost opportunity. He was trapped by the frame of normality during a period of economic

crisis; the attraction of a 'normal' president who ignored the economic tempest in a wave of enforced optimism soon wore off. Hollande's claim to normality had also involved a commitment to keep his private life out of the public domain, but the public jealously displayed by Valérie Trierweiler, Hollande's erstwhile partner, destroyed this aspiration very early on. Treirweiler insisted on a public embrace during the swearing-in ceremony and tweeted her support for the dissident opponent of Ségolène Royal (another former partner of Hollande) in the 2012 parliamentary election. Hollande's personal judgement was then called into question by a succession of scandals involving leading figures of the Socialist-led government. By far the most important scandal was that of Jérôme Cahuzac, the first budget minister whose reputation for integrity was destroyed by evidence of a secret bank account in Switzerland (despite his repeated denials).

The normal presidency purportedly signified the attempt to rebalance the executive away from the hyper-presidential intervention of the early Sarkozy years. Hollande's first premier, Jean-Marc Ayrault, survived almost two years, from May 2012 to March 2014. President and premier agreed that there needed to be a more collective form of government. Premier Ayrault, though a close ally of Hollande, suffered from a lack of authority within the government, however, and the prime minister was unable to control the very personal stances adopted by several of his ministers, especially the minister for productive investment, Arnaud Montebourg. Hollande's reputation suffered greatly from his incapacity to control the main levers of Socialist power. The PS victory in the 2012 legislative elections did not ensure a compliant pro-presidential majority. Almost from the inception, President Hollande's actions were contested by a group of PS rebels, able to muster the support of between marked thirty and fifty deputies, coming close to calling into question the government's own majority. The image of governmental cacophony was increased by the lack of discipline of the coalition partners. From the outset, neither the PG nor the PCF participated in the Ayrault government. The decision of Europe Écologie Les Verts (EELV) to withdraw from the government in April 2014 signalled a turning point, both politically and in terms of policy focus.

Manuel Valls replaced Ayrault as premier in April 2014. Hollande's second premier was much less tolerant with internal diversity and open challenges to his authority, hence his insistence on the departure from government of the two principal left-wing ministers in August 2014 (Montebourg and Hamon) after both had publicly challenged the premier at a PS meeting. Where Ayrault sought a vain consensus, Valls cultivated an image of political rigour and realism, with reference to Pierre Mendès-France. The political basis of the Valls premiership was even narrower than that of Ayrault, however: with the Greens joining the Communists and the PG deputies in virtual opposition, and the continuing rebellion of between thirty and fifty PS deputies, the Valls government was forced to use the restrictive Article 49.3 of the constitution to ensure the adoption in 2015 of the Loi Macron, an umbrella law containing several – mainly symbolic – measures of economic liberalisation. The experience of Ayrault and, especially, Valls renewed with a constant in the history of the French left in governmental power, challenged from its left by rebellious deputies and the extra-parliamentary party organisation and from its right by forces convinced that the left could never govern with credibility. Valls resigned as premier in December 2016, in order to participate in the PS primaries, and was replaced by Bernard Cazeneuve, Hollande's third and last prime minister.

Not saying, not doing?

I have argued elsewhere that the Hollande presidency was undermined by the weakness of a consistent legitimising discourse (Cole 2014). It was unclear to many what Hollande represented. There was a weakness of storytelling, the construction of a coherent narrative to describe and justify governmental action.

Was Hollande a traditional social democrat? There was certainly a sustained effort during the Ayrault premiership (2012–14) to revive a social-democratic discourse and to give substance to this by using social-democratic instruments such as the annual social conference between the government, the business associations and the trade unions; the principle of negotiated solutions to labour laws and training, and the state's involvement in attempting to reduce unemployment by subsidised jobs for young people. The first twelve months witnessed taxation rates rise substantially, without there being much evidence that France was succeeding in bringing down its deficit and debt levels (Clift 2014). The core problem lay in the inability to resolve the most intractable policy issue of them all: unemployment. Hollande's commitment in 2013 to 'reverse' the rising level of unemployment provided a hostage to fortune. By early 2016, no major decrease of the unemployment rate had occurred, with France comparing unfavourably with its main EU partners and competitors. The official optimism of public speeches throughout the Hollande presidency was in stark contrast with popular perceptions of failure. Hollande did not convince as a social-democratic president, not least because of his inability to resolve the most intractable problems of domestic policy. Hollande's European policy (Chapter 13) can also be read in part as a (failed) attempt to take into account the social-democratic dilemma, whereby centre-left parties are forced to operate according to the codes of German ordoliberalism and its commitment to balanced budgets.

Was he more succesful as a 'social liberal'? Hollande began the 'social-liberal' turn in 2013 (when the a governmental programme, the Crédit d'Impôt pour la Compétitivité et l'Emploi [CICE] first reduced various business taxes) faced with evidence of France's sluggish economic performance and the tense relations with the business community. The main programme was the *pacte de responsabilité* in January 2014: €50 billion of reductions in business taxes, against the (unfulfilled) expectation that firms would begin hiring workers again. Premier from April 2014, Valls was much more in harmony than his predecessor with the language of economic competitiveness, modernisation and reconciling France with the business community (witness his 'J'aime l'entreprise' to the conference of the employers' association, the Mouvement des Entreprises de France [MEDEF] in 2014). But the two symbols of the social-liberal turn – the Macron (2015) and El Khomri (2016) laws, dealing respectively with business trade regulation and liberalisation and labour-market reform – were both fierecely contested by

a minority of Socialist deputies and both relied upon the Valls government's use of Article 49.3 to secure their passage into law. In the case of El Khomri, the proposed reform of the labour code sparked important anti-government demonstrations from the trade unions and students and contributed to the melancholic *fin de règne* atmosphere in 2016.

Hollande enjoyed more success with a Republican narrative – centred on education, citizenship and the nation – especially in 2015 when reinforced by the moves to express popular unity in a period of war and terrorist attacks. Even more than predecessors, Hollande took solace in European and foreign affairs, the traditional 'reserved domains' of the French president (Meunier 2010; Howorth 2013; Loncle 2013). Hollande grew into the role of president in part as war leader: from 2012 to 2017 France intervened in Mali and the Central African Republic and participated in air strikes in Iraq and Syria. Hollande also performed an active role as a European statesman. The French intervention in Mali in 2013, to dislodge Islamic militants from the north of this strategically important African country and safeguard the captal Bamako, was successful. France was active, if not particularly effective, in Syria and Iraq; from the failed attempt to impose airstrikes on Assad in 2013 to the bombing campaign against Daesh after the 13 November 2015 Paris massacres. At the European level, Hollande played an important role in relaunching European foreign-policy cooperation in the form of the four party talks on the Ukraine (between Merkel, Hollande, Putin and Ukrainian president Petro Porochenko) which produced the 2015 ceasefire agreement. Hollande reaffirmed his support for France's nuclear deterrent.

Ultimately, Hollande's reputation suffered from the ambiguities of the 2012 campaign, from the lasting impression of a lack of coordination within the executive and in relations with the Socialist-led majority and, above all, by perceptions of a poor policy record, marked notably by the failure to control unemployment.

2.13 Concluding remarks

The Fifth Republic is France's second longest surviving post-revolutionary regime. While initially shaped in the image of its creator, de Gaulle, the Fifth Republic demonstrated its capacity to resist becoming a personalist regime. Certain early observers predicted that the regime was destined to disappear with the departure of its founder. This did not transpire. The transition to a post-Gaullist phase occurred gradually. Inaugurated by Pompidou's presidency of 1969–74, it was consolidated with the election of Giscard d'Estaing as the first non-Gaullist president in 1974 and Mitterrand as the first Socialist president in 1981. After more than fifty years of existence, the Fifth Republic has thus demonstrated its longevity. The adaptability of the regime explains in part its longevity. The alternation in power between left and right in 1981 was followed in 1986 by the first experience of 'cohabitation', an experience repeated in 1993 and 1997. Henceforth, the alternation in power of rival left- and right-wing parties, or coalitions has become a banal occurrence.

Moving away from institutions, the period since 1958 has been one of relative prosperity (at least as compared with other comparable nations), of an

ebbing and flowing of French influence within Europe and internationally, and of economic and social modernisation and crisis. While certain commentators favour an optimistic interpretation, others are less sanguine, pointing to the rise of the far right, a sense of ongoing economic crisis, diminishing confidence in politicians and widespread corruption to tarnish the reputation of the regime. The evidence presented in the ensuing chapters might support either interpretation. It is a measure of how far the Fifth Republic has imposed itself in popular consciousness, however, that contemporary disputes are centred around particular policies, or practices, rather than overt challenges to the legitimacy of the political regime.

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