

**The Fifth Republic at 50: Logics and Dynamics**

**APSA Short Course**

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**Studying the French Presidency Under the Fifth Republic:  
Overview of Past Approaches and Outline of Future Perspectives**

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**Aim**

This paper briefly outlines the study of the presidency under the Fifth Republic and the apparent presidentialisation of the political system. It does not examine the study of presidential elections; it does not examine presidents and public policy; and it does not pay particular attention to the study of individual presidents or their terms in office, except when such studies reflect on or speak to the political process more generally. A fuller version of this paper will be completed subsequently.

**The study of the presidency**

There are three main approaches to the study of the presidency, the first two of which have been dominant in French-language studies and a further approach, which has been dominant in both French-language and Anglo-Saxon literature. There is also other work that studies the presidency from different perspectives altogether, but this work remains underdeveloped.

1.) The constitutionalist approach

There are many studies of the president from the perspective of constitutional law. The defining elements of the constitutionalist approach are i.) the focus on

the president's formal powers with references to the use of such powers, and ii.) a description/narrative of political practice over time. In the description of political practice and in the identification of France as a presidentialised regime type, these works have played a major role in underpinning the presidentialisation thesis. In addition, as befits work from a legal perspective, these studies often have a normative element and sometimes aim to justify the use of presidential powers from a constitutional perspective.<sup>i</sup>

A contribution of the textbook constitutionalist literature concerns the identification of the regime type of the Fifth Republic and its comparison with equivalent types in other countries. The standard argument by constitutionalists is that France has a 'presidentialist' regime (Gicquel and Gicquel, 2005), or 'birepresentative parliamentary' regime (Cohendet, 2006, p. 338) as opposed to a standard US-style presidential regime or a UK-style parliamentary regime.

Work from a constitutionalist perspective is often found in textbooks, the status of some of which is now verging on the venerable with books being regularly updated by authors and, sometimes necessarily, by co-authors and/or groups of authors e.g., Chantebout (2006 - 23<sup>rd</sup> ed.), Pactet and Mélin-Soucramanien (2006 - 25<sup>th</sup> ed.), Ardant (2006 - 18<sup>th</sup> ed.), Gicquel and Gicquel (2005 - 20<sup>th</sup> ed.), Hamon and Troper (2005- 29<sup>th</sup> ed.), Favoreu et al (2005 - 9<sup>th</sup> ed.). More recent textbook work includes Cohendet (2006 - 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.) and a clear example of a recent journal article in the constitutionalist tradition can be found with Constantinesco and Pierré-Caps (2006). In addition, many of the contributions in journals such *Revue française du droit constitutionnel* and *Revue du droit public et de la science politique en France et à l'étranger* also approach the presidency from this perspective. There are also plenty of examples of this approach published by LGDJ.

A specific example of the constitutionalist tradition can be found in the work by Jean-Louis Quermonne. He is the author of a long-standing textbook on France most recently in conjunction with Dominique Chagnollaud (Quermonne and Chagnollaud, 1991 - 4<sup>th</sup> ed.). In his work Quermonne focuses on the constitutional powers of the president and discusses the nature of the political regime. However, in contrast to the work in this tradition, Quermonne follows Burdeau (1984 - 20<sup>th</sup> ed.) and provides an explicit explanation of presidential power. He argues that presidential power is a manifestation of *le pouvoir d'État*. The attempt to provide a political rather than a strictly constitutional explanation of presidential predominance means that Quermonne's approach is consistent with the logic of the institutionalist approach below. However, Quermonne's method is very different and his essentially static understanding of presidential power is also at variance with the logic of the institutionalist approach.<sup>ii</sup>

In France, the study of what the Anglo-Saxon academic tradition would consider to be politics long involved specialization in either philosophy, political sociology (e.g., elites, elections and voting etc), or constitutional law. Arguably, the first two areas either influenced the study of politics outside France and/or were themselves influenced by studies outside France. By contrast, debates in the constitutionalist approach remained resolutely Franco-French and neither borrowed from the work of political scientists outside France nor were influenced by them in any way.<sup>iii</sup> That said, within France the long-term dominance of the constitutionalist approach can hardly be underestimated both in terms of the teaching of the presidency at University and the study of the presidency in academia. Overall, it is hardly controversial to say that the study of the presidency in France from a political science perspective is underdeveloped because of the long-term dominance of the constitutionalist approach.

2.) The institutionalist approach

The institutionalist literature has its origins in the constitutionalist approach. For example, institutionalist writers such as Duverger were long associated with work on the French constitutional tradition (e.g., Duverger, 2004 - 14<sup>th</sup> ed.). However, what sets the institutionalist approach apart is the attempt over the last 30 years to provide a systematic explanation of the operation of the Fifth Republic including the presidency. In this approach, presidential power is understood either as the dependent variable with the electoral system and political parties as the standard explanatory variables (Duhamel, 1995), or, more usually, as one explanatory variable among others that have an impact on the wider political system, although this positivist language is only sometimes used explicitly.

Textbook examples of the institutionalist approach are Duverger (1996 - 21<sup>st</sup> ed.) and Duhamel (2003). So, Duverger focuses on the interaction of political institutions and the party system. This interaction causes variations in the power of the president and, thus, clearly explains why presidents are sometimes dominant, why cohabitation nonetheless occurs, why sometimes the president has a majority but still faces difficulties exercising leadership and so on. (See, for example, Duverger, 1978, p. 122; 1980, p. 186; 1982, p. 230). In other work, Duhamel (1985, pp. 17-18) has identified ten institutional factors that combined to cause the presidentialisation of the system. Using a similar institutionalist method, he has combined variables to identify 10 different types of presidential power under the Fifth Republic (Duhamel, 1995).

For his part, Parodi has taken the institutionalist approach further than anyone else, combining/interacting the effects of multiple institutions with the aim of both explaining why particular political outcomes have occurred and predicting what scenarios are possible given other combinations of variables in the future. (See, for example, Parodi, 1985; 1997; 2001). Indeed, the predictive element of the

institutionalist approach is a feature that sets it apart from the constitutionalist approach. Parodi has labeled this approach the 'strategic analysis of institutions'. That said, it should be noted that this method never involves the testing of hypotheses using quantitative methods, such as regression analysis. Instead, the predictions are tested using indicative examples.

Institutionalists often include the president and/or presidential powers as a variable in their work, but by the very nature of this work they almost always interact this variable with other institutional variables. So, it is slightly misleading to consider institutionalists as being students of the French presidency. Instead, institutionalists are defined by a general approach that often includes the study of the presidency.

The institutionalist approach has considerable affinity with the neo-institutionalist revival that has dominated Anglo-Saxon political science since the mid-1980s (Elgie, 1996) and particularly with rational choice institutionalism of the 'soft' variety. That said, with the exception of Duverger's identification of semi-presidentialism as a regime type separate from presidentialism and parliamentarism, the French institutionalist literature and its study of the presidency has had absolutely no impact on presidential studies outside France.<sup>iv</sup> Moreover, the French literature on institutionalism has not incorporated comparative work on presidencies or, indeed, work on institutions generally that has been conducted outside France. So, like the constitutionalist approach, to date the institutionalist approach to the study of the French president has remained largely a Franco-French affair.

### 3.) The empiricist approach

The empiricist approach is defined by a desire to explain political outcomes and to do so using evidence based on thick (or fairly thick) description. In this sense,

it is closer to the institutionalist approach than the constitutionalist approach. For the most part, though, it does not use any sort of positivist (or even quasi-positivist) terminology or methodology.

The empiricist tradition is theory-light and empirically incrementalist. Work in the this tradition provides an analysis of the political system as a whole, including the president's important position within it, as well as explanations of particular events relating to the presidency, but hypotheses are never explicitly tested. This is the sense in which the empiricist tradition is theory-light. Moreover, this work reacts to events, by providing explanations of what has happened, rather than trying to predict future events. This is the sense in which the empiricist tradition is empirically incrementalist. For example, by the mid-1970s the theme of presidentialisation had become common to work in this tradition and the explanations for it include the by now standard reasons such as the direct election of the president, the electoral system, party system, and personal factors, particularly the impact of de Gaulle's presidency. With Mitterrand's election the focus shifted to the changing party system and the impact of Europeanisation. The onset of cohabitation sparked further work and so on. Overall, work in the empiricist tradition has provided often profound insights into the operation of the French political system and how it has developed over time, but it has had little to offer a wider political science audience.

There is an empiricist tradition among academics in France. We find it particularly in a revue like *Pouvoirs*, which has had special issues on cohabitation (1999 - no. 91), and the president (1987 - no. 41), as well as issues with articles on the presidency (e.g., Ponthoreau, 2001 - no. 99; Colliard, 1994 - no. 68). We also find examples of this work in political histories of the Fifth Republic (e.g., Chevallier, Carcassonne, and Duhamel, 2004). The best collection in the

empiricist tradition is Wahl and Quermonne eds. (1995). We might also include work that has a stronger constitutionalist focus than other examples in this tradition, but which also includes a greater sensitivity to political explanation than work in the standard constitutionalist tradition. Examples might include Massot (1986; 1987; 1993) and Morabito (1995). Overall, in France the empiricist approach is often a home for people associated with both the constitutionalist and institutionalist approaches when they write outside their standard domain.

In addition to work in France, there is a very strong Anglo-American empiricist tradition of studying the French presidency. Those associated with this tradition include Hoffman (1967), Williams and Harrison (1971), Wright (1974), Andrews and Hoffman eds. (1980), Suleiman (1980), Hayward (1983 - 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), Wright (1989 - 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.), Keeler (1993), and Hayward ed. (1993). There are also plenty of articles in this tradition in general journals, such as *Parliamentary Affairs*, *Political Studies*, and *West European Politics*, as well as more specialized journals, such as *French Politics and Society*, and *Modern and Contemporary France*.

The Anglo-American work has had some impact on the academic work conducted in France. For example, Vincent Wright's work was well known and influenced scholars such as Yves Mény. Also, people such as Hoffman (1994) and Hayward (1997) have published in *Pouvoirs*, though not directly on the president. In addition, work in France has strongly affected the thinking of people in the Anglo-American empiricist tradition. Their explanation of events is shaped by their time in France and by their contacts there. Paradoxically, though, there is a sense in which work in the empiricist tradition is almost as insular as the work associated with the constitutionalist and institutionalist approaches. Arguably, its exclusive focus on events in France meant that it neither shaped political science outside those working on France nor did it try to test general theories on the French case with the aim of adding value to them.

#### 4.) Other work on the presidency

In addition to the work already discussed, there is plenty of other literature on the presidency. However, for the most part it does not represent a coherent approach the study of the institution.

By far the greatest amount of literature on the presidency is journalistic, meaning narratives of contemporary events written by journalists. This work is often one of the sources of the empirical examples cited by writers associated with all three of the above approaches. However, the journalistic work on the presidency is, strictly speaking, not academic, though it often addresses the core themes associated with the academic work, such as presidentialisation, cohabitation, and so on. In addition, memoirs and first-hand accounts by political actors are important sources of information on the presidency. In this category, we might also include colloquia organized and published by institutions such as the Fondation Charles de Gaulle and the Institut François Mitterrand. These colloquia often include first-hand accounts of particular time periods or issues relating to the president. Again, this work is not academic, but it can be used as a source by academics.

The only other approach that is both academic and that has a certain critical mass is the literature on the presidency that uses a post-modern and/or discourse approach. This work has a fairly strong tradition in France (e.g., Lacroix and Lagroye eds., 1992; also the review *Mots*). It also has a following in the Anglo-American tradition (e.g. Drake and Gaffney eds., 1996).

#### **Perspectives for the future study of the presidency**

There is a sense in which the study of the French presidency is alive and well. The need for constitutional law textbooks is strong and these books invariably include long sections on the political regime of the Fifth Republic in which the presidency is an important part. Moreover, each new edition includes up-to-date examples to illustrate its points. In addition, the empiricist tradition is also strong. Recent Anglo-American contributions include those by Bell (2000), Hayward and Wright (2002), and Clift (2005) and no doubt the Sarkozy presidency will generate a new set of studies from the empiricist perspective. For its part, the impact of the institutionalist approach has diminished somewhat with the retirement of Duverger, but, as noted above, there are still contributions from Parodi.

There is another sense, though, in which the study of the French presidency is, currently, almost utterly moribund. For example, the Association française de science politique has neither a working group on the presidency nor a group that focuses on a set of institutions explicitly including the presidency. The last article on the presidency to appear in the *Revue française de science politique* was Parodi's (2002) article on the legislative elections that year and cohabitation. The review *French Politics* has yet to publish an article on the presidency in five volumes. More generally, the study of the presidency has stagnated. The main debates in all of the three main approaches identified above are now very familiar. There is little sense in which we are on the verge of a paradigm shift in the study of the presidency.

Assuming there is a malaise in the study of the presidency, then it is for at least two reasons. Firstly, as suggested above, much of the debate on the French presidency has been very insular. There has been little attempt to incorporate insights from comparative politics. Secondly, and partly in defense of French insularity, the study of executives generally has been fairly moribund. In the US,

presidential scholars are sometimes thought of being second-class citizens when compared, for example, with students of Congress. In the UK, Dunleavy and Rhodes (1990, p. 4) argued that prime ministerial studies had long been dominated by a meagre and largely anecdotal debate about whether there was prime ministerial or cabinet government.

In this context, what are the perspectives for the future study of the presidency? Firstly, there is some potential for the constitutionalist and institutionalist perspectives to be combined. In this regard, the work of Cohendet is interesting. She writes in the constitutionalist tradition, but she is clearly very influenced by the institutionalist approach. So, for example, she insists (Cohendet, 2006, p. 402) on the standard institutionalist distinction between the regime and the system. The regime is the collection of rules and norms in the constitution. The system is the actual manifestation of political life. On this basis, Cohendet adopts an approach that would be very familiar to institutionalists arguing that the political system involves the interaction of the regime and the wider system of political variables. She even sets out an equation:

$$SP = RP \ R \ SVD$$

where SP = political system; RP = political regime; R = Reacts with; and SVD – System of Determining Variables (e.g., presidential legitimacy, political crisis etc). The value of this approach lies less in the equation *per se* and in the starkly underspecified and undertheorised notion of the System of Determining Variables,<sup>v</sup> but more in the very attempt to break out of the usual confines of the constitutionalist approach and in the argument that a political regime can operate in various ways as a function of systemic variables. This logic takes forward the constitutionalist approach and offers room for the systematic study of the interaction of constitutional rules and, for example, party system variables within this approach.

Secondly, the institutionalist approach offers potential for development. The underlying links between this approach and rational choice institutionalism have been noted. This means that there is great potential for insights from the latter to be incorporated into the institutionalist approach. By the same token, the specification of this approach by people such as Parodi is very elaborate and has the potential to shape the thinking about the impact of institutions and executive politics more generally. However, in order to have a more general resonance the institutionalist approach needs more rigorous specification, perhaps using formal models, and more empirical testing, particularly using quantitative methods.

Thirdly, there are some approaches to the study of executive politics used elsewhere that might usefully be applied to the French presidency. For example, the UK-based core executive research agenda provides a ready-made template that could be applied to France. (See an overview by Rhodes, 2000). This work uses historical, interpretive and positivist methods and would ask questions of the presidency in a way that might generate new insights. Also, the sub-discipline of political psychology has developed a rigorous research method that has been applied to the study of political leaders including presidents. Again, this approach may have much to offer the French case. (For example, see the articles in the journal *Political Psychology*).

Fourthly, there is a broader political science literature that is not necessarily focused on presidents or executives, but which can do so and which might be applied very productively to the French case. In this regard, the work on veto players by George Tsebelis (2002) is an obvious example,<sup>vi</sup> as is the work on agenda-setting by Baumgartner and Jones (1993).

## **Conclusion**

The French presidency has been the subject of considerable academic attention. There are three main approaches to the study of the presidency. These approaches have tended to generate long-standing but now somewhat moribund debates that speak almost exclusively to scholars of French politics rather than scholars of presidencies and executives more broadly. There is the potential for these approaches to be combined in ways that would allow new insights to be gained. There is also plenty of ways in which the work of comparativists could enrich the study of the French presidency. There are also ways in which such studies may also enrich the work of comparativists. Both of these developments would be welcome.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Arguably, the approach is sometimes party political with, for example, gaullist constitutionalists seeming to justify the General's actions from a legal perspective.

<sup>ii</sup> Elsewhere I have reviewed the difference between Duverger's approach and Quermonne's approach in some detail (Elgie, 1996).

<sup>iii</sup> They were influenced by constitutionalist work outside France, notably the work of jurists like Hans Kelsen. Thus, there is often a positivism in the work of constitutionalists, but it is a legal positivism, rather than positivism as it is understood in political science.

<sup>iv</sup> The irony, of course, is that French constitutionalists have almost unanimously rejected semi-presidentialism as a separate categorization of regime types. So, the main institutionalist contribution to the comparative study of presidencies has had little or no impact in France at all.

<sup>v</sup> Cohendet's (1993) more substantive work fails to clarify the variables with any significantly greater degree of rigour (*ibid.*, p. 72).

<sup>vi</sup> Tsebelis, of course, has often used examples from the French case in his work on veto players.

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Defense and Armed Forces : the End of the Nuclear Monarchy ? Bastien Irondelle CERI-Sciences Po Paris. 56 rue Jacob 75006 Paris.  
France irondelle@ceri-sciences-po.org. 1. The Vth Republic originated in the troubles of the Algerian War (1958 crisis) and the Defense  
policy of the Vth Republic is inaugurated by a divorce between political power and the Army (1961 putsch). With the leadership of General  
de Gaulle, Vth Republic gives birth to a Nuclear Monarchy, where the Preside The French Second Republic was extremely short lived. It  
lasted only three years, from the Revolutionary wave that swept Europe and deposed King Louis-Philippe in 1848 to the coup by the  
President, a man named Louis-Napoleon in 1851. Louis-Napoleon proclaimed himself Emperor Napoleon III and founded the Second  
French Empire, which would remain in place for 20 years.Â The Constitution of the fifth Republic is still in place today and is about to  
celebrate its 60th anniversary. I truly believe that the fifth republic has strong enough institutions to last for many more years to come.  
17. Prepared for delivery at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, Illinois, August 31-September 3,  
2007. Copyright by the American Political Science Association. ABSTRACT.Â But it also might end up there with that of the imaginative  
scientist/novelist who assured us nearly 50 years ago that if "the nuclear arms race between the United States and the U.S.S.R. not only  
continues but accelerates...within, at the most, ten years, some of those bombs are going off" (Snow 1961, 259); or with that. of the  
imaginative University of Chicago political scientist who in 1979 proclaimed