

The President above parties: a founding illusion of the Fifth Republic

Article

Published Version

Knapp, A. (2012) The President above parties: a founding illusion of the Fifth Republic. *E-France* (3). pp. 55-74. ISSN 1756-0535 Available at <http://centaur.reading.ac.uk/30635/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

Publisher: University of Reading, Department of Modern Languages & European Studies

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the [End User Agreement](#).

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online

The President above Parties: a Founding Illusion of the Fifth Republic

Andrew KNAPP
University of Reading (UK)

Max Weber famously wrote that the state, and its domination of civil society, may draw on three sources of legitimacy: the traditional authority of the ‘patriarch and the patrimonial prince’, the rational-legal authority of rules and due process, and the ‘extraordinary and personal *gift of grace* (charisma).’ Charisma, he adds, may be ‘exercised by the prophet or – in the field of politics – by the elected war lord, the plebiscitarian ruler, the great demagogue, or the political party leader.’¹ A charismatic leader ‘holds his authority in virtue of a mission held to be incarnate in his person’; the structures of charismatic authority are born of ‘extraordinary situations of emergency and enthusiasm.’ Because the circumstances of its genesis are exceptional, however, “‘Pure” charismatic domination is [...] unstable’; it is all too easily overtaken by the ‘conditions of everyday life’, challenged by the question of the succession, and ‘fated to decline as permanent institutional structures increasingly develop.’²

¹ Max Weber, ‘Politics as Vocation’, in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, tr./ed. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1948), pp. 77-128; pp. 78-9.

² Max Weber, ‘The Nature of Charismatic Domination’, in Max Weber, *Weber: Selections in Translation*, ed. W.G. Runciman, tr. E. Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. 232, 236, 238, 248.

Few democratic politicians correspond so closely to the Weberian profile of charismatic leadership as Charles de Gaulle. His own conviction of his charismatic status leaps out of the opening pages of his *War Memoirs*; the catastrophe of June 1940 gave him the chance to make it reality. Few heard his historic broadcast of 18 June calling on Frenchmen to continue the fight against Germany; fewer joined him in London. It was above all his conviction of his own personal mission to incarnate France that transformed his motley group of followers into a broad political movement commanding, by June 1944, the support of all of France's major pre-war parties, the internal Resistance, and some 400,000 (mostly colonial) troops. De Gaulle owed his position as the head of France's first post-war government (the Provisional Government of the French Republic was declared on 3 June 1944) to this record, to the acclamations of the crowds on his return to France (at Bayeux on 14 June, and above all in Paris on 26 August), and to the tardy recognition of the Allies, accorded on 23 October 1944. Only in November 1945 was his role given the official sanction of a newly-elected Constituent Assembly, a unanimous parliamentary vote of which he made so little case that he resigned barely two months later.

De Gaulle never represented anything as banal as a parliamentary constituency. His return to power in June 1958 fell almost as far outside the routines of democratic politics as his record in 1940-46: President René Coty appointed him as the last Prime Minister of the Fourth Republic because politicians, the public, and an insurrectionary military viewed him as the only man who could solve France's problem in Algeria. He asked for, and got, a mandate to give France a new Constitution; the Fifth Republic was approved by popular referendum in September 1958, and he was elected as its first president, by a college of some 90,000 local notables, that December. In fact he only ran ('stood' would be a more appropriate word) for election by universal suffrage once in a thirty-year political career, at the presidential election of December 1965: his other appeals to the voters – five of them – took the form of referendums: one in 1958, one in 1961, two in 1962, and one in 1969. In each, he put his own leadership on the line, and when he lost the last of them, he announced his resignation within hours of the result. Over four decades later, the 'de

Gaule myth' – constantly changing, but not so far fading – retains extraordinary power over the French political imagination.³

The presidential election of 1965 was an essential moment in the theme of this paper, the 'routinisation' of de Gaulle's charismatic authority, its slow mutation into a duller, more institutionalised, more rational-legal source of legitimacy. But the process extended across the whole of the presidency, and involved a complex series of interactions between the president himself, France's parties, and the constitution of the Fifth Republic as it took shape in its first decade. The end product was the transformation of an institution, the presidency, conceived as an insurance against the domination of the state by political parties, into *the* major stake of party competition. This was one of de Gaulle's most lasting legacies, and has structured French party politics ever since.

The approach taken here is broadly chronological and draws heavily on the memories of actors such as Alain Peyrefitte, Pierre Lefranc, Robert Poujade, and Jacques Foccart. It covers the transition between the Fourth and Fifth Republics, the 'second foundation' of the Fifth Republic in the autumn of 1962, the impact of 1965, and the succession process when de Gaulle finally left the stage.

Fourth to Fifth Republic

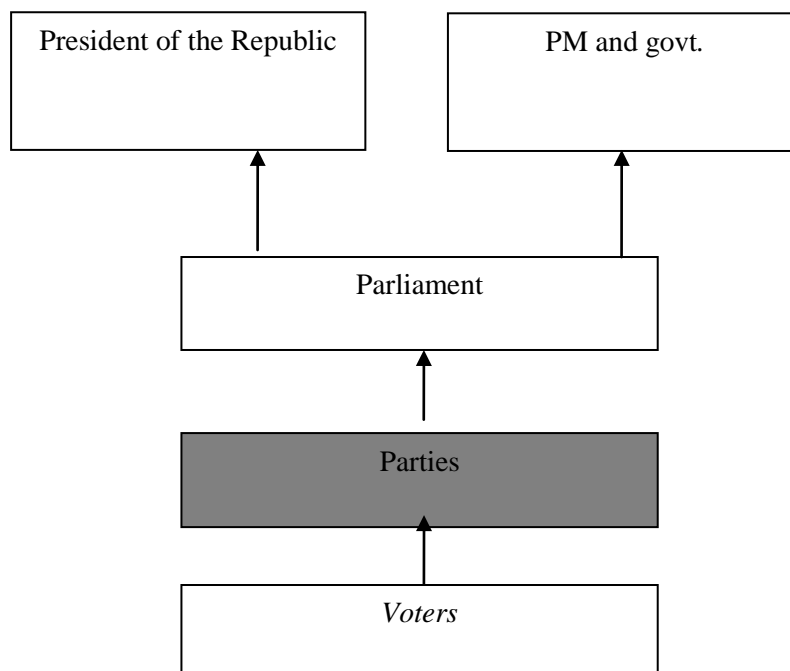
De Gaulle had opposed the Fourth Republic even before its creation, sketching out his alternative vision at Bayeux, on 16 June 1946, five months after his own resignation and in the middle of France's post-war constitutional debate. At the heart of the Gaullist critique was the freedom the Fourth Republic accorded to political parties to control the French state. 'We know only too well', he thundered at Bayeux, 'that once the danger [of German occupation] had passed, everything was handed over to the discretion of the parties.'⁴ Not that parties lacked a legitimacy of their own; it was simply that, in the Gaullist canon, they were doomed to represent *parts* of the nation, and thus to reproduce France's deep, and damaging, social and political divisions. As long as parliament was the creature of the parties, and as long as the Prime Minister, the government, and the President of the Republic were the creatures of parliament, the parties would act as a *screen* between the French

³ S. Hazareesingh, *In the Shadow of the General. Modern France and the Myth of de Gaulle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁴ Charles de Gaulle, Discours prononcé à Bayeux le 16 juin 1946, in *Discours et Messages*, ii, Paris, Plon 1970, p. 11.

people and their supreme executive authority (Figure 1). What looks to an Anglo-Saxon observer like a straightforward, if oversimplified, schema for a typical parliamentary democracy, was unacceptable to Gaullists because of its apparently proven incapacity to deal with major crises – the defeat of 1940, but also the insurrection of May 1958 in Algiers.

Figure 1: The Fourth Republic or le régime des partis



Breaking with the ‘regime of parties’ was, then, an essential Gaullist aim after the General’s return to power. But parties could hardly be abolished in a modern democracy; indeed Article 4 of the new Constitution, promulgated on 4 October 1958, stated that ‘Political parties and groups shall contribute to the exercise of suffrage. They shall be formed and carry on their activities freely. They shall respect the principles of national sovereignty and

democracy.⁵ It was no more realistic to attempt to change the behaviour of parties; representing partial interests was in their nature. Rather, France's institutions should constrain their sphere of action, and ensure, in a much reinforced presidency, a supreme authority who would be, in the words of the Bayeux speech, 'above parties' – and capable of by-passing them by appealing directly to the electorate.

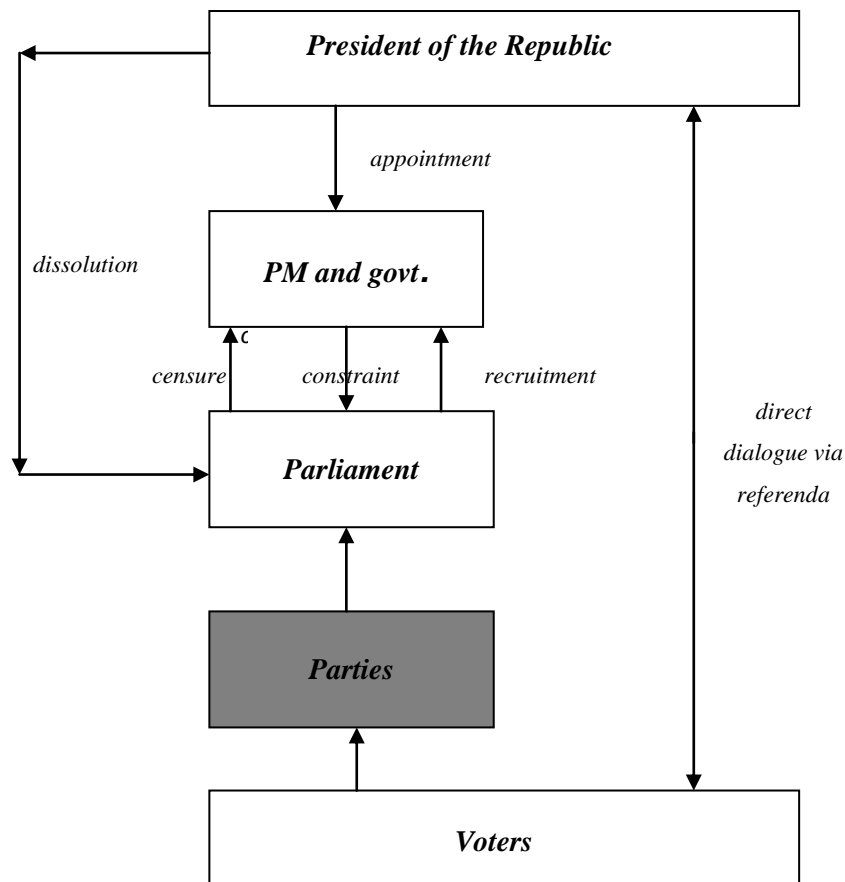
Figure 2, then, is a simplified representation of the Constitution of 1958. Parties, at the outset, were still expected to form a screen between voters and parliament. But the President, now elected not by the two houses of parliament but by an electoral college of 90,000, was freed from parliamentary control. And he was given important new powers. His appointment of the government would henceforth be without countersignature (of de Gaulle's three prime ministers, the first, Michel Debré, was a seasoned parliamentarian; the second, Georges Pompidou, had never been elected to any office; the third, Maurice Couve de Murville, had won his first parliamentary election less than three weeks before his appointment). He had the right to dissolve parliament, again without countersignature. And he could engage in a direct dialogue with the voters by putting major institutional issues – 'the organisation of the public authorities', as well as treaties and issues relating to the rapidly-shrinking French Union – to referendum. The exercise of this right was, in principle, subject to checks and balances. A referendum could only be called on the proposal of the government or of both houses of parliament; and while it might be used as part of a process of constitutional amendment, this could only occur (under Article 89) after both houses of parliament had voted on an identical text. De Gaulle, nevertheless, made full use of the referendum and paid little attention to such checks and balances, treating the proposal of the government as a formality and, in 1962, ignoring the requirement of a parliamentary vote on a constitutional amendment. The main thing was the ability of president and people to connect. Personally aloof but still politically charismatic, he also took care to maintain direct, day-by-day contacts with the French through press conferences, television and radio speeches, and the walkabouts – the 'plebiscite every day'⁶ – that were the despair of his security personnel.

⁵ 'Les partis et groupements politiques concourent à l'expression du suffrage. Ils se forment et exercent leur activité librement. Ils doivent respecter les principes de la souveraineté nationale et de la démocratie.' (Constitution of the Fifth French Republic, Article 4.

⁶ Hazareesingh, *In the Shadow of the General*, p. 67.

The new presidency was complemented by a new set of relationships between parliament and the government. Parliament remained, of course, the main (though not the only) source of recruitment for ministers; it retained its right to force the government to resign, through a vote of censure of an absolute majority of its

Figure 2: The Fifth Republic of 1958



members, a tool that ensured that no government could flagrantly defy its wishes. At the same time, however, the government, appointed by the president, was no longer under any obligation (as it had been under Article 45 of the Constitution of the Fourth Republic) to seek the confidence of parliament before taking office; and it disposed of a

formidable battery of new measures available to get its own agenda through, and to survive what was still expected to be a legislature dominated by fractious and divided parties.

Within this schema, the role of the Gaullist party, the Union pour la Nouvelle République (UNR) remained ambiguous. Even with Gaullist parties, de Gaulle's earlier experiences had been unhappy: the Rassemblement du Peuple Français (RPF), launched by him in the spring of 1947 with the purpose of bringing the Fourth Republic down and himself back to office, failed and was disowned by him in 1953. The UNR had no official backing from the General. 'Everyone will understand', said de Gaulle on 23 October 1958, during the campaign for the first legislative elections of the Fifth Republic, 'that I have no wish to, that I cannot, be directly involved in this competition [...] This impartiality compels me to require that my name, even in the form of an adjective, should not be used as a label by any group or by any candidate.'⁷

This official version should not, quite, be taken at face value. De Gaulle was soon intervening actively, if very discreetly, in the life of the UNR. His interventions concerned both the party's structure and its strategy: he had no wish either to see the UNR elect a party president – a title too redolent of authority – or to allow it, as some party leaders such as Jacques Soustelle wished, to seek allies among the *Algérie Française* ultras like André Morice, Roger Duchet, or Georges Bidault. The UNR's secretary-general, Albin Chalandon, resumed the position by observing that if the UNR was de Gaulle's creature, he was not the UNR's; he could never, as a national arbiter, shut himself within the confines of a single party; and the party was therefore in the position where it must constantly serve the General without ever being directly under his command.⁸

De Gaulle's early relationship with the UNR, indeed, was a bundle of negatives unusual for a democratic political leader. He did not wish it to become another mass organisation as the RPF had fleetingly been; he certainly did not wish to become an *Algérie Française* bastion; he never had any form of direct or open contact with 'his' party, but always acted through members of the Gaullist

⁷ Charles de Gaulle, Conférence de presse du 23 octobre 1958, in *Discours et messages*, III, p.52. ('Tout le monde comprend que je ne veuille, que je ne puisse pas me mêler d'une manière directe à cette compétition ... Cette impartialité m'oblige à tenir essentiellement à ce que mon nom, même sous la forme d'un adjectif, ne soit pas utilisé dans le titre d'aucun groupe et d'aucun candidat.')

⁸ Jean Charlot, *L'UNR: étude du pouvoir au sein d'un parti politique*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1967, p. 255.

inner circle such as Jacques Foccart (above all), Pierre Lefranc, Jacques Richard, or Olivier Guichard. He did not wish to know how the UNR chose its candidates.⁹ And he did not believe that the UNR would win more than a handful of seats in 1958 (even if views of how well he *wanted* the UNR to do vary). De Gaulle the charismatic leader remained deeply reluctant to use the most basic tool of a democratic politician, party leadership.

The Fifth Republic refounded: Autumn 1962

The ambiguity in relations between the president and his party was partly, but only partly, lifted with the ‘second foundation’ of the Fifth Republic in the autumn of 1962. This was a three-month political drama which opened with de Gaulle’s announcement of a referendum on a constitutional amendment to allow the election of the president by direct universal suffrage – a referendum that was unconstitutional as parliament had not had the opportunity to vote on the amendment, which it would have opposed. The drama escalated with the only successful vote of censure by the National Assembly against a government of the Fifth Republic, continued with the dissolution of parliament, and concluded with a successful referendum and the return of a Gaullist-led parliamentary majority. The new republic thereby received two of its essential features: a directly-elected presidency, and a stable majority coalition in the National Assembly. De Gaulle was explicit about the need for the former: the sanction of universal suffrage would be required for any possible successor, because no other possible candidate could possess de Gaulle’s unique historic stature. Altogether less expected was the crystallisation of a stable majority; less so still, by the Gaullists at least, the unintended consequence of the constitutional reform – an immediate rapprochement between the presidency and party competition.

De Gaulle took a step into the arena of party politics because he was disappointed with the referendum result of 28 October and worried by its implications for the parliamentary elections of 18-25 November. Sixty-two per cent of valid voters cast said Yes to the direct election of the president; but that was only 47 per cent of registered voters, prompting the general to forecast that, half disowned

⁹ Alain Peyrefitte, *C’était de Gaulle*, I, Paris, Éditions de Fallois / Fayard, 1994, p. 266.

by the referendum, he would be completely so by the elections.¹⁰ This pessimism reshaped his relationship with the UNR, whose rise was actively sanctioned, even sought, by the president, albeit implicitly: on 7 November 1962, for example, he expressed the wish that the verdict of the second vote would not contradict the result of the first.¹¹

These words were confirmed by (mostly) covert acts. In 1962 de Gaulle took a direct interest, as he had not in 1958, in the selection of UNR candidates; he helped choose the party's election slogan (*Faites respecter votre oui*); he showed warm approval of those of his ministers, appointed from outside parliament, who now ran in constituencies; he asked Lefranc, a Gaullist since 1940, active within the post-war RPF but outside electoral politics thereafter, to organise a merger between the UNR and the separate movement of left-wing Gaullists, the Union Démocratique du Travail. Jacques Foccart, a Gaullist stalwart from the Resistance years with strong connections to the secret services, who became the President's adviser for African affairs (and the organiser of France's close relations with the heads of newly-independent Francophone African states) from 1958, now took on an equivalent liaison role for his relations with the UNR. By the time of the municipal elections of March 1965, Foccart observed that de Gaulle 'proclaimed his lack of interest in the elections, but spoke to me about them at length from the beginning of the year, and asked me almost every evening how particular local situations were developing. In reality, he followed all elections, even by-elections, very closely. He had visited all the major towns of France and many of the smaller ones, he knew the mayor and the notables and had formed a clear idea of the value of each of them. There was nothing he did not know about France's electoral geography.' And 'I kept the General informed of developments in each major constituency, and of the pressures needed to make some potential candidates run, and to secure the withdrawal of others. In a few cases, though very rare ones, and with considerable misgivings, the General allowed me to indicate his wishes to obtain a change of mind from a potential candidate'.¹²

¹⁰ Peyrefitte, *C'était de Gaulle*, I, p. 263.

¹¹ Charles de Gaulle, Discours du 7 novembre 1962, in *Discours et messages*, IV, p. 44 ('Les 18 et 25 novembre, vous allez élire les députés. Ah! puissiez-vous faire en sorte que cette deuxième consultation n'aille pas à l'encontre de la première!'). The televised version is on <http://www.ina.fr/politique/allocutions-discours/video/CAF89051357/discours-du-general-de-gaulle-du-07-11-1962.fr.html>.

¹² Jacques Foccart, *Journal de l'Élysée*, I, *Tous les soirs avec le Général de Gaulle*, Paris, Fayard/JeuneAfrique, 1998, p. 377. ('Il affichait son désintérêt [pour les élections municipales], mais il m'en parlait abondamment presque tous les soirs depuis le début de l'année, m'interrogeant sur les détails de l'évolution des situations

Figure 3 (see next page) attempts to represent this new state of affairs. It shows, in the first place, a clear separation, within the country and within Parliament, between the parties of the majority and those of the opposition. The government could henceforth normally count on the support of the majority (the UNR-UDT, and the small group of *Républicains Indépendants* led by the young Finance Minister Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, conservatives within the ruling coalition but outside the Gaullist party) and expect the opposition to oppose, albeit rather ineffectively. The opposition was, for the moment, more dispersed than the majority, between the Communists, the Socialists, and the Centrists. Secondly, the links between the president and the majority were reinforced, to the point where a real separation between the two as might have been imagined at the beginning of the Republic was no longer an option. As Georges Pompidou, the Prime Minister appointed by de Gaulle after the end of the Algerian war, observed to Alain Peyrefitte, de Gaulle's Information Minister and posthumous chronicler, 'The President cannot exercise his functions without the support of a parliamentary majority. The General needs to give up his unanimist utopia. Of course he is the president of all the French, but thanks to a majority and in spite of a minority.'¹³

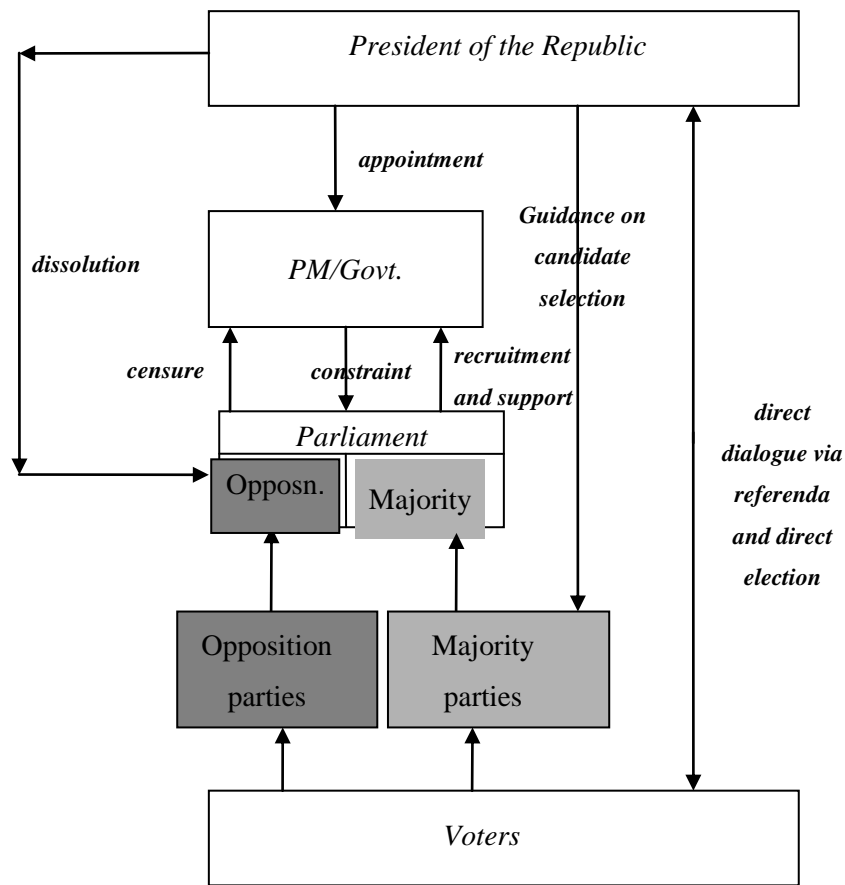
The mutual dependence between the president and the majority was certainly far from total. Even within the Gaullist-led coalition there were aspirations to greater independence from an early stage, not least from the Giscardians. De Gaulle himself, more importantly, still held to his idea of a direct dialogue between the head of state and the nation, over the heads of the parties. His preparation of the 1965

locales. En réalité, il suivait très attentivement toutes les élections, même partielles. Il avait visité toutes les grandes villes et beaucoup de plus petites, il connaissait les maires, les notables, et il s'était fait une idée sur la valeur des uns et des autres. ... Il n'ignorait rien de la géographie électorale.' And 'Je tenais le Général informé de l'évolution dans chaque circonscription importante, des pressions qu'il nous fallait exercer sur les uns pour qu'ils se présentent et sur les autres pour qu'ils retirent leur candidature. Dans certains cas, mais très rares, et avec beaucoup de réticence, le Général acceptait que je fasse état de son souhait pour obtenir un changement d'attitude de la part d'un candidat potentiel.'

¹³ Peyrefitte, *C'était de Gaulle*, I, p.267. (Le Président ne peut pas exercer ses fonctions s'il n'a pas une majorité pour le soutenir. Le Général doit renoncer à son utopie unanimiste. Bien sûr, il est le Président de tous les Français, mais grâce à une majorité et malgré une minorité.)

presidential election campaign is illustrative of this. He kept the voters guessing about his candidacy until 4 November, just a month before the first ballot, and failed to give the teasing signals common to most incumbent candidates. He left the organisation of his ‘campaign’, such as it was, not to the UNR, but to the Association for Support of the Action of General de Gaulle, a small

Figure 3: The Fifth Republic post-1962



group of the long-term faithful, headed by Pierre Lefranc, which had already served during referendum campaigns. Lefranc had been invited to prepare a *possible* campaign from September, but could

produce no campaign material, and had to find an agent in each *département* who was *not* a member of the UNR.¹⁴ Odd though de Gaulle's behaviour may appear within a party democracy, it seems that it chimed with the views of most of the French: a poll in November 1965 indicated that 56 per cent of respondents wanted the president to stay out of party politics.¹⁵

De Gaulle's second term, 1965–69

If the poll appeared to back de Gaulle's approach, the same could hardly be said of the first-ballot result. Forty-four per cent against five opponents, though excellent for a politician, appeared mediocre for a living legend. There followed a radical change of strategy between ballots, with de Gaulle allowing for the second what he had refused for the first: television interviews (which he did with great success), and above all the clear support of the UNR, if not quite as a 'president's party', at least as a logistical support. As Peyrefitte observed,

De Gaulle had believed – as I had, and we were both wrong – that the fact of being elected by universal suffrage, and, for him, of being a historic figure, made a party unnecessary for the president. The 1965 election opened his eyes. It was the end of a myth according to which the president and the people maintained a continuous dialogue, beyond parties, which had been considered as intermediate interests capable of perverting the constitution.¹⁶

¹⁴ Pierre Lefranc, *Avec de Gaulle: 25 ans avec le général de Gaulle*, Paris, Plon (collection Presses Pocket), 1989 (première édition *Avec qui vous savez*, Paris, Plon, 1979), p. 298.

¹⁵ *Sondages* (IFOP), 1965.

¹⁶ Alain Peyrefitte interview, 10 July 1991, quoted in Andrew Knapp, *Gaullisme since de Gaulle*, Aldershot, Dartmouth Publishing, 1994, p. 195. ('De Gaulle a cru — comme moi, et nous avons tous les deux tort — que le fait d'être élu au suffrage universel, et, pour lui, d'être un personnage historique, rendaient un parti accessoire pour le président. En 1965, il s'était rendu compte que c'était nécessaire. Cette élection lui a ouvert les yeux. C'était la mort d'un mythe, dans lequel nous avons vécu, selon lequel le président et le peuple entretenaient un dialogue continu, au-delà des partis, considérés comme des intérêts intermédiaires qui risquaient de détourner la Constitution le moment venu.')

The election of 1965, then, was a historic turning-point, and opened a new phase in the institutional practice of the Fifth Republic. This would be shaped, not only by the lessons of the presidential election, but also by the parliamentary elections due for March 1967. De Gaulle, it is true, could make light of the importance of the need for a presidential majority, as when, after the 1967 elections were won by a whisker, he remarked to Peyrefitte ‘So you’ve won your elections! Pity! We might have had the chance to govern with the Constitution!’¹⁷ In fact, not only the President but also the Prime Minister were increasingly interested in the development of the UNR; their interventionism reinforced the links of mutual dependence.

Such links were not, it is true, readily admitted by the President. As Robert Poujade, the party’s secretary-general from 1968 to 1971, later recalled,

The General had a sort of detached affection, and a limited esteem, for the [Gaullist] movement. While he did not – quite – place it in the category of useless committees, he thought of it as a tenuous emanation of himself, which owed its existence to him, and which ought to be clear on this point.¹⁸

Whatever his feigned detachment, and even disdain, de Gaulle had been particularly active in the party’s campaign and pre-campaign in 1967. According to Lefranc, he had insisted that voters should be able to choose a UNR candidate in every constituency (which meant fewer free runs to Giscardians); and he pressed the ‘technical’ ministers appointed from outside parliament to seek a constituency.¹⁹ Foccart, for his part, confirms that the General concerned himself in detail, and almost daily, with candidacies in the last quarter of 1966.²⁰

¹⁷ Alain Peyrefitte, *C’était de Gaulle*, III, Paris, Éditions de Fallois / Fayard, 2000, p. 230. (‘Alors, vous les avez gagnées, vos élections ! C’est dommage ! On aurait vu comment on peut gouverner avec la Constitution !’).

¹⁸ Robert Poujade, *Avec de Gaulle et Pompidou. Mémoires* (Paris: Éditions de l’Archipel, 2011), p. 82. (‘Le Général avait une sorte d’affection distanciée et une considération en fait limitée pour le mouvement. S’il ne le rangeait pas tout à fait dans la catégorie de comités Théodule, il le réduisait dans son esprit à une émanation ténue de lui-même, qui n’avait de vraie réalité que par lui et qui devait s’en persuader.’)

¹⁹ Lefranc, *Avec de Gaulle*, pp. 252, 320.

²⁰ Foccart, *Journal de l’Élysée*, I, pp. 481–536. For example, de Gaulle vetoed the candidacy of Michel de Camaret in the Breton city of Quimper, despite de Camaret’s excellent Free French record, because was a divorcee and in Quimper, ‘the priests’ word is law’ (p. 511).

Foccart also, of course, consulted him on choices for the party leadership.²¹ In speeches, moreover, he underlined the dangers of an eventual 'cohabitation' with the Left during the election campaign, on 4 March 1967 cohabitation,²² and he recognised, albeit obliquely, his personal link with the party during a press conference on 27 November.²³

But de Gaulle's party activity was paralleled by an increasingly tight day-to-day control on the party, and on the majority, by the Prime Minister, Georges Pompidou, in the aftermath of the presidential election. Pompidou chaired both the political council of the UNR and the bureau of its parliamentary group on 13 January 1966. The following May, he set up an Action Committee for the Fifth Republic aimed at smoothing out differences between the UNR (especially its left wing) and the *Républicains Indépendants*. In the autumn, he brought the UNR's leaders together at the residence of the president of the National Assembly, Jacques Chaban-Delmas, to discuss the party's role after de Gaulle's departure from the scene. He reminded them that no party would be able to live off the General's reputation in the near future, and proposed the replacement of the outgoing secretary-general, Jacques Baumel, by a college of five joint secretaries, whose work would be co-ordinated from within the government. It was Pompidou, finally, who organised the party conference in November 1967 at Lille, and gave it a strong theme of renewal and rejuvenation.²⁴

These initiatives responded to two main motivations on Pompidou's part: not only to ensure victory at the 1967 parliamentary elections, but also to make the UNR the future instrument of his own presidential candidacy. From the moment of de Gaulle's re-election, at the age of 75, for a second seven-year term, in December 1965, it was entirely foreseeable that the party would never again be called on to support the General directly and in person. Its survival, and that of its leaders, depended not only upon successful parliamentary elections

²¹ Foccart, *Journal de l'Élysée*, I, p. 778.

²² Charles de Gaulle, *Discours et messages*, IV, Paris, Plon, 1970, pp. 147–9.

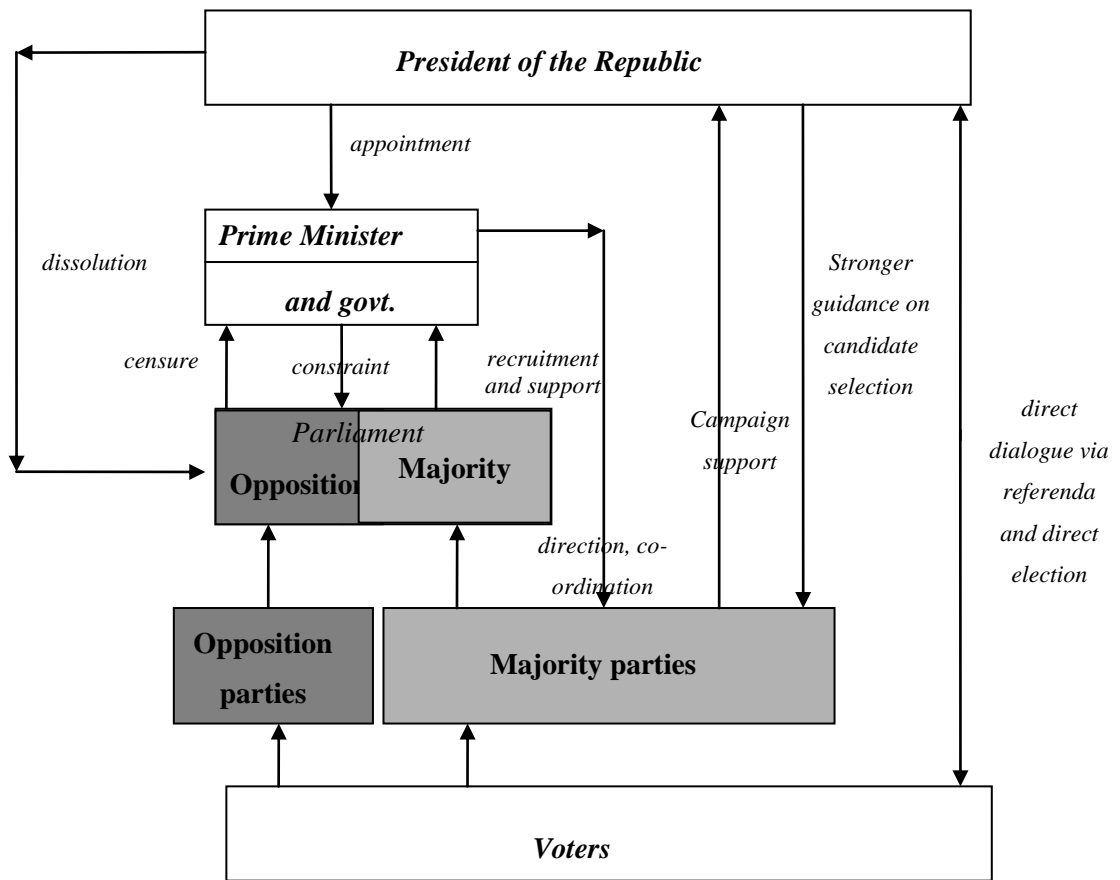
²³ Charles de Gaulle, *Discours et messages*, IV, Paris, Plon, 1970, p. 247.

²⁴ On the Lille conference, see especially Jean Charlot, 'L'après-gaullisme', *Revue Française de Science Politique*, 18.1, February 1968, pp. 68–76, and Jean Charlot, *The Gaullist Phenomenon*, London, George Allen and Unwin, 1971, pp. 93–4.

but on a future presidential election for which Pompidou could reasonably consider himself the best-placed candidate.²⁵

These parallel developments are represented in Figure 4: a stronger role for the president in candidate selection, but also the beginnings of a party role in the election of the president; and a

Figure 4: The Fifth Republic 1965-69



greater degree of interventionism by the prime minister in party affairs. These developments, it should be added, took place in a context of growing competition between President and Prime Minister. To a certain degree, it is hardly surprising that the president

²⁵ Lefranc, in *Avec de Gaulle* (p. 297) claims that this process was initiated in the autumn of 1965, when Pompidou was preparing to run himself if de Gaulle did not.

and the prime minister should each concern themselves with the main party of the majority, the president for strategic issues (including candidate selection) and the prime minister for day-to-day ones. But from 1965, and above all from 1967, relations between de Gaulle and Pompidou deteriorated. In public policy terms, this crystallised around the issue of ‘participation’, de Gaulle’s ambition to defuse class conflict in France by promoting greater industrial democracy and workers’ profit-sharing. De Gaulle found Pompidou distinctly lukewarm towards any such reform; the Prime Minister was indeed sceptical towards what he saw as setting up a *régime d’assemblée* on France’s shopfloors.²⁶ But the differences between the two men extended to the issue of who should control the Gaullist party. From the moment when the party had become a precious source of support, as it did from 1965, it inevitably became an asset and subject to disputed claims. Thus de Gaulle could observe to Foccart in February 1966 that ‘Pompidou is wrong to pose as head of the majority. The majority is formed up around me.’²⁷ Equally, it appears likely that Pompidou’s efforts to set up a new system to finance the UNR that would be more professionalised, more predictable, and less dependent on the secret services, was not wholly to de Gaulle’s liking.²⁸

Pulled between de Gaulle and Pompidou, the UNR of the late 1960s, relaunched as the Union des Démocrates pour la V^e République (UDV^e) in 1967, and the Union pour la Défense de la République (UDR) in 1968), suffered, in Poujade’s words, from a certain ‘incapacity to exist’ independently of the executive.²⁹ And when it came to mobilising the conservative riposte on the streets to the ‘events’ of May 1968, the Comités de Défense de la République, organised by Lefranc and Foccart, were, at the very least, a necessary complement to the Gaullist party proper.³⁰ It was nevertheless the party that benefited the most, both in a landslide victory at the parliamentary elections of June 1968 (when the UDR won the first single-party majority in French republican history) and in a wave of

²⁶ Georges Pompidou, *Pour rétablir une vérité*, Paris, Flammarion, 1982, p. 204.

²⁷ Foccart, *Journal de l’Élysée*, I, p. 361. (‘Pompidou a tort de se poser en chef de la majorité. La majorité, c’est autour de moi qu’elle se fait.’)

²⁸ Private sources (Confédération Nationale du Patronat Français). Pompidou’s proximity to French business, established during his years at Rothschild’s Bank, was far greater than de Gaulle’s – and hardly disposed him favourably to ‘participation’.

²⁹ See Charlot, *The Gaullist Phenomenon*, p. 127.

³⁰ See Lefranc, *Avec de Gaulle*, p. 363; Poujade, *Avec de Gaulle et Pompidou*, p. 141.

new members. The figure of perhaps 160,000 was very high for a French right-wing party and perhaps twice the pre-1968 level; the UDR's best recruiting sergeants were not Pompidou or Poujade or de Gaulle, but the leftist leaders Daniel Cohn-Bendit or Alain Geismar, or the trade union leader Georges Séguy, or the Communist Party chief Waldeck Rochet.³¹

The party and the presidential succession, 1968-9

Between de Gaulle and 'his' party, however, the triumph of June 1968 produced something close to a separation. De Gaulle himself would say of the 1968 National Assembly that 'it's a PSF chamber [referring to the far right-wing Parti Social Français of pre-war days]; I'm going to make them apply PSU policies [referring to the Parti Socialiste Unifié, a left-wing ginger group active in the events of May].'³² De Gaulle, now an old man in a hurry, saw May 1968 as a clear warning that France needed more reforms; the new majority saw their electoral victory as an invitation to clamp down on leftists by all means. De Gaulle knew that the conservative victory owed at least as much to Pompidou as to him.³³ Above all, he knew that the direct dialogue with the people of France that was central to his conception of the presidential function had been interrupted – and had to be re-established if he was to remain in office. This prompted the referendum of 27 April 1969, in principle about reforms to the Senate and to the regions, but also about whether de Gaulle should remain president. Its organisation was entrusted to Pompidou's successor as prime minister, Maurice Couve de Murville, and to his staff, who did not display any excessive energy in discharging their duties. For many UDR voters and even activists, there was now an attractive alternative to de Gaulle in Georges Pompidou, who had emerged much reinforced from the events of May, and who had made clear his own presidential aspirations in a press interview in January 1969.³⁴ Lefranc's verdict on the party's campaign, though exaggerated, had a grain of truth: 'It was pretty obvious to everyone that the UDR and its leaders did not show any great ardour in their task. The result was de Gaulle's referendum

³¹ Figures from Charlot, *The Gaullist Phenomenon*, p. 131.

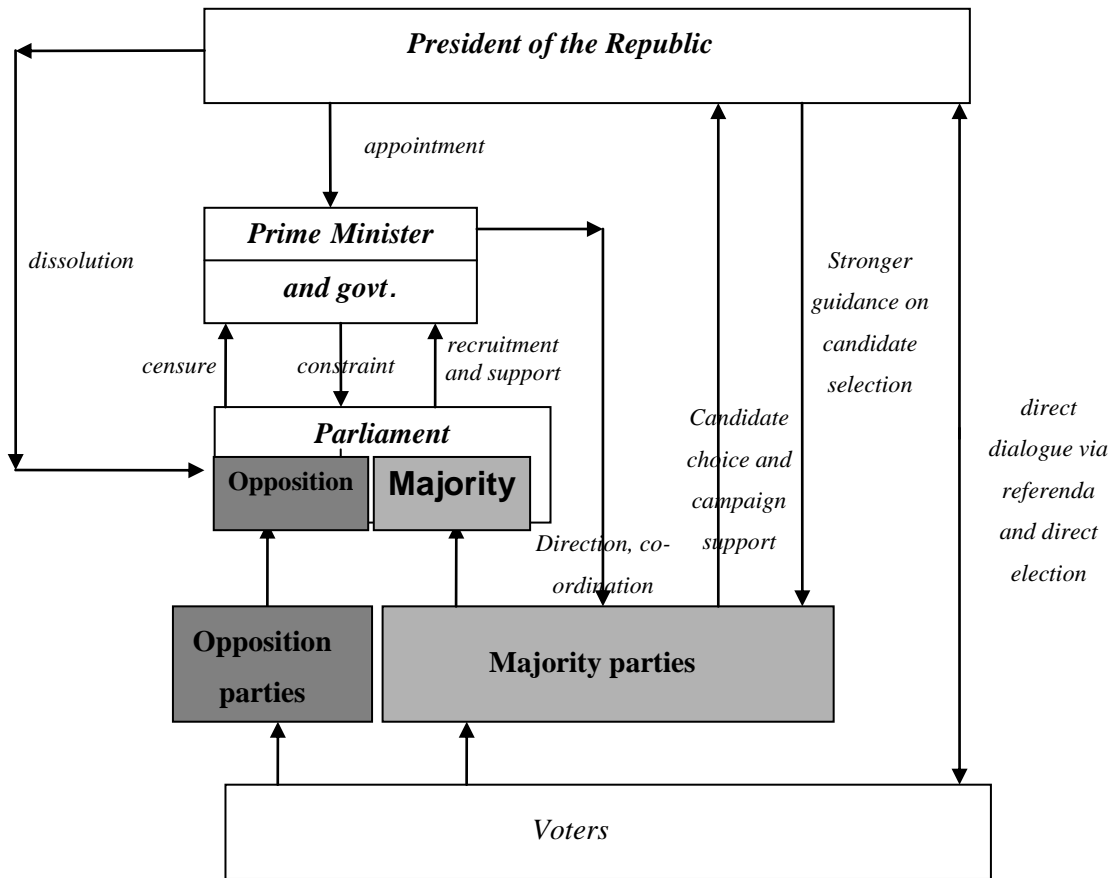
³² Jean Lacouture, *De Gaulle*, III, Paris, Le Seuil, 1990, p. 726. ('C'est une chambre PSF; je lui ferai faire une politique PSU.')

³³ Lacouture, *De Gaulle*, III, p. 726.

³⁴ Poujade, *Avec de Gaulle et Pompidou*, pp. 169-172.

defeat and immediate resignation, and the presidential election of 1969.³⁵

Figure 5: The Fifth Republic from 1969



That contest saw the party, in the shape of its historic ‘barons’, take on a role, albeit still a weakly institutionalised one, in the

³⁵ Lacouture, *De Gaulle*, III, Paris, Le Seuil, 1990, p. 726. (‘Il nous fut, comme à tout le monde, facile de constater que l’UDR et ses cadres ne faisaient pas preuve d’une grande ardeur. Et c’est la défaite et le scrutin présidentiel de 1969.’) Poujade, as UDR secretary-general, would write later that the party had campaigned actively – but that he himself had reservations about the complex, inaccessible character of the reform proposed at the referendum (Poujade, *Avec de Gaulle et Pompidou*, 171).

nomination of the presidential candidate. On 28 April, just twelve hours after the General's resignation, the barons met for lunch and agreed on Pompidou's candidacy. Pompidou made an official declaration of his candidacy the following day at 9.30, and was officially adopted as the party's candidate that afternoon by the UDR's executive bureau. He then went on to negotiate the support of a certain number of conservative centrists, notably by promising to reverse de Gaulle's veto on UK entry into the EEC, to help transform de Gaulle's referendum defeat into a Gaullist electoral victory. Each of these events confirmed the role that parties would play in relationships between voters and the president, represented in the final chart (Figure 5). And an enhanced role for parties left little space for charismatic leadership. Pompidou, though he was not primarily a party man (and indeed did not command the total loyalty of the party as president), was still a party choice; among the many personal attributes of this intelligent conservative, charisma was not one.

Conclusion

However logical and desirable a president above parties may have seemed in 1958, when the president was de Gaulle and where nothing short of a broad cross-party consensus had a chance of settling the Algerian issue, the Gaullist ideal proved a chimera. Even the General needed the backing of a party from an early stage; the Gaullists' preferred labels for their organisations, such as 'Union', 'Rally', or 'Movement', were skimpy fig-leaves that did little to conceal their partisan reality. All de Gaulle's successors in the presidency have needed a major party to reach the Élysée: the elimination of Raymond Barre by Jacques Chirac in 1988, that of Édouard Balladur by Chirac in 1995, or, finally, that of Ségolène Royal by Nicolas Sarkozy in 2007 were all due, in different ways, to the failure of the unsuccessful candidates to mobilise a major party behind them. Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, elected in 1974 with only the small *Républicains Indépendants* group behind him, appears as the exception who proved the rule: the Left was still (just) disqualified in 1974 by the strength of the Communists, and Giscard's Gaullist competitors were still divided and traumatised by the Pompidou's death in office. The end of the de Gaulle presidency also established a second pattern that would reappear later, that of the lame-duck president, too old or too ill, or both, to aspire to a further term: Pompidou in 1973, Mitterrand from 1988, Chirac from 2002. This phenomenon will become generalised, though driven by institutions not by human frailty, with the advent of the two-term limit on the presidency under the constitutional reform package voted in 2008.

The president above parties has nevertheless cast a long shadow. Although successful candidates owe their position more to party support than to personal charisma, presidents in power have always felt obliged to resign their party functions the better to appear as presidents of all the French. At the same time, however, they have always felt an imperative need to retain the support of a party to face future electoral contests, whether presidential, legislative, regional, or local. The result has been a system in which the presidential party is directed from the shadows by a president who is no longer, officially, a party leader: an ambiguity that is not the most positive legacy of de Gaulle's presidency.