



MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY



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21G.053

Fall 2016. Tuesday 7-10pm. 14N.217

Understanding Contemporary French Politics

Bruno Perreau*

This course examines French politics since 1958. It analyzes how politics has deeply influenced cultural and social life in France, including daily interactions between its citizens and residents. France is often described as a country of salient ideologies, where conflict prevails over lobbying. The course will deconstruct such a prejudice by revisiting public controversies and historicizing political cleavages, from the Algerian war to postcolonial issues, from the birth of the European construction to the recent financial crisis, and from the moral “revolution” of the seventies to the recognition of new families. Moreover, the class will show that, despite the decline of political participation, French people remain more than ever steeped in politics: they are now involved in public life through new channels, in particular the new media. The course argues that the Fifth Republic is more than a political regime: it is a mirror of French society.

To discover French institutions and understand the impact of political issues in contemporary France, students will run for the French presidency! They will prepare historical notes, deliver speeches, participate in a first-round presidential debate, and submit a final political statement.

Course taught in English.

* Bruno Perreau is the Cynthia L. Reed Professor, and Associate Professor of French studies at MIT. He was a member of the Institute for Advanced Study (Princeton), Jesus College (Cambridge), and Stanford Humanities Center. He is also Non-Resident Faculty at the Center for European Studies, Harvard. Perreau is the author of *The Politics of Adoption. Gender and the Making of French Citizenship* (MIT Press, 2014), *Queer Theory. The French Response* (Stanford University Press, 2016), as well as six French-language books on American and French political institutions, gay parenting, and queer studies.

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Grading policy

Sessions will be divided between:

- Student speeches on weekly issues
- Debates on topical controversies associated with the weekly issues
- Every three sessions: screening and debate

Final grade will be determined from four types of required exercises:

- One grade will be based on **one speech (20%)**. Each student will make a ten-minute speech to state an opinion on the weekly issue, followed by a debate with the class. Students will have to *speak* to the class (not *read* a pre-written text).
- One grade will be based on **three historical notes (30%)**. Each note will consist of a four-page maximum paper on one political event, one political character, as well as one political party, and one institution. Submitted online, three days before class, one in February, one in March, one in April.
- One grade will be based on **a six-page political statement (40%)**. The paper will consist of a political statement of intent, as if students were running for the French presidency. They will have to explain their institutional and social reforms and how this would change French society. The students will submit on Stellar a first version on week 9 and will resubmit the final version two weeks later.
- One grade will be based on a **one-hour presidential debate (10%)**: students will team and prepare a political platform that they will advocate in a first-round presidential debate.
- Other elements will be taken into account for the final grade: 1° attendance, 2° the demonstration that the students have done the readings, 3° the quality of their oral output.

Deadlines

- First class: September 13, 2016.
- No Class: October 11, 2016. November 22, 2016.
- Last class: December 13, 2016.
- Choice of presentation (speech) and historical notes: September 20, 2016.
- Political statement: October 25, 2016.
- Resubmission of political statement: November 1, 2016.

Materials

All documents (book chapters, articles and pictures) are available on Stellar. Movies will be screened during the classes. When impossible, copies will be lent to the students.

Course organization

THE SETTLEMENT OF THE FIFTH REPUBLIC (1958-1974)

09/13. Introduction. The Algerian War

- What do you know about French politics? Why does it matter?
- What is a discourse?
- **Screening:** Gillo Pontecorvo, *The Battle of Algiers* (1966)

09/20. The Imperial Presidency

- **Reading:** Charles de Gaulle, *Discourse of Bayeux* (1946); Michel Debré. *Speech to the Council of State* (1958)
- **Facts:** The majoritarian system

Speech theme 1: Advocate for/against the direct election of the French President
Historical note 1: Charles de Gaulle. Michel Debré. Gaston Monnerville. No-confidence vote of 1962. The presidential election of 1965.

09/27. May 1968: A Moral Revolution?

- **Reading:** Kristen Ross, *May 1968 and its afterlives* (2004); *Constitutional Council. Freedom of Association Decision* (1971)
- **Facts:** The Constitutional Domain

Speech theme 2: Advocate for/against the suppression of the students' strike of May 1968
Historical note 2: Georges Pompidou. Daniel Cohn-Bendit. The strike of 1968. De Gaulle's resignation. The Marcellin Law.

THE LIBERALIZATION OF THE REGIME (1974-1988)

10/04. A New Generation

- **Screening:** Bertrand Blier, *Going Places* (1974)

Historical note 3: Georges Pompidou. Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. The Abortion Law of 1975. The socialist and communist parties' alliance of 1972.

10/18. The Socialist Era

- **Reading:** François Mitterrand. *Speech at Epinay* (1971)
- **Facts:** Decentralization

Speech theme 3: Advocate for/against the death penalty

Historical note 4: François Mitterrand. Robert Badinter. Pierre Mauroy. The 1981 election. The decentralization reform.

10/25. The Liberal Turning Point and the Cohabitation

- **Reading:** Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. *Speech at Verdun sur le Doubs* (1978); Timothy Smith, *France in Crisis: Welfare, Inequality, and Globalization since 1980* (2004).
- **Facts:** Cohabitation

Speech theme 4: Advocate for/against the increase of income taxes

Historical note 5: Jacques Chirac. Michel Rocard. Edith Cresson. The RMI (minimum wage). The 1995 Strikes.

THE TIMES OF CRISES (1988-)

11/01. Revisiting France's Past

- **Screening:** Robert Guédiguian, *The Last Mitterrand* (2005)

Historical note 6: The Rise of the National Front. The collaboration trials. The health of President Mitterrand

11/08. European Doubts

- **Reading:** Robert Schuman, *Declaration on the ECSC* (1950); Jacques Chirac, *Cochin Appeal* (1978); Michael Sutton, *France and the Construction of Europe, 1944-2007* (2007).

Speech theme 5: Advocate for/against the participation of France in the European Union

Historical note 7. The European Parliament. Simone Veil. Jacques Delors. The Maastricht treaty. The referendum on the European constitution in France. The 2014 European election. The European Court of Human Rights.

11/15. Identities and the Nation

- **Reading:** Joan W. Scott, *Parité! Sexual Equality and the Crisis of French Universalism* (2005)

Speech theme 6: Advocate for/against the ban of religious signs at school

Historical Note 8: The Gayssot Law. The Parity Law. The PaCS. The 2005 riots. Nicolas Sarkozy. Christiane Taubira. The DSK gate. Anti-Gay Marriage Protests since 2012.

ARE YOU THE FUTURE FRENCH PRESIDENT?

11/29. A New Political System?

- **Screening:** Xavier Durringer, *The Conquest* (2010)

Historical note 9: Impeachment in France; The Inversion of the Electoral Calendar. Ségolène Royal. François Hollande.

12/6. “Presidential Debate”. Primaries.

12/13. “Presidential Debate”. Election.

General reading to help prepare speeches, historical notes, and debates:

- Jill Forbes, Michael Kelly, *French Cultural Studies* (1998)
- Sylvain Brouard, Andrew Appleton and Amy G. Mazur, *The French Fifth Republic at Fifty: Beyond Stereotypes* (2009)
- Tony Chafer, Emmanuel Godin (eds), *The End of the French Exception? Decline and Revival of the “French Model”* (2010)
- Helen Drake, *Contemporary France* (2011)