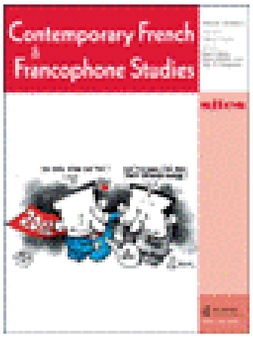

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PRESIDENTS OF THE FIFTH REPUBLIC: THE VIRTUES OF COMPARISON, NOT A COMPARISON OF VIRTUES

Jean-François Sirinelli

ABSTRACT *In setting out to compare Nicolas Sarkozy's presidency with those of his predecessors under the Fifth Republic, we need to keep in mind that, except for Georges Pompidou (who died before completing his seven-year term), and Jacques Chirac (who had already served seven years before being elected for a further five), Sarkozy is the first president to come into office with a relatively short five-year term ahead of him. Moreover, in the course of his presidency a major financial and economic crisis arose that greatly reduced his room for maneuver. In many respects, the pattern of this presidency resembles that of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, with a period of reform abruptly cut short by crisis. That said, the pension reforms pursued from the beginning of Sarkozy's presidency probably mark a very clear turning point, displaying a marked form of political voluntarism.*

Keywords: Sarkozy; France; Comparisons; Fifth Republic; Quinquennat; Pension Reform; Economic Crisis.

In setting out to compare Nicolas Sarkozy's presidency with those of his predecessors under the Fifth Republic, the historian is confronted by certain methodological questions. Some are entirely classic questions relating to the heuristic techniques employed in this field; although contemporary history is now a fully recognized social science in France it nevertheless presents practical challenges, not least because it must share part of its corpus with other social sciences, in particular political science. Others more directly

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concern the discipline of history itself. Here we can identify a number of complicating factors affecting any comparison between the actions of President Sarkozy and his predecessors that make benchmarking hard to achieve. While such inherent difficulties are not, as we shall see, entirely insurmountable, they should nevertheless not be disregarded here for, if the comparative approach is to retain its heuristic virtues, it is precisely our task as historians to endeavor to assess them. The first part of my analysis will therefore examine these factors.

The complexities of comparison

The first is so obvious that one might hesitate to mention it were it not, at the same time, an unavoidable parameter of historical studies. It is, of course, the question of duration, and here we encounter a structural difference in Nicolas Sarkozy's term of office. He has carried out his presidential activities within the framework of a five-year term, only the second of its kind in the history of the Fifth Republic, the first having been Chirac 2[1] after the constitutional reform of 2000 shortened the presidential mandate by two years.

More importantly, this temporal parameter also requires us to differentiate between the presidents of the Fifth Republic on other, more contingent grounds. Some have completed a full second term (Mitterrand, Chirac), or part of one (de Gaulle), allowing them a commensurately longer period in which to act. Conversely, one presidential term was cut short by illness (Pompidou), demonstrating the impact of contingency on structure. De Gaulle's second term illustrates in this respect the vital and contrasting effects of contingency on duration. We thus see an initial extension of his mandate through re-election followed by a curtailment caused by his voluntary departure following the referendum defeat of 27 April 1969.

But an analysis of this relationship with time must look beyond the duration of presidential office. A number of presidents of the Fifth Republic have previously occupied ministerial posts, some at the Hôtel Matignan, that already allowed them to influence their country's future before reaching the Elysée, making it sometimes difficult to determine precisely which of their contributions relate specifically to the period of their presidency. Of course, political life under the Fifth Republic cannot be reduced to a gallery of presidential portraits, but these certainly present us with a hall of mirrors in which a substantial proportion of recent French political history can be observed.

Provided, of course, that the mirrors do not distort the picture too much. We must therefore include a third distinguishing factor on our list: the contrasting historical conditions under which the policies of the successive

presidents were developed. More specifically, the general situation in France in the course of the fifty-four years under consideration was neither enduring nor even stable, and served, effectively, as a changing field of operations for each president in turn.

It is thus clear that any point-by-point comparison that omitted to take account of the underlying situation in France would have little meaning. Historians must, on the contrary, provide contexts for both the acts of individuals and our provisional assessments of those acts and, in this regard, the mid-1970s acted as a watershed: the events of 1973–1974 brought an end to the post-war era of sustained economic growth known as *les trente glorieuses*, changing the face of France for ever. Valérie Giscard d'Estaing's term of office thus has the historical distinction of having seen a fault line develop in the course of its seven years.

The appearance of this fault line did not just alter the general hand dealt to France, it also changed the order of priorities for political action. The battle against *la crise* (long-term adverse economic circumstances) must therefore be taken into account when assessing subsequent presidents. And, most importantly, if we view reform as an essential element of political action (and we shall return to this), the margin of maneuver available for its implementation has not been the same in every presidency. Indeed, this margin could change within a single presidential mandate. In the case of Nicolas Sarkozy, it certainly narrowed, and any objective study of his actions must acknowledge that the shift to a five-year mandate left little structural freedom for him to absorb, digest, and, potentially, recover from the sudden changes brought about by the events of 2008. By contrast, the first three years of Mitterrand 2 saw a period of economic improvement and we can suggest that in this case it was in fact the crisis in the Mitterrand-Rocard diarchy that acted as the main brake on reform.

The effects of crisis, although disparate, point to a fourth, less obvious parameter that has exerted increasing influence in the course of the Fifth Republic. While the factors I have already listed make a substantial contribution to the contextualization of the successive actions of the presidents of the Fifth Republic, we would in all likelihood fail to take account of the most important factor of all if we neglected to mention the growing imbrication of these actions in world history. Of course, each head of state has faced significant issues of international origin. Indeed, de Gaulle became president as a consequence of the process triggered by the Algiers putsch of 13 May 1958, in other words, as a result of the upheavals of decolonization taking place across the world. Yet that period can still be discussed in terms of national history. Although shock waves from elsewhere were certainly felt, they affected a national metabolism peculiar to France: it was the *French* colonial empire that was thus confronted with the process of decolonization. Only in the course of subsequent decades did this national history begin to merge with that of the world around it as

the historical phenomenon of globalization took hold. While this observation is unexceptional, it is clear for comparative purposes that, in addition to differences in the margins for maneuver available to successive presidents, the latter gradually found themselves having to address questions that, even when they were essentially domestic in character, could not be dissociated from world history. Valéry Giscard d'Estaing was able to introduce a number of reforms early on in his presidency despite the onset of the first oil crisis a few months before he took office, but in the final stretch of his seven-year term, by contrast, he found his hands tied by the impact of the second oil crisis. Likewise, and more noticeably, Jacques Chirac's two terms unfolded against a background of mounting concerns over the structure of Europe. This contributed to Jean-Marie Le Pen's progression to the second round of the presidential elections of 2002, and the failure of the May 2005 referendum stands as the clearest manifestation of these anxieties. The onward march of French de-industrialization under the pressure of globalization during Nicolas Sarkozy's five-year term and the deterioration of the economic and financial situation in the Euro zone offer clear and definitive evidence of the decline in the freedom of action of French presidents in relation to the wider world that has occurred during recent decades.

This growing pressure on national history[2] has inevitably had a corresponding effect on both the margins for maneuver available to French presidents and the nature of the issues that they have had to deal with. (By issue, I mean here a situation or a problem that has a practical effect at a given moment within French society and that it is the role of those in government to manage and resolve.) It is around these issues that political life is constructed and that analysis of the actions of those in government must be based. Here, then, we come to the crux of this introductory section: given the variety of conditions and range of issues requiring action, is it possible to conduct a like-for-like comparison between presidential terms?

My answer is "yes," provided we re-center our analysis on the succession of issues that has arisen in the course of the Fifth Republic and, instead of attempting a comparative catalogue of achievements, instead compare what it has been *possible* to achieve, which has itself been determined by the elements set out above—context, the margin for maneuver—and the aims of those involved. Even where contexts and issues are considered to be similar or equivalent—and this is in any case a purely conjectural matter—what is possible will vary according to each individual's political background and, probably, his character as well, inclining him towards either prudence or action. Such intentions always form a complex residue at the intersection of various parameters that, in leading to a decision-making process, are typically structured around two focal points that have long been recognized: the complex figure of the statesman and the profound and varied interacting forces that influence his decisions.[3]

A president of the third type?

The statesman exists in a dialectical relationship with such forces: his vocation and high ideals lead him to try to limit them as much as possible, but they shape what is possible and his role is thus to act upon them. He ignores them at his peril. And it would likewise be a mistake for the analysis of a comparative historian to underestimate such forces: it is not the historian's role to behave as a demiurge, creating a statesman as he should be rather than as he truly is, subject to constraints and limitations.

Which brings us back to Nicolas Sarkozy. In the gallery of leaders of the Fifth Republic, in terms of horizons of possibilities, he introduces a third type of presidential category. The first, that of the founding father, was established and exclusively occupied by General de Gaulle, who came to power through historical circumstance as much as by the electoral will of the people; emerging as president from a period of great turbulence, he was to govern France, once the Algerian drama was over, from within the security of *les trente glorieuses*. The day-to-day management of the government was, moreover, more the work of his prime minister for six years, Georges Pompidou, than of the president himself, for whom matters of national "greatness" and international "rank" dominated. In the mind of the founder of the Fifth Republic the priority was to help restore and consolidate France's standing. His alleged remark that "practical matters can be dealt with in due course" encapsulates both the element of voluntarism underlying the eleven years of his presidential activities and a degree of indifference to the economy (except where it could enhance national status) and social issues (which might divide the country).

In all, times were good, and the man who had taken the helm in a time of storms was, in later years, a victim more of his growing detachment from a prosperous and developing country than of adverse socio-economic conditions. In terms of our parameters, he was given time to act and the circumstances were favorable. His ultimate fall was the consequence of the excessive gulf between a changing country and its aging president.

Within the typology that I am setting out here, Georges Pompidou may be classified as a transitional president. Firstly, he did not have enough time and, most importantly of all, symbolically, his illness overtook him at the exact moment when the flourishing good health of France's thirty glorious years suddenly broke down. This ushered in the troubled historical backdrop to the activities of a second category of presidents. Here, the seven years of their presidencies, even when they enjoyed no second term, as in the case of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, allowed them time to act, but their margin for maneuver was, by contrast, subject to a constant process of attrition as the economic downturn set in and the pace of globalization increased. That said, while Giscard d'Estaing's term of office was disrupted by a rapid and substantial deterioration in the socio-economic situation, the two subsequent presidents, Mitterrand and

Chirac, were faced with economic difficulties that were ongoing and long drawn out rather than sudden and acute and both were granted a second term.

Nicolas Sarkozy is, for now, the only member of a third category: he is the first president to be bound by a shorter five-year term—Chirac 2 being, in this regard, simply the continuation of the seven years of Chirac 1, even if five of those were shaped by cohabitation—and, what is more, in the course of Sarkozy's term, a major crisis arose. In many respects, the pattern of this presidency resembles that of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, with a period of reform abruptly cut short by crisis. And we can even match Sarkozy's period of office year-on-year to the final five years of Giscard d'Estaing's mandate. Many similarities favor such a comparison. First, there was a single prime minister throughout both periods: Raymond Barre from 1976 to 1981 and François Fillon from 2007 to 2012. Second, the crisis in each case was a double one: in 1979, the second oil crisis undid the measures taken during the previous three years, just as the financial crisis of the summer of 2011 has acted as a sort of aftershock to the broader crisis that erupted in 2008. Crucially, in both cases, the drive for reform was impeded as a consequence of the crisis.

There is certainly no intention here to excuse policy errors that may have been committed between 2007 and 2012 and even less to portray the outgoing president as a wise reformer forced into inactivity by the misfortunes of the times. But any attempt to compare and contextualize—and this last is, ultimately, the social function of the historian—should take the following as its starting point: this president was not allowed the time to put his intended policies in place or to recover from the crises that he faced.

The fortunes and misfortunes of political voluntarism

Words such as "denial" and "betrayal" belong in the arena of political debate rather than of historical analysis. As historians, our evaluation of policies must begin with their stated aims. Nevertheless we must equally, in the end, provide some assessment of the changes that have been wrought. As leaders of a country in the process of transformation, all these presidents have left their mark on France to some extent. That said, have their respective contributions impacted the mainstream of history, or have they remained on its margins?

The answer is not simple because, as has been said, the involvement of each has been affected to some degree by his political philosophy or, more prosaically, by his temperament. Should change be encouraged or merely managed? And, can we say that change is necessarily a positive thing? President Pompidou, in his final years, and Jacques Chirac, in his second term, would appear to have been of the opinion that it is not. Chirac's second term is important here. The most daring initiative generally attributed to Chirac 2 is his opposition to American intervention in Iraq. But in fact this was in line with French public opinion and

built on a latent anti-Americanism that was intensified by hostility towards George Bush. And, in domestic policy, Chirac's three *grands chantiers* (great initiatives), as he called them, addressed issues that were either necessarily consensual (the fight against cancer, support for the disabled) or difficult to openly oppose (road safety).

This points to the first characteristic of Nicolas Sarkozy's actions: they have been the sequel to at least five years, if not twelve, of relative presidential inactivity, intensified by the cohabitation from 1997 to 2002 which shifted much of the initiative to Lionel Jospin's government. The "break" with the past promised during Sarkozy's electoral campaign in 2007 thus implicitly suggested a return to a more proactive form of politics.

Has such voluntarism been followed through with steadfastness, the two being, in theory at least, closely linked? The answer is not obvious for historians. Each time a president has stood for re-election we have seen a frenzy of political "storytelling" from his supporters, weaving the outgoing president's actions into a coherent whole, while opponents have grasped the chance to denounce the president in question for his lack of direction and for forgetting or reneging on his promises, inviting charges of apostasy. Caught between such sanitized and denigrating versions, contemporary historians find themselves in the position of arbiters, called on to pass judgment, which is not at all their function.

In Nicolas Sarkozy's case, opponents have often targeted contradictory statements made several years apart. Thus in October 2005 he considered that allowing foreign nationals to vote in local elections would be "unproblematic" (a judgment made, it is true, not as president, but as Minister of the Interior) whereas he regarded this as a "dangerous proposal" in November 2011. Or again, and within a shorter time-span, Euro-bonds were transformed into "an odd idea" on 5 December 2011, when Sarkozy had until a few months previously been their defender, if not their deviser. And, of course, the tax shield for the super-rich introduced early in his presidency (in a deeply symbolic move, his adversaries said), was removed in the final stages of his term.

It is true that abandoned policies and backtracking are common to all these presidents' periods of office, and that political activity is inherently punctuated by changes of direction arising from errors of judgment or resistance or inertia in society at large. But, in this particular case, it must be said that such contradictory decisions or statements reflect a deliberately pragmatic approach and the transformation of voluntarism into a political methodology. There is thus an almost structural ambivalence between a Dr. Jekyll intent on reform and a Mr. Hyde struggling to control the backlash which is the inevitable outcome of measures that are poorly understood or poorly thought out or, in any event, poorly explained. It is true that such ambivalence must be seen in the context of crisis outlined above and it is also a result of the classic dilemma of government action: to govern is to make choices, but those in power must persuade the electorate that they are the right choices.

It is equally true that attempts at political pedagogy do not necessarily generate consensus. This is obvious in the case of the main reform undertaken during Sarkozy's presidency, that concerning pensions. It cannot be denied that he faced a problem on this front that was all the greater for having been avoided by his predecessors. We should remind ourselves of the facts and complexities of the matter. What has effectively happened is that the political agenda has been overtaken by demographic changes. The rise in the birth-rate after the war (8 million births between 1945 and 1954) was subsequently an important factor at key moments in French history: the *baby-boomers* were of student age in May 1968, then, when the economic downturn struck a few years later they had become young adults settled into their first jobs. Several decades on, they began to swell the ranks of the retired (this was known in France as the *papy-boom*), which had already expanded with the increase in life expectancy of the previous generation. But the very fact that the baby-boomers were reaching this age was itself a problem: after being taxpayers who contributed to the system they had become beneficiaries who were a drain on it. This was made worse by the fact that the next generation, burdened by higher unemployment and lower salaries across the board, could not continue to finance the growing number of pensions in the same way. To add to the burden, there was also an increase in women pensioners resulting from the earlier growth in women's employment among, precisely, the young adults of the baby boom.

The situation that had thus developed was complicated by what was ultimately an almost existential feeling of anxiety threatening the expectations of the ex-baby-boomers who had looked forward to retirement as an extended Eldorado to be enjoyed while they were still comparatively young. In this optic the *papy-boom* had been expected to be a *happy-boom*. Since political action in principle involves anticipation and therefore foresight, the pension question has been on the political agenda for over twenty years during the mandates of at least three presidents (Mitterrand 2, Chirac 1 and 2, and Sarkozy). What is more, Chirac was directly confronted in his second term by the events of 2006 when the first annual cohort of baby-boomers reached the age of sixty. The measures taken in the course of his presidency demonstrate that words were no longer enough; pensions had become a pressing political issue. Nevertheless, the steps taken at that time are generally considered to have been insufficient, offering no lasting solutions.

We should therefore stress that the pension reforms pursued from the beginning of Sarkozy's presidency probably mark a very clear turning point, displaying a marked form of political voluntarism. It might be claimed that, had Ségolène Royal been elected, amid what had become inescapable realities, she too would have introduced these reforms, but such speculation is beyond the remit of the historian. We can only observe that these changes were resisted by the opposition parties and challenged by the major unions. We can see, and I offer this as some sort of conclusion, that this episode epitomizes the

difficulties of government action in democracies where policy is dependent on public opinion, especially following several decades of economic adversity.[4]

Translated by Teresa Bridgeman

Notes

1 For simplicity, I shall use this method to label presidencies such as those of de Gaulle, Mitterrand and Chirac, which lasted for more than a single term.

2 I refer readers here, in a more epistemological vein, to Sirinelli.

3 Translator's note: As all of the presidents of the Fifth Republic have been men, the use of masculine gender is retained here.

4 Given that the topic addressed here has involved an expansion of the period under discussion to include the whole of the history of the Fifth Republic, limitations on space are such that it has not been possible to provide a general bibliography, which would need to be equally extensive. For detailed bibliographical information on the period, see Garrigues, Guillaume, and Sirinelli (2010).

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