

Political Turmoil and Power Fragmentation in France: Reverting to Its National Spirit

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Nearly seventy years after its creation, the Fifth French Republic suffers from a highly dysfunctional political system, tormented by gridlock and populism.¹ Originally intended to reflect France's *national spirit*, it was designed by wartime hero Charles de Gaulle to centralize power in the hands of the Executive.² Such sense of centralized rule has since been abandoned, with proposals for reform including a greater emphasis on parliamentary power with a weaker and ceremonial presidency.³

This paper rejects these notions, arguing power fragmentation is behind the political turmoil of the Fifth Republic. Accordingly, France must embrace its national spirit of centralized rule and heroic leadership by abandoning parliamentary government and reforming its institutions to allow for greater presidential authority. Hence, the goal of this paper is to draw parallels between the collapse of the Fourth Republic and France's current state of crisis, highlighting the role played by de Gaulle then, and urging for new strong leadership figures to emerge.

Section I will review the concepts and theories most relevant for this paper. It will examine France's national spirit by drawing from both theoretical and practical examples. Based on power

fragmentation and neglect toward France's spirit, section II will draw clear parallels between the fall of the Fourth Republic and the current political crisis. Finally, section III will provide a foundation for what a potential Sixth Republic could resemble with an emphasis on presidentialism.

This paper fulfills two purposes. First, it serves as an analysis of France's political decline, as, despite de Gaulle's sober assessment of the country's national spirit and the initial success of the Fifth Republic, power fragmentation persisted. Moreover, it provides a clear blueprint for a new system – one that is not only true to France's political tradition but also needed in times of such political instability.

I. Review: France's National Spirit

This section is dedicated to explaining notions of national spirit. First, by examining G. W. F. Hegel's views on national spirit, the state, and collective consciousness, this paper establishes a basis for analyzing France's own national spirit. It then shifts to de Gaulle and how he perceived France himself, laying out his vision while also drawing from historical examples that support it. Fleshing out these concepts will allow for a clearer

assessment of how France collapsed by neglecting its national spirit.

Hegel on National Spirit

Hegel's concept of *Volksgeist*, or national spirit, recognizes nations have their own set of features, culture, heroes, and traditions intrinsic to their nature.⁴ Hegel implies such spirit is a collection of citizens' conscious identity, further indicating the existence of a collective consciousness and imagination that shapes national spirit.⁵ National spirit is manifested through laws, institutions, and finally, the state – described as an independent, lasting, and semi-fixed being.⁶ The assumption of a national spirit is vital not only for the purposes of this paper, but the broader field of comparative politics. Part of measuring the success of political systems is recognizing nations have distinct inclinations which stem from tradition and identity. Therefore, understanding its nature and how it manifests allows one to search for France's specific national spirit and the features behind it.

de Gaulle: Eternal France and Strongman Heroism

de Gaulle's interpretation of national spirit is perfectly in line with Hegel's. de Gaulle believed in an "eternal France," one which undergoes constant renewal but reinforces its essence through it.⁷ Moreover, de Gaulle's military background helps explain his emphasis on the strongman as a quintessential part of France's identity, as he often attempted to mirror himself to previous figures in French history.⁸ Centralized government has, in fact, been

the norm in France since the monarchy. Louis XIV, for example, is best known for his efforts to centralize public administration under the influence of the king.⁹ Similarly, Napoleon brought stability to the French Republic, later claiming his title as emperor and continuing the tradition of heroic strongmen as drivers of modernization in France.¹⁰

Classifying himself into such category, de Gaulle believed to be the guiding statesman France needed in times of crisis,¹¹ leading the resistance movement during Nazi occupation and, amidst the collapse of the Fourth Republic, answering public calls and returning to politics to lead the country into substantial institutional reforms.¹² As a result, de Gaulle's vision for the Fifth Republic placed more emphasis on the President as someone meant to embody France's national spirit and guide the country beyond the shorter-length terms of parliamentarians.¹³ Countering preceding political turmoil, de Gaulle indented for the President to hold significant tiebreaking powers over domestic matters, play a major role in foreign relations, and gather support, legitimacy, and political capital by aligning with the people through plebiscites parallel to the Assembly.¹⁴ de Gaulle's vision for France – and mainly the French President – is thus highly consistent with France's tradition of strong leadership and centralized government.

II. The Fourth and Fifth Republics: How France Neglected Its Spirit

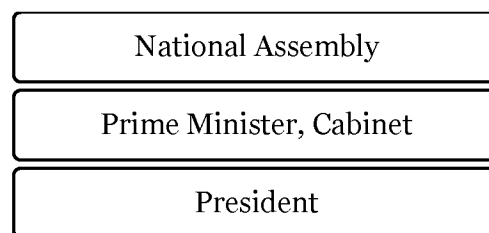
With notions of national spirit clarified, this section aims at highlighting the parallels between the political struggles of the Fourth and Fifth Republics. The section places power fragmentation as conflicting with France's national spirit and serving as the main cause behind the failures of both political systems. In addition, it will reveal though de Gaulle was initially successful in consolidating power and public legitimacy under the President, the current system still lacks the level of centralism consistent with the French tradition.

The Fall of the Fourth Republic: Power Fragmentation and Parliamentary Crisis

Shortly after the war, the French Constituent Assembly met to draft a new constitution. Its success, however, was limited. The Fourth Republic was born out of a compromise that strongly dissatisfied de Gaulle, who argued for a presidential system.¹⁵ Instead, the constitution placed heavy emphasis on the National Assembly over not only the President, but also the Prime Minister. This relationship is illustrated by Figure 1 below. Though in theory the President oversaw the Cabinet his powers were mainly ceremonial.¹⁶ Moreover, the Prime Minister, who was meant to lead the Cabinet from within, effectively became hostage to both the other ministers and the Assembly as he relied on them for political support,¹⁷ overturning the traditional hierarchy. Lastly, the Assembly was not only responsible for approving the Prime Minister but could also vote him out.¹⁸ The result was a series of unsuccessful

coalitions, weak cabinets, and an unstable party system.¹⁹

Figure 1. Balance of Power in the Fourth Republic.



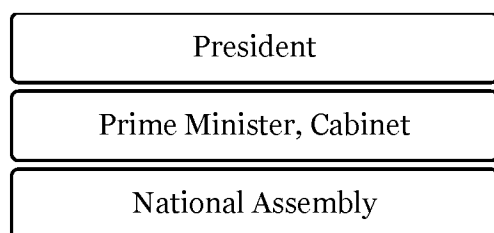
The lack of a strong Executive drove the Republic into a period of political chaos, with power fragmentation at the centre of this. With decision making widely decentralized across branches, Prime Ministers struggled to retain parliamentary support, and governments had little long-term vision for France.²⁰ Moreover, such fragmented constitutional design conflicted with France's political tradition and national spirit. A ceremonial President provided little value to France and failed to exercise the idea of continuity often associated with mixed systems. In consequence, near the end of the short-lived Republic, both elites and masses had reached the consensus that dysfunctional institutions were the source of such parliamentary chaos. This paved the way for de Gaulle's return as the head of a new constituent body tasked with crafting an entirely new system in ways which fixed the flaws of its predecessor.

de Gaulle's Half-Measure

The constitution of the Fifth Republic signified a clear break from the previous Assembly-led regime. de Gaulle's main goal was to address institutional gridlock associated with parliamentarism while also

incorporating aspects of national unity and effective authority.²¹ As a result the new constitution left enough leeway for the President to play a more active role in domestic policy making, though the Prime Minister and Cabinet retained responsibility over government.²² In fact, in its early years the Republic, despite its parliamentary aspects, had become highly presidential, as de Gaulle believed in a clear hierarchy within the Executive branch in which the head of state held supreme authority and exercised control over domestic policy.²³ This suggested the President was no longer a mere nonpartisan arbitrator who stepped in occasionally, but someone who actively guided policy over an extensive period of time, allowing for greater cohesion and long-term planning more in line with what de Gaulle perceived to be France's *national interest*.²⁴ However, as Figure 2 below suggests, this framework, though less fragmented, is also less balanced.

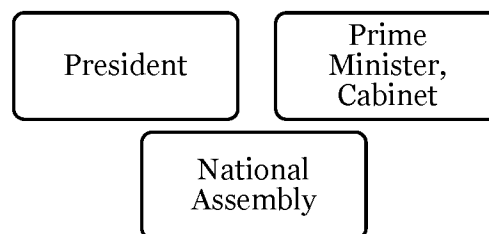
Figure 2. Balance of Power in the Fifth Republic when President Asserts Dominance



Issues began to arise when Presidents stopped resembling the unifying and heroic strongman persona of de Gaulle. Because the constitution was ambiguous as to who conducts domestic policy, without a head of state closely overseeing the Prime Minister's job the Prime Minister remained technically

competent to carry out day-to-day government business. This is particularly dysfunctional when President and Prime Minister belong to different and opposing parties, causing the struggle over authority known as *cohabitation*.²⁵ Figure 3 illustrates how this scenario brings back the fragmentation of the Fourth Republic, only this time, within the Executive branch itself. Cohabitation has resulted in several periods of political instability in France,²⁶ as a lack in clarity from the constitution stimulates conflict. Furthermore, studies suggest the public legitimacy of institutions is diminished in semi-presidential systems where responsibilities are dispersed, especially when compared to pure presidential or parliamentary governments.²⁷ In line with France's national spirit, weak national unity is directly tied to the absence of a unifying strongman who represents the interests of the people.

Figure 3. Balance of Power in the Fifth Republic During Cohabitation



de Gaulle's failure to establish a pure presidential system when designing the Fifth Republic can hence be classified as a *half-measure*. Though aware of France's long tradition of heroic strongmen and centralized leadership, by failing to impose a constitutionally clear hierarchy within the Executive, de Gaulle replaced the

Assembly-Executive struggle with a President-Prime Minister one. Such lack of cohesion reinforces dynamics of power fragmentation strongly resembling the struggles faced by the Fourth Republic prior to its dissolution. Hence, the biggest flaw within both regimes is their lack of coherence with France's national spirit, as power fragmentation is particularly destructive in France given its political tradition – which de Gaulle recognized but failed to fully execute.

III. Designing a Sixth Republic: Embracing Presidentialism

After identifying the common failures of both the Fourth and Fifth Republics and highlighting the discrepancy between their respective constitutional designs and France's national spirit, the question of how to move forward remains. Reinforcing the main theme thus far, this section explains why a hypothetical Sixth Republic must contain greater elements of presidentialism as to finally abandon the chaotic dynamics of power fragmentation and pay tribute to de Gaulle's original vision for France – which prioritizes strong leadership and centralized authority in line with the spirit and interests of the nation.

Centralizing Power

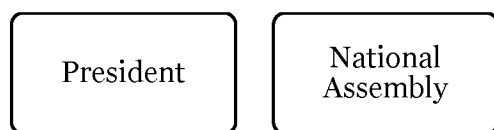
The fragmentation associated with cohabitation is addressed in presidentialism as the President no longer shares authority with the Prime Minister. This facilitates decision making, being particularly relevant in times of crisis. For example, in cases of polarization and gridlock in the Assembly, the President can

still assume responsibility over most government responsibilities. This is only possible because the President is no longer tied to the Assembly via Prime Minister. A clearer and undivided source of authority contributes to greater government legitimacy as citizens have a better understanding of who to hold accountable for political decisions.²⁸

Preventing Tyranny

A common criticism of the centralized decision making of presidentialism is the risk of Executive tyranny.²⁹ When contrasted with semi-presidentialism, however, it is clear pure presidential systems are less prone to the kind of power imbalance that results in tyranny. For example, without cohabitation the French President may exercise supreme authority over the Prime Minister and Cabinet, who are in turn directly tied to the Assembly. As a result, the President can control Assembly operations and undermine the separation of powers. By contrast, in presidentialism, branches are more properly separated.³⁰ While Executive power is concentrated under a single person rather than two, the absence of a Prime Minister grants the Assembly full independence from Executive interference, creating checks and balances more substantial than in other systems.³¹ As illustrated by Figure 4, the separation between Executive and Assembly allows not only for more effective decision making, but also a greater balance of power between branches.

Figure 4. Balance of Power in a Hypothetical Sixth Republic



National Spirit, Stability, and Continuity

In addition to being less prone to gridlock and tyranny, presidentialism is more aligned with France's national spirit. As recognized by de Gaulle, France's most critical moments in recent political history are associated with strongman heroism. Therefore, abandoning such a notion means rejecting the kind of authority most compatible with its political tradition. Presidentialism offers greater stability when contrasted with other systems, as fixed terms allows for a sense of continuity and long-term planning absent in the dynamics of constant shuffling of parliamentarism. Furthermore, as noted by de Gaulle, the presence of a single leader who acts as an arbitrator, guides the nation through times of crisis, as well as symbolizes national interest and unity is more in line with France's national spirit.

Conclusion

The instability associated with France's political system begs two questions: what is the source of this turmoil and how can such problem be addressed? After identifying France's national spirit with an emphasis on strongman heroism, this paper found the primary flaw of both Fourth and Fifth Republics pretrains to their failure to acknowledge the nation's political tradition by decentralizing power and decision making. Section I provided a more solid

foundation to de Gaulle's vision for France based on Hegel's notions of national spirit. Thereafter, Section II identified the issues with the Fourth and Fifth Republics. The former, following an institutional design that placed the Assembly above the Executive, not only rejected France's national spirit but also opened a window for unstable coalitions and extreme fragmentation. The latter, given its unclear constitutional rules, gave room for cohabitation, a scenario in which President and Prime Minister struggle for power. Both these systems failed to live up to de Gaulle's own idea of France.

Section III provided a model for a potential Sixth Republic by advocating for pure presidentialism as the future for France and illustrated how this improves the current system in three ways. First, it addresses the issue of cohabitation by eliminating the Prime Minister and centralizing power under the President. Second, it imposes greater constraints on tyranny by detaching the Executive branch from the Assembly and consequently preventing one from capturing the other. Lastly, presidentialism is more compatible with France's national spirit of centralized leadership and strongman heroism. This paper therefore provides a clear diagnosis of France's problems while also crafting a blueprint for a future system. Further research may deal with the means of reform and how France may require a unifying figure in the molds of de Gaulle to carry out such comprehensive institutional change. Finally, more work juxtaposing this model with the pure parliamentary system proposed by some factions of the

French political elite may be useful in balancing the pros and cons of each.

Endnotes

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