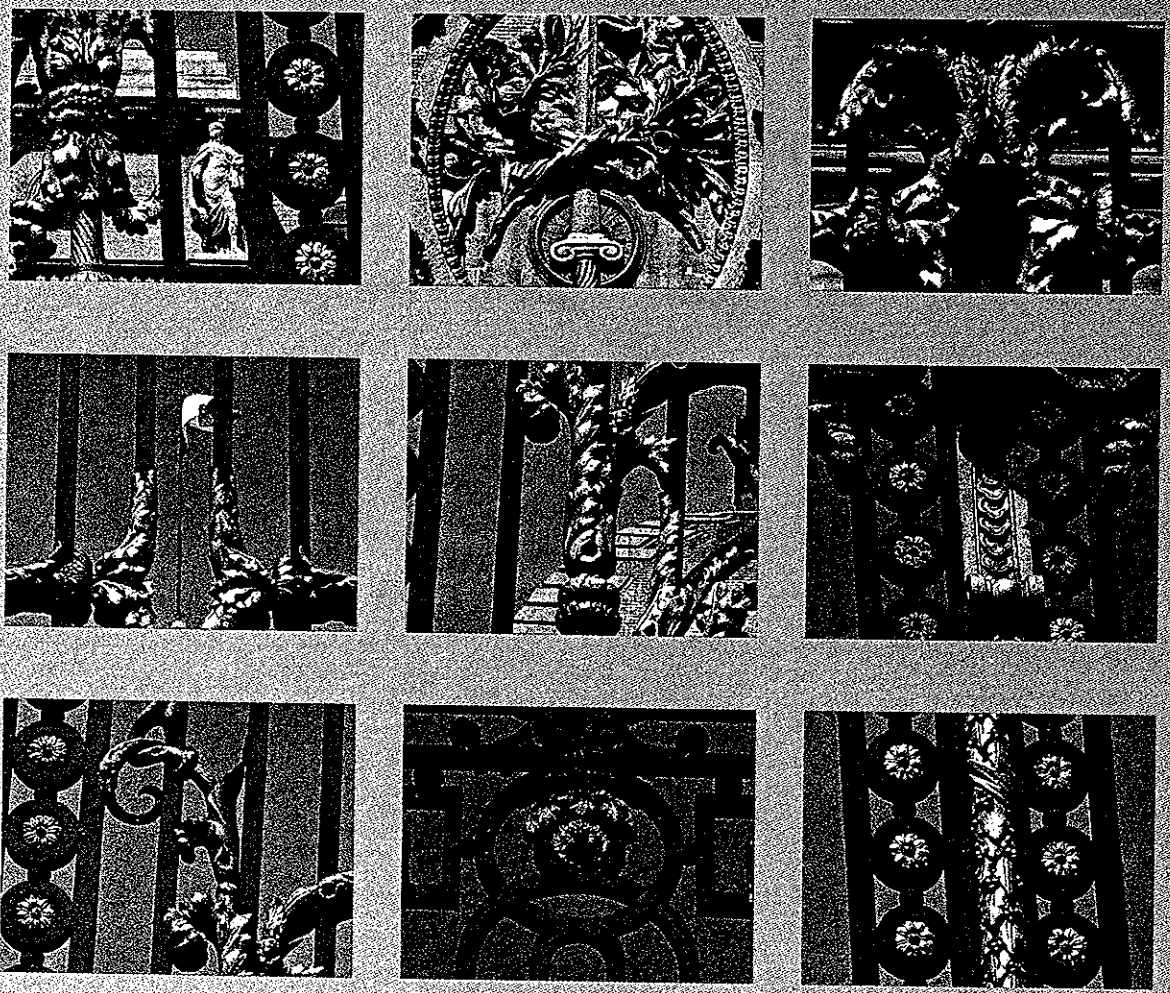
Chapter 9

French Political Culture



Two Parisian families I knew during the Bicentennial of the French Revolution in 1989 illustrate the deeply divided nature of French society. One couple, although not university educated, were bright and hard working and had turned their small suburban house into a tidy and pleasant home. They read the conservative daily *Le Figaro* and a Catholic weekly and did not like the Socialist government. When they entered a church, they crossed themselves. They showed little interest in celebrating the Bicentennial July 14 and cautioned me about the crowds in Paris. They suggested a picnic in the countryside instead.

The other family was typical Parisian intellectuals, both university educated, inhabiting a charming, book-strewn older apartment not far from one of Paris's great boulevards. They read the leftish *Le Monde* and were irreligious. They liked the current Socialist government. They urged me to join the street festivities the night before July 14 and then catch the spectacular parade. They thought the French Revolution was really worth celebrating.

Questions to Consider:

1. What is the split nature of French political culture?
2. What is statism? Is it still found in Europe?
3. What was the slogan of the French Revolution?
4. What is anticlericalism? Where else is it found?
5. What is the typical education path into the French elite?
6. What is the ENA and why is it important?
7. How do presidential press conferences show differences of political culture?
8. What happened to Marxism in France?

There, in miniature, was conservative France and radical France, the former Catholic and indifferent or even a little hostile to the French Revolution, the latter secular and enthusiastically in favor of it. The split created by the French Revolution continues to this day, although in subdued form. Conservative France no longer battles radical France; rather, the two preserve a chilly distance.

Both families deeply love France, but they love different facets of France. France has a mystique, a drawing power that can equally attract conservatives such as de Gaulle and Socialists such as Mitterrand. The conservatives are drawn to French civilization, its Catholic roots, and its *grandeur* (greatness). Liberals and leftists, on the other hand, are drawn to the ideals of the French Revolution—liberty, equality, fraternity—and see France as guarding these ideals. Some French envision their land as a person, a princess, or even a Madonna. They have a reverence for their country that few Americans or Britons can match. The dramatic and stirring **"La Marseillaise"** (see box on page 120) shows the depth of French patriotism.

French patriotism in the abstract, however, does not carry over into the real, grubby, daily life of French politics. The French are more cynical about politics than Britons or Americans. The French may be the world's greatest complainers: Nothing works right; reforms do not work; all governments are crooked. France in the abstract is glorious; France in the here and now is shabby. De Gaulle said France needs national greatness, for only with such a vision can the French rise above the sordid reality and pursue the mythical ideal.

Sarkozy was elected in 2007 in part because of his ability to project an idealistic vision of reinvigorated France with a neo-liberal twist. The French initially liked the notion, but once Sarkozy was in power they grew quickly disillusioned with the reality.

Historical Roots of French Attitudes

Where did this French political schizophrenia come from? Part of the problem is historical, traceable to the centralization of French kings, who implanted an **omnipotent** state, a state that tried to supervise everything. In theory, a centralized system should plan and build rationally; in practice, it often fails. The French, educated to expect a powerful government to help them (the ideal), are always disappointed when it does not (the real). This is reinforced by the promise of every new French government to cut France's high unemployment rate. They fail, leaving French citizens bitter. The solution: Either stop promising or dismantle the impediments to a free economy that would hire more people. Few French politicians are willing to do either.

"La Marseillaise" French national anthem. (See page 119.)

omnipotent All-powerful.

statism Idea that a strong government should run things, especially major industries.

bureaucratized Heavily controlled by civil servants.

French **statism** also stunted the development of a voluntary, do-it-ourselves attitude, something taken for granted in the United States. France simply has no tradition of voluntary groups of neighbors undertaking local governance. When local groups take responsibility and something goes wrong, you can only blame yourselves. In France, with all responsibility, until recently, in the hands of the central government, people blame Paris.

Centuries of **bureaucratized** administration also left the French used to living by uniform, impersonal rules—and lots of them. This creates hatred, the hatred of the little citizen on one side of

Political Culture

"La Marseillaise"

Possibly the world's greatest national anthem is the French "La Marseillaise." Dashed off in a single night in 1792 by a 32-year-old army officer, Rouget de Lisle, to accompany volunteers from Marseille marching north to defend the Revolution, "La Marseillaise" soon became the Revolution's, and then France's, anthem.

Extremely stirring and bloodthirsty, it is the perfect anthem for fighting for a nation. The refrain goes as follows:

Aux armes, citoyens, formez vos bataillons!
Marchons! Marchons!
Qu'un sang impur abreuve nos sillons!

(To arms, citizens, form your battalions!
We march! We march!
Until [the enemy's] impure blood overflows our furrows!)

If you have never heard it sung, catch the movie *Casablanca* on late-night television. Like the French flag, "La Marseillaise" became a controversial political symbol. Part of the Revolution, it was banned by Napoleon and the Bourbons, accepted by the liberal Orleans monarch in 1830, banned again by Napoleon III, and made permanently the national anthem in 1879. In a split society, nothing is simple.

the counter facing the cold, indifferent bureaucrat on the other. Centralization and bureaucratization are the products of the "order and reason" approach to governance that has been practiced in France for centuries. Order and reason, unfortunately, are mere ideals. Since they are always deficient in practice, the French become unhappy with a reality that always falls short of ideals.

culmination Logical outcome or end.

A Climate of Mistrust

In personal relations, the French are sometimes distant and mistrustful to people outside their family. Indeed, attitudes of mistrust are widespread throughout Latin Europe—they are extremely pronounced in Italy—while trustful attitudes are more common in North Europe. American scholar Laurence Wylie found villagers in the Vaucluse, in the south of France, constantly suspicious of *les autres*, "the others," those outsiders who talk behind your back, blacken your name, and meddle in your affairs. The best way to live, people there agreed, was not to get involved with other people and to maintain only correct but distant relations with neighbors. With modernization, such extreme mistrust has receded.

French philosopher and playwright Jean-Paul Sartre voiced a very French feeling about interpersonal relationships when he wrote, "*L'enfer, c'est les autres*" (Hell is other people). He meant, in his play *No Exit*, that having to get along with other people was his idea of hell.

Political Culture

How to Celebrate a 200-Year-Old Revolution

The French Revolution was still a divisive political issue in 1989. Even choosing the official historian for the Bicentennial was a political problem. Conservative historians called the Revolution a giant mistake, the root of France's subsequent troubles. Such views anger the left and were hardly a way to celebrate the Bicentennial. Radical or leftist historians, on the other hand, read into the Revolution the harbinger of all things good and of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. This was hardly acceptable to conservative France.

In François Furet the Mitterrand government found their historian: a former Marxist who had turned away from radicalism to produce a moderate and sober synthesis with something for everyone. Furet found nothing wrong with the revolutionary ideals of *liberté, egalité, fraternité,* but he argued that with the collapse of the monarchy and takeover of the revolution by extremists, the revolution had to "skid out of control" (*dérapage*). It was not just evil or foolish people that caused the revolution to skid out of control, Furet argued, but the logic of revolutions themselves. Furet's thinking parallels that of Crane Brinton, discussed in Chapter 7.

A change in the political context enabled Furet and other French intellectuals to accept this troubling analysis of the French Revolution. For decades, many French intellectuals naively celebrated the 1917 Russian Revolution as a continuation of the French Revolution. With the erosion of French leftism and decay of Soviet communism, French intellectuals saw that the Bolshevik Revolution had been a mistake. But if 1917 was the **culmination** of 1789, then logically the French Revolution itself must have been badly flawed. The new attitude about communism forced the French to reevaluate their own revolution.

patrie French for fatherland.

Foreigners notice how shut off the French family is. Typical French houses are surrounded by high walls often topped by broken glass set in concrete. Shutters are not just for decoration; they bang shut as if to tell the world to mind its own business. Traditionally, French people rarely entertained at home—they would go to a restaurant instead; inviting outsiders to your table was an invasion of family privacy. This has changed, however; I have been invited into several French homes for superb meals.

Special mistrust is reserved for the government. In Wylie's village it was taken for granted that all government is bad, a necessary evil at best. The duties of a good citizen, which schoolchildren memorize in their civics course, are mere ideals, but in the real world, government is corrupt, intrusive, and ineffective. French children learn to love **la patrie** in the abstract but to disdain politics in the here and now. Politics are also best kept private and personal; discussing politics with others only leads to arguments. Besides, it is none of their business.

The Nasty Split

Catholic countries have a serious problem that Protestant (and Eastern Orthodox) countries do not have to worry about: the role of the church. When Britain and Sweden broke with Rome and established national churches, they also subordinated churchmen to the state. The Anglican church

COMPARISON

THE INSTABILITY OF SPLIT SOCIETIES

Unlike the stable and settled countries of North Europe, such as Britain and Sweden, the countries of Latin Europe continued to experience political upheavals well into the twentieth century. In France, Italy, and Spain, regimes have tended to be personal creations (for example, those of de Gaulle, Mussolini, and Franco) that end or change with the demise of their creator.

The underlying factor in this instability seems to be the split quality of French, Italian, and Spanish political culture that is rooted in their histories. Roughly half the population of each country is Catholic and conservative and favors strong executive leadership; the other half is anticlerical and liberal or radical and favors a strong parliament. The center is small; people in Latin Europe historically tended to identify with either the left or right camp, each severely mistrusting the other.

When the right was in power—historically, most of the time—the left denounced the government with shrill Marxist rhetoric as the tool of capitalists. When the left was in power, the right denounced them as dangerous incompetents, possibly serving Moscow's interests. At any given time, roughly half the country regarded the government as illegitimate, and this stunted feelings of legitimacy about government in general. In Latin Europe, few take pride in their nation's governmental institutions.

In the absence of shared values and underlying consensus, political difficulties can lead to violence, coups, and even civil war, which in turn lead to authoritarian rule. In the 1930s, Spain split into left and right camps and exploded into a vicious civil war won by the Catholic and conservative forces of General Franco. Disgruntled rightists in the Spanish military attempted a coup as recently as 1981. Portugal had a coup in 1974. In 1958 France nearly had a military coup. In opposition, François Mitterrand referred to the Gaullist constitution as a "permanent coup." (In office, he found that the presidential powers it gave him really were not so bad.)

in Britain and the Lutheran church in Sweden depended strictly on London and Stockholm, respectively, for support; they could not turn to Rome. As a result, in these societies the church no longer played an independent political role.

In Latin European countries—France, Italy, Spain—the Roman Catholic faith retained its political power, supporting conservative regimes and retaining special privileges, such as control of education, tax exemption for church lands, and a considerable say in government policy. Because of this temporal power, many people in Latin Europe developed anticlerical attitudes. Their most brilliant spokesman was Voltaire (see page 92). Anticlericalism was not necessarily atheism; it rather sought to get the church out of government, what Americans call the separation of church and state.

Anticlericalism spread in Latin Europe, especially among intellectuals. After the French Revolution and Italian unification (in mid-nineteenth century), many people wanted a purely secular state, that is, one with no church influence in government. That was easy to do in America, where there was no single established church, but it was hard in France, Italy, and Spain, where church and state were intertwined. To separate them required drastic surgery: sale of church lands, banning of some Catholic orders (such as the Jesuits), and state rather than church control of schools. The reaction to this was predictable. Just as the Republic was anticlerical, the church turned anti-Republic. Church sentiment went from conservative to reactionary, and the Roman Catholic faith became a pillar of monarchical restoration because that meant a return of church privileges.

In this way conservative France retained its Catholicism, while revolutionary France became strongly anticlerical. The battle raged for more than a century. At one point the Vatican instructed faithful Catholics to steer clear of any political involvement with the "Jacobin" Republic. During the Dreyfus affair, French clericalists and anticlericalists took opposing sides. Finally, in 1905, the National Assembly completed the separation of church and state; France no longer had an established church. Until the twentieth century, to be in favor of the Republic meant to be anticlerical. France's great premier of World War I, Georges Clemenceau—*le tigre*—was a passionate republican and supporter of Dreyfus. He recalled how his father used to tell him, "There's only one thing worse than a bad priest—and that's a good one."

The French left—chiefly the Socialists—still draw their supporters most heavily from the anticlerical tradition. The right—chiefly the Gaullists—attract mostly people from the pro-church tradition. Indeed, in all of Latin Europe—Italy, Spain, and Portugal as well as France—if you know how often a person goes to Mass you can usually predict his or her vote; strongly Catholic almost automatically means politically conservative.

Most French babies are baptized Catholic, but only 13 percent of French Catholics attend Mass weekly. (Europeans in general are much less religious than Americans.) Although the great battles between clericalists and anticlericalists have subsided, some issues reawaken the old quarrel. The abortion controversy and question of state control of Church schools can still bring protest demonstrations in the streets of Paris. Once established, social and political cleavages have tremendous staying power.

School for Grinds

Schooling also contributes to French political culture. The curriculum was set generations ago and is changed only slowly. Heavy on memorization, French education tends to produce diligent grinds rather than lively intellects. Even small children lug home briefcases bulging with books. A "good" child is one who puts in long homework hours.

privatistic Tending to purely private and family concerns.

lycée French academic high school.

baccalauréat French high-school exam and diploma.

Until recently, everywhere in the country French children learned the same thing, as established by the Ministry of Education in Paris, with no local input. Generations ago an education minister looked at his watch and told an interviewer what Latin verb was being conjugated all over France. (Starting in the late nineteenth century, Paris used uniform education to replace local dialects and subcultures with common Frenchness.) Since then, French school curricula have become less centralized and less classical.

The curious thing about the standardized, memorized French education, however, is its deeply humanistic and individualistic content. Outwardly, French schoolchildren appear to be mechanically digesting an inflexible, unimaginative curriculum; inwardly, they are exposed to ideas that would be banned in American schools (such as the ideas in the novel *The Immoralist*). This tension between outward conformity and inward freedom can give rise to **privatistic** attitudes, along with occasional eruptions of rebellion. It encourages young French people to keep their thoughts to themselves. In this way, a set, rigid educational pattern may actually contribute to French individualism.

The French pride themselves on the equality of educational opportunity that their system offers. France has few English-style boarding schools for the rich, but, as everywhere, opportunities are still skewed. While the French school system is open to all, the lofty content of French education is tilted toward the children of middle- and upper-class homes. Working-class and peasant children, not necessarily exposed to correct speech—and the French are maniacs about their language—or to abstract, intellectual thoughts, begin school at a disadvantage and have lesser chances at higher education. (Is educational stratification in the United States the same?)

The great gateway to social, economic, and political power in France is the **lycée**. Napoleon developed them to train army officers. Most lycées are state-run. Admission is competitive, and the curriculum is demanding. Not all communities have lycées, which are concentrated in cities. Students complete the lycée with an examination at age 18 and get a **baccalauréat**, which entitles

Political Culture

How Would You Do on the "Bac"?

In about twelve hours of nationwide essay exams spread over a week, France's seventeen- or eighteen-year old lycéens face questions like the following, taken from the philosophy section of a recent baccalauréat exam. How would you do? Choose one. Spend no more than two hours.

- Why defend the weak?
- Comment on Rousseau's declaration that "one must have societies where inequality is not too great, where the tyranny of opinion is moderated and where voluptuousness reigns more than vanity."
- What is it to judge?
- Is it reasonable to love?

French students now get their choice of bac exams. Some are scientific or technical; the most prestigious is math (because you cannot bluff). The French government is trying to move students from the humanities to technology.

them to university admission. Now, as the result of government policy to upgrade French educational levels, over 60 percent of French young people earn the "*bac*," but they still tend to be from middle-class families.

THE "GREAT SCHOOLS"

Just as Oxford and Cambridge tower over other English universities, the **grandes écoles** dominate French higher education. French universities, which stress the "impractical" liberal arts, are nearly free, unselective, and unimportant. Anyone with a bac can get into a French university—now 1.5 million students crowd France's eighty-two universities—but many drop out. Altogether, some 45 percent of French twenty- to twenty-four-year-olds are in full-time education, the highest percentage in Europe and comparable to the United States. Suggestions to let universities select students competitively and charge tuition are shouted down. Result: Not one French university makes the global top forty.

grande école French for "great school"; an elite, specialized college.

Ecole Nationale d'Administration (ENA), France's School for top bureaucrats.

In contrast, the "Great Schools" are highly selective. Skimming off the brightest and most motivated 4 percent by means of rigorous entrance exams, the schools train (rather than "educate") French youths in the practical matters of running a country and then place them in top civil-service and managerial positions. The Great Schools form the people who run France. No other country has anything quite like them. It would be as if West Point produced not army officers but leading administrators. Some denounce the *grandes écoles* as elitist and undemocratic, but few suggest abolishing them.

Although there are several Great Schools, three are politically the most important. The *Ecole Polytechnique* was used by Napoleon to train military engineers. Called X for short, *xiens* have their pick of technology and management jobs when they graduate. The *Ecole Normale Supérieure*, founded by Napoleon to create loyal lycée instructors, still produces many of France's leading intellectuals—among its graduates have been Jean-Paul Sartre, Raymond Aron, and President Georges Pompidou. The newest Great School, founded by de Gaulle in 1945, is the **Ecole Nationale d'Administration** (ENA), which quickly became the most important. Many of the country's top civil servants are "enarchs," as they call themselves.

Like all Great Schools, the ENA is extremely selective. Many of its students are already graduates of the *Institut d'Etudes Politiques* in Paris, itself a *grande école* (and still known as "Sciences-Po," a birthplace of modern political science). Getting into the ENA is even harder; typically, fewer than one in ten pass the legendary written and oral exams to join the entering class of 100 or so. ENA students get monthly stipends and spend half of their twenty-seven months interning in government ministries. Most ENA graduates get high positions in the civil service. About one-third of France's prefects and ambassadors are ENA graduates. Until recently, cabinets were dominated by enarchs. President Chirac (class of 1959) and Premier de Villepin ('80, along with his sister, Véronique) graduated ENA, as did 2007 Socialist presidential candidate Ségolène Royal ('80) and Socialist leader François Hollande (also '80). Royal, of course, lost to Sarkozy, a law graduate of an ordinary university.

A break with "enarchy," as French critics call it, came with Sarkozy's 2007 cabinet, which had only one enarch. French voters may be tired of their arrogance, and some think ENA has passed its peak of influence. Extensive privatization has shrunk the number of positions running state-owned industries, and many bright young people now prefer MBAs and private industry. France's most prestigious MBA is from the HEC (*Ecole des Hautes Etudes Commerciales*), another Great School.

hegemony Being top or commanding power.

Training in a Great School epitomizes the best and worst of French education. You have to be very smart and hard-working. But you also have to be cold, logical, and removed from ordinary people. Products of the *grandes écoles* may be brilliant, but they often lack common sense and humanity. Some critics call them, pejoratively, *technocrats* (see page 110), people who rule by technical criteria. In line with their training by the state, they also tend to propose the same old statist solutions. A perfect example is Alain Juppé, a brilliant ENA graduate (1972) and Chirac's first premier, whose cold, technocratic leadership made him the most unpopular premier of the Fifth Republic and the biggest single cause of his party's setback in the 1997 parliamentary elections.

THE FEAR OF "FACE TO FACE"

Whatever the educational institution—lycée, university, or Great School—the teaching style is similar: cold, distant, uninvolved. Class discussion is rare. Questions are from the instructor, not the students. When I taught long ago at the University of Toulouse, I was determined to break this

Political Culture

THE FRENCH-U.S. LOVE-HATE RELATIONSHIP

The French have contradictory attitudes toward America. At times, anti-Americanism seems to be part of French political culture. Many French, especially intellectual and political elites, dislike the United States, its compassionless capitalism, its lack of culture, and its global **hegemony**, all symbolized by McDonald's. Sarkozy did not share this view; he praised America.

French critics call the United States a *"hyperpuissance"* (hyperpower) that tries to remake the world in its own image. But France, they say, will go its own way, based on its own traditions and culture. Millions of ordinary French people, however, like America and flock to U.S.-made movies and eat "McDos." McDonald's has grown rapidly to close to a thousand restaurants in France, all French-owned and French-run.

What is eating the French elites? First, they look back to the time when French power, language, and culture (and cuisine) dominated Europe and much of the world. They resent being replaced by U.S. power and English language. De Gaulle, angered at not being treated as an equal by Roosevelt and Churchill during the war, led France on nationalistic and anti-U.S. paths. France, not the United States, was to lead Europe. Many French, especially in the Foreign Ministry, still follow this design.

French elites do all they can to hold back the tide of Americanization. They outlaw English words (*"franglais"*). They limit the number of U.S. movies and TV shows. They reject a totally free market and cling to state ownership and supervision.

The French try to retain their Frenchness, much as the Japanese try to retain their Japaneseness. Neither are completely successful. Little by little, French ways resemble American ways, *"le business à l'américaine"* (an example of franglais). The international economy requires it; much business is now global and conducted in English. French firms buy American firms and vice-versa. Some French Great Schools now offer English-language MBAs. Some French think they are fighting American cultural domination, but they are really fighting modernization.

pattern; I urged and demanded student participation. The result was stony silence; my request was outside their experience.

By the time they are teenagers, French adolescents have picked up one of the basic characteristics of French culture, what sociologist Michel Crozier called "*l'horreur du face-à-face*." Aside from family and intimate friends, French people feel uncomfortable with warm, cozy, face-to-face relationships. Some tourists find the French unfriendly. They really are not; they are simply reserved and formal to everyone, including other French people. The French style is opposite that of the American, which emphasizes informality and friendliness. In the United States everyone is supposed to be outgoing, use first names, smile, and say, "Have a nice day." Such behavior—much of it shallow—boggles the French mind.

To avoid face-to-face relationships, the French prefer a structured system with clear but limited areas of competence and set, impersonal rules. That way people know where they stand and nobody butts into another's private domain. British-style pragmatism and "muddling through" are not the French style.

COMPARISON

FRENCH AND AMERICAN PRESS CONFERENCES

A French presidential press conference offers a quick insight into French political style. A rare event—maybe once or twice a year—the press conference takes place in an imposing salon of the Elysée Palace, the French White House. The president is seated. On the wall behind him is either a brocade or tapestry. In keeping with the elegant setting, the president is attired in a conservative suit and plain tie.

The journalists sit quietly taking notes. The president expounds abstractly on progress, national greatness, reason, and order, like a professor giving a lecture. He speaks beautiful French, slowly and clearly, with utter confidence and literate, witty phrases, for he is the product of an elite education. Then, if there is time, the president takes a few questions from the reporters. The questions are polite, even timid, for no one dares to trip up or embarrass the president. The president in return treats the journalists like small children who do not understand the logic and clarity of his policies. The president is, in keeping with French political style, magisterial and rational.

The American presidential press conference takes place against a plain blue backdrop. The president stands at a lectern. He is wearing an indifferent suit and striped tie. The president is nervous and ill-at-ease, for he knows that the newspeople are out to get him, just as they have been out to get every president. As they see it, that is their job. He offers a few opening remarks in an almost defensive tone to explain his recent actions. Then, with a forced smile, he throws the conference open to questions from the floor. The journalists descend like a wolf pack, clawing at the air with their upraised hands, each one demanding attention.

The newsperson called upon—often by name, as the president wants to show he likes them personally—gives a little lecture setting the background for his or her question. The question itself—implying a scandal or how the president's policies are failing—is hostile, trying to catch the president in an uncomfortable situation. The president replies in stammering, ungrammatical English, for he is the product of an American college. The president, in keeping with the democratic American style, tries to treat the journalists as friends and equals, but his smile and handshakes as he leaves can scarcely conceal his adversarial relationship with the media.

FREEDOM OR AUTHORITY?

compartmentalization Mentally separating and isolating problems.

ideal-typical Distilling social characteristics into one example.

The points discussed so far—the lack of trust, fear of face-to-face relationships, rigid and rote education—all contribute to a French political personality that cannot quite make up its mind whether it wants freedom or authority. Actually, it wants both, the abstract *liberté* extolled by philosophers and the controlled hierarchies built for centuries by French bureaucrats. What happens is **compartmentalization**: The private French person loves freedom, while the public French person—in school, on the job, facing the bureaucracy—knows he or she needs reason, order, and formal, impersonal rules. A typical French person has been described as an anarchist who secretly admires the police but could equally be a policeman who secretly admires the anarchists.

The result of this mental split is a continual longing for freedom and a perfect society but an equal tendency to surrender to authority and a highly imperfect society. The balance is unstable; from time to time the quest for liberty bursts out, as in 1789, 1830, 1848, the Paris Commune of 1871, the Events of May of 1968, and the 2005 youth riots. We will explore this pattern more fully in the next chapter, but it is interesting to note that most of these outbursts ended with a surrender to authority. French political culture has been described as limited authoritarianism accompanied by potential insurrection. When they vote, some French say half in jest, "The heart is on the left, but the billfold is on the right."

Legitimacy in France is weaker than in Britain. Rather than a strong feeling of the rightness of institutions and authority, some French accord their system only half-hearted support. A few, on the extreme left and right, hate it.

Social Class

As is Britain, France is a class society. The gap between French working and middle class is one of the biggest in Europe and—with the educational system slanted in favor of middle-class children—social mobility is not what it could be. In France, as in Britain, few born working class or Muslim climb the income ladder. Distribution of income in France is more unequal than in Britain or even Spain. The rich live superbly in France; the poor scrape by.

Class differences tend to reinforce other cleavages in French society—clerical-anticlerical, urban-rural, radical-conservative, even to a certain extent North-South. That is, these factors tend to line up on one side—never perfectly, of course—but enough to produce a left-right split in French voting. Very broadly, the **ideal-typical** French voters of the left and the right are depicted in the table below.

Left Voter	Right Voter
Working class	Middle class
Anticlerical	Pro-church
Urban	Rural or small town

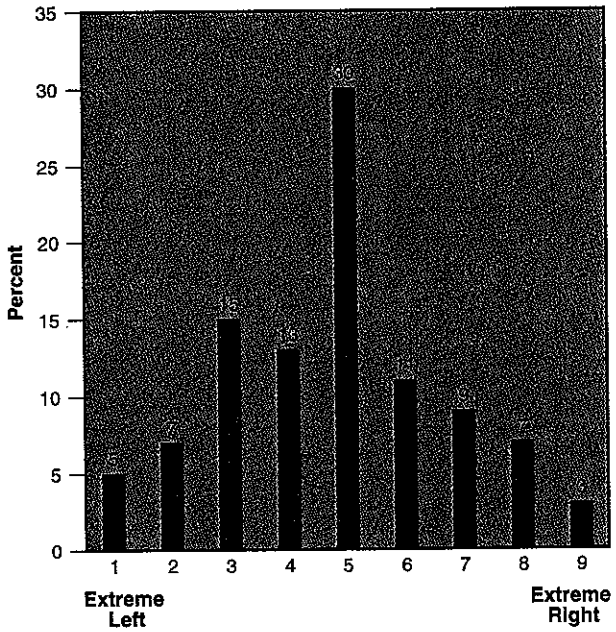
THE GREAT CALMING DOWN

French intellectuals, some of them from the same *grandes écoles* as the governing elite, were for a long generation attracted to Marxism. Observing the huge gap between the ideal of equality and the reality of gross inequality, many educated and middle-class French turned to Marxist explanations

DEMOCRACY

THE CENTRIST FRENCH

The real winner of recent French elections has been neither the left nor the right but the center. Observers referred to the "normalization" of French political life and a healing of the great split in French society. Politicians of the left and right tended to move to the center. Gone are the old ideological visions; moderation and pragmatism are now fashionable. Underscoring this was a 1992 poll that asked Frenchmen to place themselves on a nine-point ideological scale, ranging from extreme left to extreme right. The results are not too different from Britain (page 56) and Germany (page 210): Most people are centrist. French politicians are thus on notice: Any party or candidate perceived as too far left or right will lose. This helps explain the decline of the Communists. As this lesson sinks in, France turns into a "two-plus"-party system, like many other industrialized democracies.



THE SELF-PLACEMENT OF FRENCH VOTERS ON A LEFT/RIGHT IDEOLOGICAL SCALE

and sometimes to membership in the Communist party. Philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre backed every leftist cause and urged other intellectuals to become likewise *engagé*. Another *normalien*, his conservative adversary Raymond Aron, disparaged Marxism as "the opium of the intellectuals," a play on Marx's famous statement that "religion is the opium of the masses."

Under Mitterrand, if not before, this changed. French intellectuals became disillusioned with Marxism, communism, and traditional leftist positions. The French Communist party declined to irrelevance. There seem to be several reasons for this major shift, which has long-term implications for French political life. In the 1970s, a new generation of French intellectuals criticized the Soviet Union and communism. The Soviet-approved coup in Poland by a Polish general in late 1981 reminded many French of Marshal Pétain in the service of Germany during World War II.

But most important, with the election of a Socialist government in 1981, the left was in power. It was one thing to criticize a conservative government but quite another to run a government yourself. French intellectuals and leftists saw how difficult it was to improve the economy, assume a role in world affairs, and transform French society. Clever slogans do not translate into effective policy, and many French intellectuals became moderates. Some celebrated free-market capitalism, a strange position for French intellectuals. The Mitterrand presidency contributed a lot by freeing French society from the allure of leftist ideology and guiding it to a middle-of-the-road pragmatism, one that most governments continued. French politics became centrist, like politics in most of Europe. (Curiously, at this same time, U.S. politics polarized, and the middle ground shrank. Any idea why?) With the onset of the Bicentennial, much of the passion that earlier surrounded the French Revolution went out of it. French politics entered into what might be termed "the great calming down" of deideologized pragmatism. As François Furet put it, "The Revolution is over." Most French agreed.

KEY TERMS

baccalauréat (p. 124)
bureaucratized (p. 120)
compartmentalization (p. 128)
culmination (p. 121)
Ecole Nationale d'Administration (ENA) (p. 125)
grande école (p. 125)
hegemony (p. 126)
ideal-typical (p. 128)
"La Marseillaise" (p. 120)
lycée (p. 124)
omnipotent (p. 120)
patrie (p. 122)
privatistic (p. 124)
statism (p. 120)

FURTHER REFERENCE

Bernstein, Richard. *Fragile Glory: A Portrait of France and the French*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990.

Ehrmann, Henry W., and Martin Schain. *Politics in France*, 5th ed. New York: HarperCollins, 1997.

Godin, Emmanuel, and Tony Chafer, eds. *The French Exception*. New York: Berghan, 2005.

Judt, Tony. *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944–1956*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993.

Khilnani, Sunil. *Arguing Revolution: The Intellectual Left in Post-War France*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994.

Mahoney, Daniel J. *De Gaulle: Statesmanship, Grandeur, and Modern Democracy*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996.

Reader, Keith A. *Intellectuals and the Left in France since 1968*. New York: St. Martin's, 1986.

Roger, Philippe. *The American Enemy: The History of French Anti-Americanism*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

Sa'adah, Anne. *Contemporary France: A Democratic Education*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003.

Scriven, Michael. *Jean-Paul Sartre: Politics and Culture in Postwar France*. New York: St. Martin's, 1999.

Singer, Daniel. *Is Socialism Doomed? The Meaning of Mitterrand*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Weber, Eugen. *My France: Politics, Culture, Myth*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991.