

France: The Fifth Republic Political System (1958–Present)

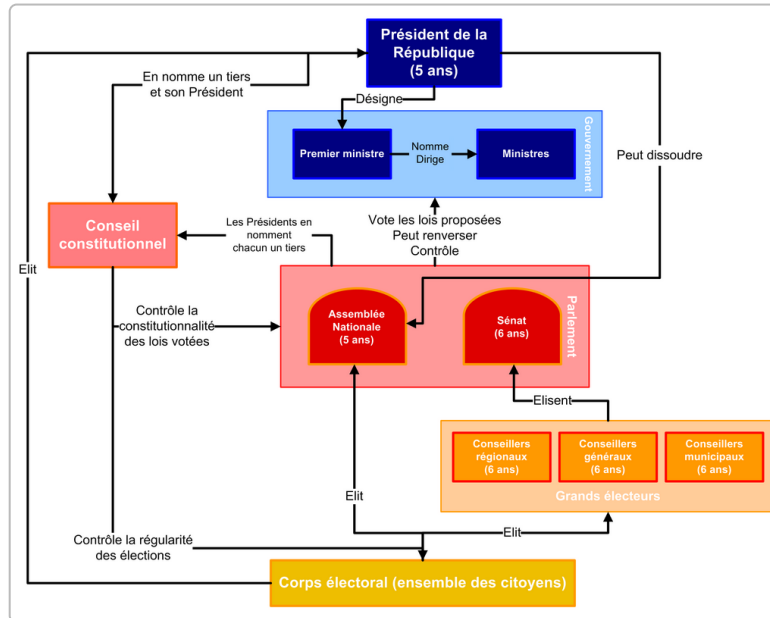


Figure 1: Institutional structure of the Fifth French Republic. The Fifth Republic (established 1958) is a **unitary, semi-presidential democracy**. It features a powerful President as head of state (blue), and a Prime Minister heading the government. The legislature (red) is **bicameral**, comprising the directly elected *Assemblée nationale* (577 deputies, 5-year term) and the indirectly elected *Sénat* (348 senators, 6-year term) ¹. The President appoints the Prime Minister (typically from the parliamentary majority) and presides over the Cabinet ². Citizens vote directly for the President and Assembly; local officials elect the Senate ³. A separate **Constitutional Council** (orange, 9 members appointed by the President and parliamentary leaders) reviews laws for constitutionality ⁴ ⁵. In practice, the President can dissolve the Assembly (Art. 12) and call referendums (Art.11), giving the executive considerable authority ⁶. The system combines elements of presidential and parliamentary rule, making the French President “uniquely powerful in comparison to other major democracies” when allied with a parliamentary majority ⁷.

Historical Evolution of the Political System

- **Third Republic (1870–1940):** A parliamentary regime lacking a single written constitution. It operated under the “*constitutional laws of 1875*”, which were ordinary statutes that organized the government ⁸. This period saw extreme legislative dominance and frequent cabinet changes. It collapsed under German invasion in 1940.
- **Fourth Republic (1946–1958):** Established after WWII, it restored a parliamentary system similar to the Third Republic. Governments remained unstable (many short-lived cabinets) and the legislature

held primary power. The Fourth Republic struggled with postwar reconstruction and colonial conflicts (e.g. Indochina, Algeria) ⁹ . In May 1958 a crisis in Algeria led to Charles de Gaulle's return.

- **Fifth Republic (1958–present):** De Gaulle drafted a new constitution in October 1958 to strengthen executive power ⁹ ¹⁰ . The result was a **semi-presidential system**. The 1958 Constitution created the Fifth Republic and the new Constitutional Council ⁹ . It significantly enhanced the presidency (direct election by 1962 referendum, originally 7-year term, reduced to 5 years in 2000) ¹⁰ ¹¹ . This change was intended to ensure political stability and decisive leadership.

Constitutional Framework

The **1958 Constitution** (amended over time) defines France as an “*indivisible, secular, democratic and social Republic*” (Article 1). It enshrines principles of liberty, equality, and *laïcité* (secularism). Powers are separated among the executive, legislature, and judiciary, but with overlaps. Key features include:

- **Semi-Presidentialism:** Both President and Prime Minister share executive authority. The President is elected by popular vote for a five-year term (max two consecutive terms) ¹¹ ¹² . The Constitution empowers the President with national leadership roles (Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces, presiding over Cabinet, ensuring treaty compliance, and emergency powers under Article 16 ⁶ ¹³). The President appoints the Prime Minister; by convention this is the leader who can command a majority in the National Assembly ¹⁰ . However, during **cohabitation** (when President and Assembly majority differ), the Prime Minister and parliament control domestic policy, while the President retains control over defense and foreign affairs ¹⁴ ¹⁵ . (Three cohabitations have occurred: 1986–88, 1993–95, 1997–2002 ¹⁶ .)
- **Executive Powers:** As noted by official analysis, “the President has considerable powers...including appointing the Prime Minister and dissolving the National Assembly” ⁶ . Article 12 authorizes dissolution (subject to a one-year limit between dissolutions ⁷). Article 16 grants broad emergency authority if state institutions face grave threat ¹³ . Article 11 allows the President to call referendums on government bills or treaties when Parliament permits. Article 8–9: the President appoints (and can dismiss) the Prime Minister and other ministers ¹⁷ . Article 10–11: the President promulgates laws and can request a second reading by Parliament (no veto, but delaying power) ¹⁸ ¹⁹ . Article 18: communications (messages) to Parliament (read without debate) and addresses to Congress are tools for the President to set policy themes.
- **Prime Minister and Government:** The **Prime Minister** (head of government) directs national policy and defends it before Parliament (Article 21) ²⁰ . The PM “shall be responsible for national defence” and ensures implementation of laws ²⁰ . In practice, the PM chairs the day-to-day affairs of government and presides over councils in the President's absence ²⁰ . The PM nominates ministers (subject to presidential approval) and can delegate powers to them. The Government (Council of Ministers) collectively determines policy (Article 20) and is accountable to Parliament via confidence votes ²¹ ¹⁷ . By convention, the government must maintain the support of the lower house: a motion of censure can bring it down. Under Articles 49–50, if the National Assembly passes a no-confidence vote (simple majority), the Government must resign; conversely, the Government can force legislation through without a vote using **Article 49.3** unless overruled by no-confidence ¹⁰ ²² .

- **Legislature – Parliament:** Parliament is **bicameral**. The **National Assembly** (Assemblée nationale) has 577 deputies elected for 5 years ¹. They are chosen in single-member districts under a two-round majority system: a candidate wins outright in round one with >50% of votes and ≥25% of registered voters; otherwise, the top candidates (and those above a threshold) contest a run-off ²³. The Assembly has greater power: it ultimately prevails on disputed legislation and its confidence is key to government survival. The **Senate** has 348 members elected for 6-year terms by “grands électeurs” (an electoral college of local officials and parliamentarians) ¹. Half the Senate is renewed every three years. While it reviews and can amend legislation, it cannot dismiss the government or override the Assembly. The legislative process: ordinary laws (statutes) can be proposed by either house, but must pass both houses identically. In case of disagreement, a joint committee tries to reach compromise; if still deadlocked, the Assembly may have the final word ²³. Organic laws (laws on institutional matters) require special majorities and mandatory Constitutional Council review before enactment ²⁴ ⁴.
- **Judiciary and Constitutional Review:** France’s judiciary is independent but divided into separate branches. The **Court of Cassation** is the highest court for civil/criminal matters (largest judicial branch); the **Council of State** (Conseil d’État) is the highest for administrative law ²⁵. France traditionally avoided broad judicial review over Parliament, but since the Fifth Republic it established a **Constitutional Council (Conseil Constitutionnel)** to guard the Constitution. The Council has nine members (three each appointed by the President, the President of the National Assembly, and the President of the Senate) serving single **9-year terms** ¹¹. All former Presidents of the Republic are also lifelong members if they choose. Initially it could review bills only before promulgation (upon referral by top officials or 60 legislators) ⁴. A major reform in 2008 introduced the “Priority Preliminary Ruling on the Issue of Constitutionality” (QPC): citizens in ongoing cases may challenge a law’s constitutionality, which can be referred to the Council via the Court of Cassation or Council of State ²⁶ ²⁷. If the Council finds a violation, the law is struck down or suspended. Thus, France now has a powerful constitutional tribunal whose rulings apply erga omnes.

Executive–Legislative Relations

Under the Fifth Republic’s design, the balance between President and Parliament depends on electoral alignment. When the President’s party holds a legislative majority, the President effectively leads the government (driving policy and appointments) with little formal opposition ⁷. In such cases, commentators note the French legislature is “considered one of the weakest in Europe” relative to executive dominance ⁷. For example, Presidents de Gaulle, Pompidou, Mitterrand (second term), Chirac (second term), Sarkozy, and Macron had aligned majorities and advanced their agendas. However, if *cohabitation* occurs (as with Chirac–Jospin in 1997–2002), the President must appoint a PM from the opposing party, restricting the President’s domestic influence ¹⁴ ¹⁵. During cohabitation, the Prime Minister chairs the internal policy agenda while the President focuses on foreign affairs and national defense ¹⁴. Since 2000 the presidential and legislative election cycles have been synchronized (both 5 years) to reduce cohabitation; indeed, none has occurred after 2002 so far.

The Government is accountable to Parliament: by rule, ministers cannot simultaneously hold seats in Parliament ¹⁰. The National Assembly can remove a government by absolute majority (motion of censure). Conversely, the Government can bypass the Assembly on most bills by invoking Article 49.3: it then adopts the bill unless a no-confidence motion passes within 24 hours ⁶. This procedure has been used repeatedly (e.g. to pass the 2023 pension reform and immigration law) when facing fragmented legislatures ²⁸.

Presidential veto power is limited: the President can request Parliament reconsider a law, but ultimate enactment is allowed after one reconsideration cycle.

Major Political Institutions

- **President of the Republic:** Elected by popular vote (two-round system). As head of state, the President represents national unity and guarantees constitutionality (Article 5). The President presides over the Council of Ministers (Cabinet) ¹⁷, negotiates treaties (with ratification), and can grant individual pardons. The President's unique powers make the office especially influential. As one analysis notes, when President and government are politically aligned, the President “is effectively head of the executive and can drive through their policy agendas with little formal opposition” ⁷. In practice, Presidents de Gaulle and Pompidou often dominated policy; Mitterrand and Chirac became more parliamentary when facing opposition, but still leveraged their office for key decisions (e.g. referendum on Maastricht Treaty). Presidents may serve up to two consecutive terms (constitutional reform, 2008) ¹¹.
- **Prime Minister and Government:** The Prime Minister (PM) is the leader of the Cabinet and chief executive in day-to-day governance. The PM directs all government action (Article 21) and implements legislation. The PM may be a member of the majority party or coalition. Cabinet ministers are appointed by the President on the PM's recommendation ², and head various departments. The collective Cabinet sets major policies, but each minister often controls specific portfolios. If the President and Assembly majority are the same, the PM tends to be less assertive; if cohabiting, the PM becomes dominant in domestic affairs. The government's programs must be presented to both houses, and the PM answers questions in Parliament. Beyond formal powers, the PM's influence depends on political context and personal standing.
- **Bicameral Parliament:** The *Assemblée nationale* (red, Figure 1) is the lower house. It has 577 deputies elected for five-year terms (unless dissolved) by two-round majority voting. The Assembly initiates and votes on legislation, including the annual budget. It can hold the government to account and passes motions of censure. The *Sénat* (red oval in Figure 1) is the upper house with 348 members (serving 6-year terms, half renewed triennially) elected by about 150,000 “grands électeurs” (mainly local officials). The Senate reviews laws passed by the Assembly, proposes amendments, and represents territorial interests. In ordinary legislative matters, it has veto power at first reading (can delay laws) but ultimately the Assembly may override it. The Senate also proposes amendments and can force joint committees. Unlike the Assembly, the Senate cannot dismiss governments and its approval is not needed to hold a majority government. The **Constitutional Council** (left orange box) sits above both houses as guardian of the Constitution ⁴ ⁵. It vets organic laws and, since 2010, can review any statute via QPC when referred by courts ²⁷.
- **Advisory Councils:** France's constitution provides for consultative bodies. The **Economic, Social and Environmental Council (CESE)** represents organized civil society (labor unions, employers, NGOs). It is a consultative assembly that “advises the lawmaking bodies on social and economic policies” but has no legislative vote ²⁹. It studies government questions referred to it and issues reports. France also has local government councils (regions, departments, communes) with elected assemblies, but ultimate authority remains in Paris. Prefects (state appointees) continue to oversee law enforcement and administration in each department and region, despite decades of *décentralisation* reform ³⁰.

Electoral Systems and Parties

France uses **majoritarian two-round elections** for both the Presidency and the National Assembly. Presidential candidates must win over 50% in the first round, or else the top two contest a runoff. Similarly, Assembly races go to a second round unless a candidate achieves a majority plus threshold in round one. This tends to produce broad coalitions; notably, in 2017 and 2022 opponents of Marine Le Pen joined to support Emmanuel Macron in the second round.

Major parties/alliances: The party system has realigned since 2017. Traditionally dominated by the center-right Gaullist/Républicains and center-left Socialist blocs, French politics has fragmented. Macron’s centrist movement (*La République En Marche*, now **Renaissance** in the **Ensemble** alliance) won the presidency and plurality of Assembly seats (20% vote in 2022) ³¹, drawing support from both left and right ³². The center-right **Les Républicains (LR)** (Gaullist successor to the UMP) has weakened (6.6% in 2022) ³³, while the Socialist Party (PS) also fell. On the left, Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s France Unbowed (LFI, populist left) and allied Greens and Communists formed a loose alliance, **Nouveau Front Populaire (NFP)**, for recent elections. The far-right **National Rally (Rassemblement National, RN)** under Marine Le Pen has surged, seeking to normalize its image (“de-demonisation”) ³⁴. In the 2024 legislative election, no group won a majority: the leftist NFP won ~180 seats, Macron’s Ensemble ~159, RN ~142, and LR ~39 ³⁵. (See table below.) This three-way split produced the hung parliament now in place ³⁵.

Alliance/Party	Main Ideology	Seats (2024 NA)
New Popular Front (LFI, PS, Greens, etc.)	Leftist coalition	180 ³⁵
Ensemble (Renaissance + center allies)	Centrist/liberal	159 ³⁵
National Rally (RN)	Far-right/nationalist	142 ³⁵
Les Républicains (LR)	Centre-right	39 ³⁵

Table: Main parliamentary groups after the 2024 election ³⁵.

Political Ideologies: French politics includes several ideological traditions. **Gaullism** (named after Charles de Gaulle) emphasizes a strong state, national independence, and social solidarity. It dominated the right under former names (RPR, UMP, LR). The Socialist/Republican Left (PS) historically championed social democracy and welfare. **Communists** (PCF) still exist but are minor. The radical left (LFI) espouses eco-socialism and anti-austerity populism. The **far-right RN** advocates nationalism, anti-immigration, and Euroscepticism. Centrist liberalism (Macron’s movement) blends pro-market reforms with social liberalism. France also has environmentalist and regionalist parties. Party coalitions shift frequently; electoral alliances (like NFP on the left, Ensemble on the center-right) are common to form majorities ³⁶ ³¹.

Public Policy and Administration

Policy-making in France is **highly centralized**. The **civil service** (often graduates of elite schools like the École Nationale d’Administration, until its recent abolition) staffs ministries and the prefectural system. Technocrats and senior administrators play a major role. The state sets national policy through detailed legislation and administrative regulations. Although reforms since the 1980s have decentralized powers to regions and departments, the central government retains strong influence. For example, an 1982 law

created elected regional councils and devolved areas (economic planning, education) to them ³⁰ . However, préfets still represent the central government in each region/department and can veto local decisions. The **Conseil d'État**, as both adviser and supreme admin court, reviews major bills and issues legal opinions, shaping policy details. Interest groups (trade unions like CGT, CFDT, FO; business lobbies; farmer organizations) may influence policy, but France's corporatism is limited. Civic engagement often occurs through mass demonstrations. Advisory councils like the CESE institutionalize social dialogue, though their recommendations are not binding ²⁹ .

Judiciary and Civil Liberties

France's judiciary is independent. Civil and criminal courts follow a mixed-civil law tradition, culminating in the Court of Cassation. Administrative courts form a separate system headed by the Council of State (conseil d'État) ²⁵ . Judges are career professionals; lay magistrates are absent. Judicial review over ordinary laws was traditionally weak, but since 2010 individuals can challenge laws' constitutionality via the QPC (filtered by Cassation or Conseil d'État) ²⁷ . The Constitutional Council now acts somewhat like a supreme court for fundamental rights. Human rights (e.g. the 1789 Rights of Man) and religious secularism (*laïcité*) are entrenched.

France in Europe and the World

France is a founding member of the European Union (formerly the EEC) and of NATO (it withdrew from NATO's integrated command in 1966 and rejoined in 2009). It is a leading EU power, often co-shaping EU budgetary, agricultural (CAP), and foreign policies. Notably, France holds a **permanent UN Security Council seat** (veto power) and is one of five recognized nuclear-weapon states. As NPR noted, the makeup of France's government "is important because the country is a leading voice in EU policy, among the biggest world economies and a nuclear-armed, veto-wielding member of the UN Security Council" ³⁷ . French foreign policy emphasizes multilateralism (UN, Francophonie, EU), a strong defense (recently pledging substantial NATO and EU defense spending, including aid to Ukraine ³⁸), and independence of action (e.g. in former colonies or on global issues). France hosts the European Parliament's election counts (symbolic) and often leads on climate (e.g. Paris Agreement). The President's stance significantly affects EU policy: for example, President Macron has advocated EU integration and fiscal reform, whereas RN has voiced Euroscepticism and nationalism.

Key Political Figures

Important leaders of the Fifth Republic include: - **Charles de Gaulle (Président 1959–1969)**: Founder of the Fifth Republic, he shaped the constitution's strong presidency and asserted French independence (e.g. withdrew from NATO command). - **Georges Pompidou (1969–1974)**: De Gaulle's successor, oversaw modernization and economic growth. - **François Mitterrand (1981–1995)**: Socialist President with longest tenure (two terms). He initiated nationalizations and welfare expansion, then shifted right politically; he presided over the early EU-building (Treaty of Maastricht) and saw the first cohabitation (1986). - **Jacques Chirac (1995–2007)**: Gaullist President, navigated cohabitation (1997–2002) with Socialist PM Lionel Jospin. He opposed the 2005 EU Constitution and presided over economic reforms. - **Nicolas Sarkozy (2007–2012)**: Center-right President who pursued pension reform and security laws, but lost popularity after the 2008 financial crisis. - **François Hollande (2012–2017)**: Socialist President, initiated labor law reforms and tax increases on wealth before ending one term under low approval. - **Emmanuel Macron (2017–present)**:

Centrist President who founded LREM (Renaissance). He has pushed labor and economic reforms, navigated the “Yellow Vest” protests, and leads France’s pro-EU agenda. Under Macron, the political landscape shifted as his party realigned old blocs ³². - **Marine Le Pen (RN leader)**: While never elected President, she reshaped the political spectrum by mainstreaming the far right. Her high second-round vote shares (2017, 2022) and RN’s parliamentary gains forced the traditional parties into new strategies ³⁴.

Comparative Perspective

France’s system lies between presidential (USA) and parliamentary (UK/Germany) models. Unlike the purely ceremonial President of Germany or the monarch of the UK, the French President wields real power. However, unlike the U.S. President, the French President shares executive power with a Prime Minister and cabinet that must answer to Parliament. In fact, one scholar observes that France grafts “a popularly elected president with extensive constitutional powers” onto a parliamentary framework ¹⁰. This hybrid gives the President a stronger hand than, say, Italy’s President (mostly ceremonial), yet limits him compared to a U.S. President (due to dependence on parliamentary support).

Conclusion

France’s Fifth Republic combines a strong, directly elected head of state with a parliamentary government, aiming to balance stability and democracy. Its constitution has provided enduring institutions, yet it adapts through reforms (e.g. presidential term limits, expanded constitutional review, decentralization). The current political scene is dynamic: long-standing party structures have broken down, leading to pluralistic assemblies and coalition governments. Nevertheless, France’s core principles – republicanism, secularism, state-directed modernization – remain central to its politics. France continues to play a pivotal role in the EU and world affairs, leveraging its institutional continuity and international status.

Sources: Key information is drawn from official and scholarly analyses of French politics, including a UK House of Commons research briefing ¹⁰ ⁶, news analyses (NPR/AP) ³⁷, electoral and party data ³¹ ³⁵, and academic/legal references ⁸ ⁴. (For example, Wikipedia’s “Politics of France” notes it “has a semi-presidential system” ¹², and the Commons briefing observes the President’s extensive powers ⁶.) Additional details come from France’s constitution texts and historical sources ¹⁷ ²⁹, as well as contemporary reporting on the 2024 elections ³⁶ ³⁵.

¹ ³ ⁶ ⁷ ¹⁰ ¹⁴ ¹⁵ ¹⁶ ²³ [researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk](https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-10112/CBP-10112.pdf)
<https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-10112/CBP-10112.pdf>

² ¹³ ¹⁷ ¹⁸ ¹⁹ ²⁰ ²¹ [The Constitution of the Fifth Republic | Élysée](https://www.elysee.fr/en/french-presidency/constitution-of-4-october-1958)
<https://www.elysee.fr/en/french-presidency/constitution-of-4-october-1958>

⁴ ⁸ ⁹ ²⁴ ²⁶ [The Constitutional Council and Judicial Review in France | In Custodia Legis](https://blogs.loc.gov/law/2020/11/the-constitutional-council-and-judicial-review-in-france/)
<https://blogs.loc.gov/law/2020/11/the-constitutional-council-and-judicial-review-in-france/>

⁵ ²⁵ ²⁷ [Constitutional Council \(France\) - Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constitutional_Council_(France))
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constitutional_Council_\(France\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constitutional_Council_(France))

¹¹ [Term limits in France - Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Term_limits_in_France)
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Term_limits_in_France

12 Politics of France - Wikipedia

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics_of_France

22 28 32 34 36 France: recent political developments and the 2024 National Assembly elections - House of Commons Library

<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-10112/>

29 French Economic, Social and Environmental Council - Wikipedia

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/French_Economic,_Social_and_Environmental_Council

30 France - Regional, Local Gov't | Britannica

<https://www.britannica.com/place/France/Regional-and-local-government>

31 33 France: Political parties at a glance

<https://politpro.eu/en/france/parties>

35 2024 French legislative election - Wikipedia

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2024_French_legislative_election

37 38 New center-right government in France announced 2 months after divisive elections : NPR

<https://www.npr.org/2024/09/21/nx-s1-5121958/france-center-right-government>