A French Muslim woman wearing a *niqab* protests the 2010 ban.
Why do French citizens engage in such frequent and dramatic forms of protest?

INTRODUCTION TO FRANCE

In 1789, just as the United States was putting the finishing touches on its Constitution, France went through a violent revolution against monarchical rule. Since then, the French have maintained a strong tradition of collective action and aggressive protest. For example, in May 1968, the entire country ground to a halt for weeks as students and workers went on strike. In 1986, hundreds of thousands of high school and college students marched to oppose the government’s suggested changes to the education system. A 1995 protest against proposed reductions in government welfare benefits brought millions to the streets to resist the government’s plans. And in 2009, a one-day strike against the government’s approach to the economic crisis mobilized over 1 million workers. France has also repeatedly experienced a wide variety of smaller strikes, marches, blockades, and other forms of political protest that have disrupted daily life and upset the political sphere.

These events raise the question: why do French citizens engage in such frequent and dramatic forms of protest? The logic of collective action suggests that it can be difficult to mobilize people for a cause, especially when the undertaking is risky, illegal, or has uncertain hope of success. France is a functioning democracy, with the world’s eighth-largest economy, generous government-provided social welfare benefits, and a leadership role in the European Union—so why the recurrence of mass strikes, clashes with police, and dramatic symbolic anti-government activities? France is not a society constantly in tumult, nor is it alone among developed democracies in dealing with protest. But given the profile and intensity of such events, France provides an excellent site for examining the causes of such extreme forms of political participation.

This chapter explores several possible explanations for French protest dynamics. We begin by reviewing France’s turbulent history to demonstrate that upheavals have been part of French politics for centuries. We examine how France’s political institutions—which are more centralized than those of the United States or Germany—focus protestors who feel excluded from the political process on a clear target. Next, key political identities in France such as class divisions, nationalistic tendencies, principles of church-state separation, and a general sympathy for protest serve as foundations for agitation. And finally, French interest groups such as unions, student organizations, and anti-racist groups bring protestors together in both coordinated and spontaneous ways to fight for their goals. It is the combination of French history, institutions, identities, and interests that produces a distinctive French way of “doing protest” that sets the country apart from other liberal democracies.
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Chapter 4

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF FRANCE

To begin to answer the chapter question, it is helpful to examine France’s history because it provides a common point of reference and inspiration for groups engaged in contentious politics. Pushing back against the authority of the state and overturning the established political order has been far more common in France since the late 1700s than in the United States. For example, Americans have lived under one constitution since that time, but France has cycled through a dozen or more regimes, ranging from monarchies to constitutional democracies. This history of dramatic revolution, revolt, and protest helps shapes the context of politics in France today, and it helps French citizens justify the contentious forms of political participation that often grab world headlines.

From the Middle Ages to the Ancien Régime

In the 1400s, France was not much more than a mishmash of overlapping political entities, with local authorities loosely controlling their own claimed territories. By the 1500s, however, the territory we think of today as “France” began to take shape, especially under the rule of Henri IV (1589–1610). In 1598, Henri IV ended internal conflict by issuing the Edict of Nantes, which granted Protestants limited religious freedoms in what remains a largely Catholic country.

France subsequently flourished in the 1600s and 1700s as a military, cultural, and economic powerhouse. Sovereignty was also consolidated under the leadership of kings such as Louis XIV (1643–1715), who forged a relatively efficient government bureaucracy to administer the whole country. This marked a significant departure from the previous norm of allocating high offices to friends, relatives, and wealthy nobility, who would often abuse their powers by mixing bribery with tax and duty collection according to whim.

In the 1600s, France’s central government administration was, by comparison, much more stable and powerful than that of its closest rival, Great Britain, but this did not mean that the French state had fully modernized. Prior to the 1789 Revolution—referred to as the Ancien Régime, or the old regime—political power was divided among three core groups: the monarchy, the aristocracy, and the clergy. In addition to the authority of the king, land-owning aristocratic nobles continued to dominate France politically and economically, leaving rural peasants, urban workers, and the rising middle class largely powerless. During this time, the Catholic Church held substantial tracts of tax-exempt property that also limited farmers’ access to tillable land and greatly reduced the central government’s tax revenue.

Adding to the challenges of the time, kings Louis XIV and Louis XV (1715–1774) involved France in a series of colonial wars and European campaigns that lasted from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth century. This led to mounting state debts that generated pressure for unsustainable new taxes. Eventually, in an effort to open the door for extracting even more tax from his subjects, Louis XVI (1774–1792) was forced to call the first meeting in over 150 years of the Estates-General—a meeting of representatives from the clergy, the nobility, and the middle classes. But by 1789, any additional burdens
on the common people and middle class seemed unbearable, and the calling of the Estates-General served to launch debates about completely overhauling the monarchical regime.

The French Revolution and Its Aftermath

The assembly of the Estates-General in 1789 occurred against the backdrop of the Enlightenment, a period of time during which French thinkers such as Descartes, Montesquieu, Diderot, Rousseau, and Voltaire advocated the concepts of democracy and individual freedom over the traditional authority of kings. News of the success of the American Revolution, also based on the ideals of the Enlightenment, sparked further debates about the future of the French monarchy. Combined with the terrible economic stresses of the era, the French middle class began to demand greater access to political power and change.

As tensions rose between groups assembled at the Estates-General, a mob stormed the Bastille prison in Paris on July 14, 1789. With the fall of the medieval fortress, the citizens of Paris dealt a symbolic blow against the king’s authority and the established elites of the Ancien Régime. The event represented a turning point between parliamentary debate and open insurrection, and it marked the beginning of the French Revolution. Within the next decade, the country would experience a tumult of changing political systems:

- From 1789–1792, a constitutional monarchy, which constrained the previous absolute authority of the monarch with a set of rules embodied in a written constitution that granted primary power to the National Assembly, which represented the middle classes;
- From 1792–1795, a republic, which deposed the king and granted all power to representatives chosen by universal male suffrage, but which eventually degenerated into a dictatorship when confronted with counter-revolution at home and invasion from abroad;
- And from 1795–1799, a constitutional dictatorship (known as the Directory) run by a small committee of leaders who deposed the previous authorities in an effort to restore order and which eventually culminated in a 1799 coup d’état by Napoleon Bonaparte, a popular and successful general who crowned himself emperor in 1804 and ruled until 1814.

The rapidly shifting and extremely unstable governing structures during this time period were often determined by mass mobilization against perceived oppression and by leaders who imposed their will by force.

It is impossible to underestimate the importance of this era for France. The French Revolution and its aftermath marked European and world politics for decades. Unlike the American Revolution, France had been ruled for centuries by kings. Its citizens did not just overthrow a king and anoint another in 1789—they overthrew an entire system of government, along with the only political and social culture the people had ever known. The ideas of “Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity”—the motto of the revolution that remains France’s national motto to this day—replaced long-held values associated with monarchy such as constitutional monarchy a democratic system in which a monarch serves as head of state, symbolically embodying the culture and values of a state’s citizens and history, yet operates under the rules and constraints imposed by a written constitution.

republic a form of government that relies on rule by the people through their representatives.

constitutional dictatorship strong rule by one or more leaders who are nominally constrained by a written constitution approved by the people through their representatives.
obedience to one’s supposed social betters. In the process of protecting their interests, the French people were redefining their institutions as well as their identity. The wrenching process of the French Revolution generated widespread violence across the country, as various factions vied to control the reins of power. Yet, the revolution firmly established the notion in France that political protest can be a powerful tool for changing the world.

**Regime Change in the Nineteenth Century**

Political unrest followed the revolution and endured in France over the next 150 years (see the summary table on the following page). After Napoleon’s downfall, first in 1814 and ultimately in 1815 following his defeat at Waterloo, the Bourbon monarchy was restored to power. However, in 1830 an uprising replaced the Bourbon-ancestral line of monarchs with another, the Orleans. In 1848, another revolution overthrew the Orleans monarchy and led to the brief rule of the Second Republic. In 1851, Louis Napoleon (the nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte) staged a coup d’état to end the Second Republic and declared himself emperor the following year. In 1870, he was captured by German forces during the Franco-Prussian War and deposed. In the early 1870s, French factions jockeyed with each other for the power to decide what regime should come next. The French Third Republic emerged out of this turmoil in 1875, described unenthusiastically at the time by head of state Adolphe Thiers as “the form of government that divides France the least.” As is obvious, protest, upheaval, and big political changes were integral to French history from the late eighteenth to the late nineteenth century.

**Consolidating Democracy in the Twentieth Century**

The French people did not immediately embrace the Third Republic, but it endured from 1875 until 1940—the longest-lasting French form of government since the Ancien Régime. The Third Republic ended with France’s sudden and catastrophic defeat at the hands of Nazi Germany in 1940. At that time, the Nazis took direct control of the northern portion of France and set up the puppet Vichy regime (named after its capital) in the south of the country. The Vichy leadership preached authoritarian values and collaborated with the Nazis; it deported Jews to concentration camps and provided supplies and workers for the German war effort. Although most French citizens did not stand up to the regime, some did. Within France, small bands of resistance fighters did their best to undermine the fascist system. From abroad, General Charles de Gaulle organized the Free French Forces and led the effort to discredit the Vichy regime.

After the war, de Gaulle was appointed the provisional leader of the transition government. France would revert to a democracy, but not without another heated debate over the form it should take. De Gaulle was unable to convince his fellow citizens that the fragmented institutions of the Third Republic had directly contributed to France’s vulnerability in the face of the Nazi onslaught, yet given the Vichy years, many remained leery of strong centralized political power. In the end, French voters narrowly approved the constitution of the Fourth Republic which essentially
reestablished institutions similar to those of the Third Republic: a parliamentary democracy in which power rested in the lower house of parliament. The Fourth Republic was successful in putting France on a path toward economic recovery, especially through its state-led economic policies known as *dirigisme* (pronounced dee-ree-jhee-smuh). It also fostered a healthy relationship with Germany in the aftermath of World War II and helped launch the European Economic Community (which later became the European Union) as one of the six original signatories of the 1957 Treaty of Rome. However, because most mainstream political parties lacked broad popular support, the Fourth Republic witnessed a seemingly endless string of fragile coalition governments that fell apart more than 20 times in just 12 years.

The constant political turnover generated significant instability during this period, which the country could never quite surmount. In particular, the Fourth...
Republic proved unable to cope with uprisings against French colonial authority in Indochina (Vietnam) and in North Africa. Like other European powers, France had acquired these territories—and many others around the world—in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Yet unlike neighboring Britain, which ceded control of most of its overseas empire without a fight after World War II, France considered its possessions integral to its national interests and was determined to hang on to them.

Chief among its colonies was Algeria, which lay just across the Mediterranean Sea from the southern French coast. From 1848 until 1962, Algeria was officially part of France, much in the same way Alaska is part of the United States. Yet, its inhabitants were primarily Muslims of North African origin who did not all have the same rights as the European colonizers. Frustrated with these long-standing inequalities, resistance groups launched a revolutionary war for independence in 1954. The French government responded to unrest in Algeria by fighting back, even though divisions within the army and within the French government about whether and how to maintain France’s overseas empire meant that by 1958 French politics had deadlocked over how to proceed. The political situation grew so uncertain that elements within France’s military forces threatened a coup d’état against the democratically elected civilian government. This outcome was averted only when civilian leaders called de Gaulle out of retirement to lead the country. De Gaulle accepted on the condition that he be granted extraordinary political powers in the
short term and that he be allowed to rewrite the French constitution. By October 1958, he had done just that, giving birth to the French Fifth Republic, whose institutions have lasted through today.

French history has involved considerable political turmoil—more so than many of France’s neighbors, especially Great Britain. Revolutions, political protest, coups d’états, rebellions, and threats of greater unrest have been integral to French politics since the French Revolution in 1789. Protest has sparked significant changes to French politics, including complete changes in political regime. This sets France apart from most other European countries and has imbued its citizens with a sense of the importance of political action. It is too simple to say that this history is the sole explanation for collective action, or that history dictates protest in modern France. But the legacy of these protests provides encouragement to protestors in France, who see themselves as part of a long-standing national tradition of standing up to their leaders in an effort to enact important change.

INSTITUTIONS OF FRANCE

If we want to know why the French engage in such frequent and dramatic forms of protest, we also have to examine France’s institutions. State institutions have a direct bearing on which people are represented, how loudly different voices are heard, and how citizens’ interests are transformed into concrete policy outcomes. These aspects of political institutions can impact the likelihood of intense protest. For example, if groups of citizens can achieve their goals by voting for political parties or by lobbying influential spokespeople, they are much less likely to burn cars, blockade highways, or march on government ministries. On the other hand, if some segments of society feel that they cannot get within earshot of their leaders, they may turn to more disruptive politics to express themselves and capture attention.

France is a clear-cut example of a democracy that consistently receives a “Free” rating from Freedom House. Moreover, French government institutions for the most part successfully balance limited and effective government. The government has strong legitimacy, stability, efficacy, and efficiency when it comes to getting things done, and it permits high levels of popular sovereignty, participation, contestation, civil rights, and accountability—the central ingredients of limited government. However, more than in many other democracies, French political institutions tend to concentrate decision-making power in the hands of a few and they tend to deflect or ignore input from a number of societal groups. Because some groups feel frozen out of the traditional political process, they frequently turn to contentious forms of political participation—at times including violent protest—to make their views known and to force the government to take them into account.

To get a better sense of how France’s political institutions concentrate power, restrict decision-making access, and help generate protest, we will examine how the French constitution allocates political power in the Fifth Republic, how its
electoral institutions work, and how its leaders and citizens connect to the political process. Examining the distribution of political power sheds light on why some social groups feel left out, and why resorting to protest and other forms of contentious politics has become so common.

**Semi-Presidential Democracy and the Executive Branch**

In 1958, Charles de Gaulle created a new constitution that ushered in the Fifth Republic, a semi-presidential system of government. The system features separation of origin, in that voters cast one vote to directly elect members of the lower house of parliament, known as the National Assembly, and, as of 1962, another for the president. The semi-presidential system involves a dual executive, which means that there is both a president and a prime minister, each with real power in the political process. The president selects the prime minister, but the prime minister must also have majority support in the National Assembly. The National Assembly cannot remove a sitting president, but it can remove a sitting prime minister through a majority vote of no-confidence.

In most circumstances, the majority in the National Assembly is from the same political party as the president. In this case, the president has complete control over who becomes prime minister. This principle was confirmed in 1962 when the parliament voted no-confidence on President de Gaulle’s choice for prime minister. In response, de Gaulle used his presidential power to dissolve the National Assembly, forcing its members to stand for reelection. When the election resulted in an outcome favorable to the president, he simply reappointed the prime minister whom he had initially selected. Although the prime minister in the Fifth Republic has many important tasks, such as navigating legislation through the parliament, in normal times it is the president who has the principal authority and power to lead the executive branch.

However, the Fifth Republic constitution left open the possibility that the National Assembly majority and the president would represent different political parties. Until 2002, the president served a seven-year term, whereas the National Assembly members stood for election at least once every five years. In 1986, five years into François Mitterrand’s presidency, the voters rejected his Socialist Party in legislative elections and returned an opposition coalition to power in the National Assembly. This inaugurated the first period of cohabitation, in which the left and right shared executive power—one party held the presidency while the other held the majority in the National Assembly. In these instances, the National Assembly had the power to choose the prime minister, while the president influenced who was appointed to lead the foreign affairs and defense ministries. As a result, the president retained primary responsibility for representing France and its interests at the international level while the prime minister controlled domestic affairs.

Since the creation of the Fifth Republic in 1958, there have been three periods of cohabitation, amounting to approximately nine years. This means that executive power has been concentrated in the hands of one person (the president), and one political party most of the time. In 2000, parliament amended France’s constitution to reduce the presidential term by two years to align it with the
five-year term of the National Assembly, a change that took effect starting with the 2002 presidential and parliamentary elections. This dramatically decreased the likelihood of future episodes of cohabitation. The effect of this reform is to further concentrate political power in the hands of the French president, who will preside over a National Assembly that almost certainly will always contain a majority of members sympathetic to the president’s party.

Whether under unified government or cohabitation, the Fifth Republic’s constitution concentrates political power in the executive branch. By executive branch, we mean the president and his prime minister and cabinet. This skewed distribution of power was an intentional response to the relatively weak executive branch under the Fourth Republic, which many blamed as the source of the regime’s political instability and ineffectiveness. Most of the major decisions of the French government are put on the agenda by the executive branch.

The strength of the executive branch is reflected in France’s policymaking process. The president or prime minister typically launches an initiative by proposing a bill for parliamentary review. The legislature has the opportunity to debate the bill and to suggest amendments, and though it can delay the legislation, there are institutional provisions that make it difficult for the parliament to stop legislation deemed critical by the government. For example, Article 44 of the constitution enshrines the right of the government to force a vote on any piece of legislation that contains only the amendments approved by the government. This blocked vote provision prevents excessive or unfriendly amendments by legislators. Article 45 allows the government to shape the final form of a bill whenever the lower and upper houses cannot agree on a common text. Perhaps most dramatically, Article 49-3 of the constitution permits the government simply to declare legislation as officially adopted into law unless the National Assembly passes a resolution of no-confidence against the government. These powerful governmental tools are not deployed frequently, but the mere threat of their use constrains the legislature and strengthens the government’s hand in negotiations over legislation. Once a bill has been passed by the legislature, there is a brief window before it enters into force during which the president, the prime minister, the leaders of the National Assembly and the Sénat, or 60 members of either the upper or lower chamber can appeal the outcome to the Constitutional Council if they feel that the law violates the constitution. This overall policymaking process contrasts sharply with the American system, where members of Congress have a much greater ability to initiate, amend, and influence legislation.

Within the executive branch, elite government bureaucrats also help craft key policies. The upper echelon of the national bureaucracy has considerable influence in France. Its members are the cream of the crop of students trained at highly selective institutions of higher education known as the grandes écoles. These students undertake a rigorous academic program and once they graduate, the most highly ranked recruits leapfrog over many of their elders to top positions in the Ministries of Finance, Foreign Affairs, or other critical posts. Some make their careers in the civil service, while others become political leaders or executives at large firms. Around half of all prime ministers of the Fifth Republic and several presidents attended the grandes écoles. This system produces highly capable leaders, but it can also serve to limit input from new or different voices.
The Legislative Branch

The bicameral legislature is composed of the directly elected lower house, the National Assembly, and the indirectly elected upper house, the Sénat. Like presidents, National Assembly members serve five-year terms although the president has the power to dissolve the body and call for early elections. The electoral institutions for other French representative bodies—such as the upper house of parliament, as well as regional, district, and local governments—differ substantially from the system for the presidential and National Assembly elections. Most of the nearly 350 members of the Sénat, for example, are indirectly elected—primarily by local elected authorities—for six-year terms, with one half elected every three years.

Members of the National Assembly and the Sénat play an important role in discussing legislation, and they can at times suggest amendments to bills passing through their chambers. At least until a constitutional amendment that took effect in 2009, however, their ability to set the agenda by initiating proposals was relatively limited. The National Assembly is not simply a rubber stamp, but if you are

FIGURE 4.1
France’s Structure of Government

French voters are linked to their national-level political leaders through three separate pathways. They directly elect the president and their representatives in the National Assembly. But the prime minister is appointed by the president and is ultimately responsible before the National Assembly, and senators are elected primarily by local officials.
a French citizen considering a career in politics and your ambitions are to hold the reins of power, a term in the legislature is at best a way-station while you wait to be called up to the major leagues of the executive branch, and especially to one of the most powerful ministries such as Interior, Foreign Affairs, Finance, or Economy.

The Judicial Branch
The third branch of government—the judiciary—acts as modest brake upon executive power. Most importantly, the Constitutional Council has some authority to review legislation. Every three years, the president of France and the leaders of the upper and lower houses of parliament choose one distinguished public figure each, appointing three Council members for nine-year terms. The result is a nine-person Council, although this number can grow because former French presidents are also entitled to membership. The Constitutional Council is empowered to rule on whether legislation conforms to the constitution, and has become an important part of the policymaking process in the past few decades.

From 1958 until the early 1970s, the Constitutional Council was virtually impotent, since only the president, the prime minister, and the leader of the National Assembly or Sénat had the ability to submit legislation for review. This meant that the Council was not very active, as none of those actors has any particular interest in having unelected judges review the legality of bills already passed. In 1974, a constitutional reform allowed 60 members of either house of parliament to appeal legislation to the Constitutional Council. This made it possible for opposition parties to send any controversial item to the Council for review, and it significantly increased the independence and influence of this arm of the judicial branch. Currently, approximately 10 percent of all legislation—and particularly any controversial law—is sent to the Council for review, and almost half of the statutes it scrutinizes are found at least partly incompatible with the Constitution and must be amended before being enacted into law.

However, the power of the Constitutional Council remains limited in important ways compared to that of the U.S. Supreme Court. In the United States, any citizen can appeal a case to the Supreme Court. In France, until 2010, only politicians could initiate the review process, and they could only do it during the brief window between parliamentary approval of a law and the president’s promulgation of the law into force. The Constitutional Council has, therefore, acted primarily as a partial brake on the government, but it is hardly the powerful counterweight that judiciaries have become in some other democracies. This situation is currently evolving, however, as a constitutional revision enforced as of 2010 allows other French judicial bodies to submit constitutional questions to the Council after the statute has gone into force. Whether this change will have a significant effect on the functioning of the Constitutional Council is not yet clear.

The concentration of power in the executive branch and in the central government is striking when compared to the system of the Fourth Republic and compared to federal countries like the United States or Germany. Even so, it would be wrong to view France as completely dominated by the central government in Paris. In the 1980s, the government decentralized some authority to regions, districts, and localities, granting
elected bodies of these sub-national areas greater power over policies pertaining to local economic development, transportation, the environment, consumer protection, and workplace health and safety.

France’s participation in the European Union has also encroached upon the central government’s ability to do as it pleases. As an EU member, France must conform to legislative, bureaucratic, and judicial decisions taken at the transnational level at EU headquarters. The French government has a strong hand in many of those outcomes, but EU decisions are not always exactly what the French government prefers. These domestic and international changes have chipped away at France’s image as a highly centralized state. However, Paris still retains a lot of power. In some democratic countries, such as the United States, citizens take complaints to the city council, or the state legislature, or other local government bodies. Yet in France, the central government still calls the shots for most important policy decisions.

**Electoral Institutions**

France has a two-round majority rule system for presidential and National Assembly elections. Candidates need 50 percent + 1 of the votes to be elected to office in the first round. Because it is not typical for a politician to assemble a majority of votes in a field of many candidates, there is usually a second round runoff election that

**FIGURE 4.2**

The Two-Round French Electoral System

Any candidate who receives over 50 percent of the vote in the first round of the election is the winner. If no candidate surpasses this hurdle, there is a second round runoff election. For presidential elections, the top two vote-getters move on. For the National Assembly, any politician who receives more than 12.5 percent of the first-round vote is eligible to run in the second round.
decides a winner between the top two vote-getters from the first round in presidential elections, or between any candidate receiving more than 12.5 percent of the vote for National Assembly elections. This system lets voters express their true first preference in the first round and it offers fringe parties an opportunity to appeal to relatively narrow segments of the population. However, because most unpopular politicians are forced out or marginalized after the first vote, it also makes it easier for centrist candidates to win in the second round. To further maximize their chances of winning the second round, main parties of the left and right usually agree to nominate only one candidate each.

For example, the first round of the April 2007 presidential election pitted 12 candidates against each other. Eight of those candidates received less than 10 percent of the vote each. The top four candidates were the center-right Nicolas Sarkozy with 31 percent of the vote, the center-left Ségolène Royal with 26 percent, the centrist François Bayrou, with 19 percent, and the far-right Jean-Marie Le Pen, with 10 percent. Had this been a National Assembly election, Sarkozy, Royal, and Bayrou all would have passed to the second round, having each obtained more than 12.5 percent of the vote. But because this was the presidential election, only the top two candidates moved on. In the second round of the election, held two weeks later, Sarkozy topped Royal by 53 percent to 47 percent to become president of the Republic.

Such an electoral system provides French voters with more extensive party choices than in the United States or Great Britain, yet it also generates relatively

THE 2007 PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES
The final round of the 2007 presidential election pitted Ségolène Royal against eventual winner Nicolas Sarkozy.
cohesive governing majorities. For example, upon election in 2007, Nicolas Sarkozy immediately dissolved the National Assembly and called parliamentary elections, which took place a month later. The two rounds of voting yielded 345 seats for the center-right and 227 seats for the left, giving Sarkozy a comfortable governing majority in the 577-member house. When compared against the instability of the Fourth Republic, the history of Fifth Republic presidents and prime ministers reflects the stability and centrism provided by the electoral institutions of contemporary France.

The French state is democratic to the core, but democratic in a particular way. The institutions of the Fifth Republic, while providing some checks and balances, place considerable power in the hands of the executive branch. Well-trained, self-assured, and imbued with a sense of purpose, the president, prime minister, cabinet, and top members of the bureaucracy take the lead in the policy process. They are more insulated from the legislative branch, the judicial branch, and from average citizens and interest groups than many of their counterparts in countries such as the United States or Germany. Moreover, there are no powerful, constitutionally autonomous sub-national governments, as in many federal democracies.

France’s institutions make for efficient government, but they also help account for the intensity and frequency of protest. When French citizens feel that their interests are not being taken seriously because they are excluded from the policymaking process, they take their case to the streets. Because they believe the executive branch
TABLE 4.1
Presidents and Prime Ministers of the French Fifth Republic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>President</th>
<th>Prime Minister</th>
<th>Prime Minister</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Charles de Gaulle (center-right)</td>
<td>1958–1969 Michel Debré (center-right)</td>
<td>1959–1962 Georges Pompidou (center-right)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Maurice Couve de Murville (center-right)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Jacques Chirac (center-right) 1984–1986</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Michel Rocard (center-left) 1988–1991</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Edith Cresson (center-left) 1991–1992</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pierre Bérégovoy (center-left) 1992–1993</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Edouard Balladur (center-right) 1993–1995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacques Chirac (center-right)</td>
<td>1995–2007 Alain Juppé (center-right)</td>
<td>1995–1997 Lionel Jospin (center-left)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Jean-Pierre Raffarin (center-right) 2002–2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dominique de Villepin (center-right) 2005–2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicolas Sarkozy (center-right)</td>
<td>2007– François Fillon (center-right)</td>
<td>2007–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

decides policy behind closed doors and then pushes decisions through parliament or sidesteps the legislature altogether, they also believe that they have no other options.

On the other hand, institutions are not the only answer to the question of why the French so often engage in political protest. Great Britain also has a strong executive branch and relatively limited opportunities for public participation in
Chapter 4: France

policymaking. And while the British have staged significant periods of protest—some of which are also due to their centralized institutions—French protests tend to be more intense and more common. Moreover, since the 1970s, France has decentralized power to a limited degree by increasing the power of the Constitutional Council, regional and local governments, and even the legislature, but this has not significantly reduced the levels or strength of dissent. In other words, to answer the question of why contentious protest is such a common part of French politics, the answer cannot lie only with the highly centralized nature of French institutions.

What other factors help explain the prominence of protest in France?

**IDENTITIES IN FRANCE**

Recent evidence confirms that a particularly French approach to protest exists. Surveys conducted between the early 1980s and late 1990s reveal French respondents to be much more likely to have taken part in lawful demonstrations, unofficial strikes, and building or factory occupations than their counterparts in similar developed democracies (see Table 4.2). This stands in contrast to the tradition of signing a petition or participating in a boycott, which are much more common in Sweden and the United States. French citizens are simply more likely to participate...
Identities in France

in active, collective forms of contentious politics than most of their neighbors. Protest is, thus, a ritual that is intimately linked to a French identity.

Is there something distinctive about French identity when it comes to contentious politics? French history provides many examples of what political sociologist Charles Tilly has called *repertoires of collective action*, forms of mobilization that are ingrained in the public consciousness and that recur at regular intervals because the public intuitively understands what the form of mobilization is supposed to accomplish. French protestors and the French public alike tend to be relatively sympathetic to dramatic kinds of mobilization, and this helps increase the frequency of contentious politics. It is important not to overstate this point—it is easy to believe that history dictates present day events, or to reduce France to a caricature of a society in permanent upheaval—but it is also true that “doing protest” and “being French” have a lot in common.

This section explains how four critical social cleavages in French society help generate much of the country’s unrest. First, economic class divisions have been a source of friction for more than 200 years, and political parties on the left such as the socialists and communists have frequently used the divide between haves and have-nots to mobilize protest. Second, appeals to nationalism have also spurred conflict, especially when leaders on the political right have tapped into a yearning for what they view as a bygone era of “Frenchness” that has been undermined by

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 4.2</th>
<th>Percentage of Respondents Saying They Have Participated in Various Forms of Protest, 1981–1999</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Attending Lawful Demonstrations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great Britain</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

France’s joining the multinational European Union and by the entry of millions of immigrants from overseas.

Religion is a third long-standing form of identity that generates political mobilization in France. However, in contrast to many other countries, it is not so much that different religions divide the French people from each other. Instead, the French are divided to a greater extent between those who believe religion should have a role in public life and those who believe in a strict separation of church and state, known in France as laïcité (pronounced ly-ee-see-tay’). The final identity-based division in France revolves around what University of Michigan political scientist Ronald Inglehart calls post-materialism. Inglehart argues that individuals who do not worry about food, shelter, and other basic material necessities of life tend to express greater concern for values of individual autonomy, self-expression, and lifestyles of their own choosing. In contrast, people who adhere to “materialist” values focus on obtaining and maintaining their own and their families’ day-to-day physical and economic security. At root, Inglehart argues that material prosperity tends to change people’s values. In France, post-materialists are differentiated from materialists partly by education levels and partly by generation—with younger and better-educated citizens tending to have post-materialist political interests, while older and less well-educated citizens remain focused on materialist concerns. Together, these four cleavages create political friction that drives many waves of social protest.

Class Divisions

Class identity has long divided French society. Industrialization on the outskirts of major cities began in the early nineteenth century and drew large number of peasants off the land into urban areas. As industry spread, working-class consciousness developed and gained intensity during the unrest of 1848 and in widespread protests in Paris in 1871. By the end of the nineteenth century, the French working class was highly mobilized. Yet, as a group, workers’ sympathies were divided between two main political groups: the communists and the socialists.

After World War II, France had one of the strongest communist parties in Western Europe, reflecting the continuing importance of class identities and of the working class movement. In the founding postwar legislative election of November 1946, the French Communist Party received 28 percent of the popular vote, the highest percentage of any political party in the country. In subsequent elections of the Fourth Republic, the Communist Party regularly garnered more than 25 percent of the vote. Yet, starting in the 1970s, French citizens’ identification with the working class began to decline. This is consistent with trends across Europe, as factory work has been outsourced to developing countries and as ideologies of class struggle were dealt a blow by the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991. Still, perceived class differences have not disappeared. Tensions between workers and employers or between workers and the state—when it is perceived to oppose workers’ rights, job security, or the welfare state—create ongoing opportunities for mobilizing protest in France. In 2009, for example, more than 1 million
workers participated in a one-day strike to protest the government’s handling of the economic crisis. Given France’s population of 63 million, this would be the equivalent of a strike involving the entire population of the state of Minnesota.

Nationalism and Its Challengers

As with class identities, French nationalism is deeply rooted in the country’s history. Yet, support for nationalism can be found across the entire political spectrum in France. All strains of French nationalism call for strong central government and for France to retain independence from international commitments seen as limiting national sovereignty. Nationalists on the political left emphasize the global political, intellectual, and artistic leadership France has exhibited since the Revolutionary era. On the center-right of the political spectrum, Charles de Gaulle’s resistance to the Nazi-imposed Vichy regime has inspired what are known as “Gaullist” nationalists.

Yet it has been nationalists on the far right that have captured international media attention. They are by far the most numerous and vocal nationalists in contemporary French politics, tracing their roots back to nineteenth-century monarchist or Napoleonic imperial sympathies, or even to the twentieth-century Vichy regime. Although these historical forms of political organization are typically not held up as models for the future, many far-right nationalists hearken back to an era of “strong leadership,” and call for limiting the influence of “external” forces within French society, in particular immigrants and the supra-national European Union. The National Front Party exemplifies this type of far-right nationalism, mobilizing voters that tend to have less education and, thus, fewer skills with which to compete in a competitive global marketplace.

In large part, these voters and their far-right leaders are focusing their frustrations on the large-scale immigration from France’s former overseas colonies that literally changed the face of the country in the post–World War II era. Millions of non-white immigrants came from the Caribbean, from sub-Saharan Africa, and from South, Southeast, and East Asia. Many of these newcomers brought different cultures and religions—in particular, Islam. They have settled in France, they have had children and grandchildren, and many of these families have become citizens and have integrated themselves into French society.

Unlike in the United States, France keeps no official census data on ethnic minorities. However, estimates of France’s immigrant or immigrant-descendant population is placed as high as 25 percent of the total, if all French citizens with at least one immigrant grandparent are included. These French immigrants and their descendants are not anti-nationalist in any organized way: indeed, many are proudly French. However, their presence has created tensions between far-right nationalists who want them to “go home,” and immigrant leaders and non-immigrant French citizens who are adapting more easily to the new face of France. This cleavage, thus, divides nationalists who value centralized authority and a more unified notion of French culture, and multiculturalists or regional forces that have a more pluralistic or decentralized vision of France.
**Religious Identities versus Laïcité**

France is a predominantly Catholic country, sometimes called the “eldest daughter of the Church” for its long-standing official ties to Catholicism. Yet, the Catholic Church lacks the political and social influence it possesses in countries such as Italy or Ireland. This is partly because while a majority of respondents in a recent poll self-identified as Catholic, only about 5 percent of France’s Catholics attend Church services regularly.¹ There are also important non-Catholic minorities in the country that have become meaningful actors in negotiations over religious issues. France’s 2 million Protestants have played a prominent role in the country’s history as far back as the Ancien Régime. France also has the largest populations of Muslims (estimates range from 2.5 to 5 million) and Jews (600,000) in Europe, and one of the largest and most active Buddhist communities in the West. As with Catholics, not all of these minority religious adherents attend services regularly.

In fact, this disjuncture between those who practice religion and those who do not is reflected in the extremely important political divide between people who believe there is a role for religion in public affairs and those who demand a strict separation of Church and State. As in the United States and Turkey, and unlike in most other Western European countries, in France there exists strong support for the political principle of secularism known as laïcité. This principle emerged out of the Revolutionary and Republican traditions, which saw the Church as an ally of the hated monarchy and nobility. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, French politicians enacted a series of reforms that ended government support of Catholicism as the official state religion. For example, following a 1905 law, the government could provide no religion with financial or political support. Although the concept of laïcité has been hotly debated, it is also officially enshrined as a core concept in the French constitution, Article 1 of which reads, “France shall be an indivisible, secular, democratic, and social Republic.”

There are a number of exceptions to this principle of political secularism. In all parts of France, the government negotiates with leaders of religious groups over matters of importance to them, even though it does not officially recognize religions. For example, the government provides financial support to private religious schools that agree to conform to the state’s official educational curriculum, a fact that has been contentious for advocates of laïcité. On the other hand, the state has also gone further than many of its European counterparts to publicly distance itself from expressions of religion in the public sphere, for example by forbidding the wearing of Muslim headscarves and other visible signs of religion in public schools and by banning the burqa and niqab, full-face and body covers worn by a very small percentage of Muslim women in France.

In short, a divide between religious adherents and advocates of laïcité have been the poles around which many protests have been organized. This is true not only of the painful and prolonged national debates about the place of Muslim headscarves in public schools (which culminated in a ban in 2004), but also in protests in the 1980s surrounding state funding of religious schools. Tensions over church–state relations have cropped up numerous times in Fifth Republic France in ways that have few or no parallels in other developed democracies.
Post-Materialist Identities

In the 1970s, political scientist Ronald Inglehart argued that citizens’ values in wealthy democratic societies were changing. He called this transformation a shift from “materialism” to “post-materialism.” Materialists were interested first and foremost on obtaining economic prosperity and security, while post-materialists turned their focus to values such as freedom from authority, individualism, aesthetics, and maintaining the environment. Post-materialist values emerged most clearly in Western Europe starting in the 1960s, after Europe had recovered from the devastation of World War II. With prosperity widespread, citizens in Western Europe began changing their attitudes towards the use of government authority.

Although this value system was not unique to France, it has formed the basis of a number of protest movements in France over the years. In particular, many French citizens grew weary of the influence of the powerful centralized state on their individual lives. Such anti-authoritarian ideas motivated students and workers in the late 1960s to protest the hierarchical nature of French society. In recent years, post-materialist values have fed protest against government policies that appear to favor economic growth at the expense of values like preserving the environment.

For example, protest leaders such as farmer José Bové gained fame for challenging the influence of large multinational corporations in French life. Bové led a 1999 march that ransacked a McDonald’s construction site. His actions—and the fact that he then had to spend a few weeks in jail—brought attention to his movement’s complaint that multinational companies were making money selling mediocre products that displaced the higher quality, more natural foods produced by French farmers. Another group, known as ATTAC (Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions for the Aid of Citizens), crystallizes many of these same concerns. ATTAC describes itself as working toward “social, environmental, and democratic alternatives in the globalization process,” and its members call themselves altermondistes (other worlders), to reflect their thinking that “another world is possible.” Tensions between citizens with a post-materialist identity and a state they view as too focused on exercising its authority or promoting economic growth have resurfaced with regularity in France and underpin a number of large contemporary protests.

As the summary table on the following page highlights, a variety of important political identities exist in France, based around class, nation, religion, and post-materialism. At times, individuals may embrace multiple identities, such as a “working-class Muslim immigrant student,” or “middle-class Catholic nationalist retiree.” While these identities are not sufficient to explain the French propensity to engage in protest, they are the raw material that political leaders can mold into successful political action. This is especially true in France, where certain repertoires of collective action have long existed, and continue to remind citizens that their friends, neighbors, and fellow-citizens frequently attempt to make a political statement by engaging in demonstrations, strikes, or even by occupying a building. However, even if political identity helps account for the greater likelihood of protest in France, it still cannot explain when and why particular protest events take place. For that, it is important to turn to the concrete interests that mobilize actors.
Interests In France

French political institutions provide a target for protest and political identities define many of the axes along which protest develops. However, it usually takes political interests to mobilize people to action. Most scholars of contentious politics argue that groups are not just expressing their identities when they act collectively; rather they are trying to achieve specific goals. What do French groups want when they strike, march, or burn things down? At least in part, students want money for schools; workers and the unemployed want jobs or benefits; and those who live in run-down neighborhoods want economic opportunities. Organized interests in French society help coordinate these political actions.

In order to understand the role of interests in French politics, it is vital to survey the key French interest groups, political parties, and the state itself (which is an actor with its own interests during moments of protest). These groups are especially important for answering this chapter’s question. Then we will look at three watershed moments in the recent history of protest in France, including the dramatic events of May 1968, protests over education policy in the 1980s, and conflicts over urban and economic policy in the 2000s. Each of these moments involved
the substantial influence of concrete interests or interest groups. By examining the broader context, however, we see that interests by themselves are also not sufficient to explain instances of contentious politics in France.

**Interest Groups**

As in most democracies, France has a vibrant community of interest groups that seek to further their members’ goals in politics. Some of these groups are powerful by virtue of their close ties to the national-government bureaucracy or to political leaders. This is true, for example, of the National Federation of Farmers’ Unions (FNSEA) and of the employers’ organization Movement of French Enterprises (MEDEF), both of which meet regularly with state representatives to discuss policy decisions affecting their interests and also play a role in administering state-sponsored programs. While the MEDEF does not have much experience leading disruptive strikes, the FNSEA has been more active when agricultural interests have been at stake. In September and October 2009, to protest falling revenues, its members stopped traffic by driving tractors onto highways and through towns and dumped truckloads of dirt in local streets and town squares, including on the Champs-Elysées in Paris.

Although workers’ unions such as the General Labor Confederation (CGT), the Workers’ Force (FO), and the French Democratic Confederation of Labor (CFDT) have a high profile, their membership and influence has dwindled over the past few decades. They now organize fewer than 10 percent of the workforce, which is the lowest unionization rate of any industrialized democracy in Europe. Yet, they continue to play a prominent role in protest movements, as they often succeed in mobilizing non-union members when they stand up for issues that benefit all workers. In March 2010, the unions helped sponsor a day-long public sector strike that brought tens of thousands of people to the streets to protest economic and social cuts by the government, crippling train service and prompting many teachers to leave their classrooms.4

Unlike in the United States, many French university students participate in student unions that have at times played leading roles in organizing protests. The influential National Students Union of France (UNEF), for example, organizes its members to shape central government policies that affect university students across the country. It has been active in all major episodes of protests involving young people, mobilizing in 1968 to oppose restrictive university policies and in 2006 to help overturn the employment law that weakened protections for first time jobseekers.

In the early 1980s, these traditional groups were supplemented by the emergence of ethnically based groups, including some that grew to national proportions and contributed to protest actions. This rise was thanks in part to a 1981 law permitting non-citizens to organize associations and to early 1980s legislation that provided incentives for cities and towns to support local associations. One group of second-generation North Africans capitalized on these changes in the mid-1980s to organize massive demonstrations calling attention to the problems of racism and the uncertain legal status of many immigrants. Their efforts were complemented by anti-racist groups such as the influential S.O.S. Racisme.
Political Parties

Political parties traditionally represent society’s identities and interests, channeling citizens’ concerns and aspirations into parliamentary and governmental discussions and policies. Yet, French political parties in the Fifth Republic are not as strong or cohesive as parties in many other liberal democracies. Ideological and personal differences have created splits on the left and the right that have often undermined the formation of stable, successful parties. Although their numbers, names, and philosophies have shifted over time, parties in France can be understood as divided between center-right, center-left, far-right, and far-left tendencies.

Center-Right: The UMP, the UDF, and the UDF Successor Parties  The Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) is the major center-right party. It was formally founded in 2002, but it evolved out of earlier incarnations (such as the long-standing Rally for the Republic Party, RPR), and in its various forms has held power in the Fifth Republic longer than any other party. It rose in the early years of the Republic as the party that supported President de Gaulle, and represents the conservative segments of society such as business leaders, shopkeepers, professionals, farmers, and retirees. It succeeded in electing Jacques Chirac and Nicolas Sarkozy as presidents in 2002 and 2007.

Historically, the other major center-right party was the Union for French Democracy (UDF), which was formed in the 1970s to support President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing. In its early years, the UDF (itself a coalition of small center-right parties) differed from the Gaullist parties in that it favored less government intervention in the market economy, but it typically worked with the Gaullist party in parliament. In 2007, the UDF split into the New Center Party, which is allied with the UMP, and the Democratic Movement, which tacked toward the center and does not support Sarkozy or the UMP. Center-right parties have had a National Assembly majority since the 2002 elections.

Center-Left: The Socialists  The Socialist Party (PS) has been the dominant center-left party in France’s Fifth Republic. By the late 1970s, it had grown in strength and had emerged as the primary vote-getter on the political left, pulling ahead of the far-left Communist Party. In 1981, François Mitterrand was the first socialist elected president, and the subsequent legislative elections brought the left to power in the National Assembly as well. This momentous transition has been termed l’alternance, to mark the shift across the right–left political divide. It was particularly significant because in the early years of the Fifth Republic, Mitterrand had referred to de Gaulle’s 1958 constitution as a “permanent coup d’état,” raising questions about whether the institutions would survive under leftist leadership, or whether the Constitution would be rewritten yet again. Once in power, however, Mitterrand decided that the strong state and strong executive branch suited him just fine. The Fifth Republic had survived another potential crisis.
Interests in France

When the socialists took control of the government, they acted as a traditional leftist party, by nationalizing banks and insurance companies, increasing workers’ wages and taxes on businesses, reducing working hours, and ramping up public spending. However, these measures failed to reverse the widespread economic problems of the day, and by 1983 the PS leadership decided to turn away from its socialist platform and to engage in policies that were friendlier to the free market. Since that time, the socialists have moved even further towards the political center and away from their leftist roots. The party still draws support from civil servants, lower income groups, and educated professionals, but the Socialist Party and its allies have not held a majority in the National Assembly since 2002.

**Far Right: The National Front**  Founded in 1972 and led by Jean-Marie Le Pen until he was succeeded by his daughter Marine Le Pen in 2011, the National Front (FN) is the major far-right party in France. It represents the most conservative elements in society and, increasingly, the down-and-out working class that used to support the far-left Communist Party. The FN grew rapidly in the 1980s by appealing to anti-immigrant sentiment, employing such campaign slogans as “France for the French.” It also appeals to those who oppose French membership in the European Union, and those who favor stronger law and order.

The FN has never won many seats in the National Assembly. However, since 1988 Jean-Marie Le Pen and the FN have consistently appealed to millions of voters during presidential elections and during the first round of legislative elections. For example, in 2002, Le Pen received almost 5 million votes in the first round of the presidential election, enough to obtain a spot on the ballot for the runoff against Jacques Chirac. This was the first time since the Vichy era that a politician of the far right had been within striking distance of holding power in France, and the result shocked the country and the world. Although Le Pen garnered 4.5 million votes in the second round of the election, all of the other parties—from the far left to the center-right—threw their support behind the center-right candidate. Chirac was re-elected with more than 25 million votes, or more than 80 percent of the ballots cast.

**Far Left: The Communists and Others**  The French Communist Party (PCF) has been in decline for the past 30 years. It was one of the strongest parties in the country after its prominent role in the resistance against the Vichy regime during World War II, and it maintained a leading position on the political left well into the 1970s. However, its hard-line leftist appeal eventually wore thin for French voters, and its traditional support base of young voters, workers, and the less educated began to shift towards other parties. Some shifted allegiance to the socialists, while others moved in the direction of the National Front. Today, the PCF has little electoral appeal, even though it has reformed its political platform to be less dogmatic. In the 2007 legislative elections, the party won only 15 seats in the 577-member National Assembly, and its...
candidate garnered less than 2 percent of the vote in the presidential election held that same year.

There are a handful of other far-left parties on the French political scene that are represented in the first round of presidential elections. Parties like The Greens (which sometimes appeals to far-left sentiments, but at others times is more centrist), Workers Struggle, and the Revolutionary Communist League have each polled more than 1 million votes in at least one election since 1988. These parties are mostly a symbolic presence, drawing support from post-materialist voters attracted to their themes of environmentalism, anti-racism, and anti-capitalism. But they sometimes help translate these identities into extra-parliamentary protest actions.

The Interests of the State

To understand protest dynamics, it helps to think of the state itself as an actor with its own motivating interests. One key function of the modern state is to manage political conflict to keep the peace. When hundreds of thousands of protestors stream out onto the streets, the state has failed in this task. Social scientists Daniel Béland and Patrik Marier have identified two strategies that French governments have deployed to reduce the likelihood and the extent of social mobilization against the state. First, governments seek to divide the groups that are likely to protest—particularly labor unions—by cutting deals with some to undermine their resistance to controversial reforms. Second, they have tended to launch their most divisive initiatives during or just before the summer holiday season, when most French people are on vacation and are, thus, less likely to protest.5

When these strategies do not work, the state is faced with a choice: stand firmly behind its policies and weather the storm of protest, or back down on its initiatives to appease the protestors. Staying the course is difficult. Given the French propensity and sympathy for mobilizing against the state, demonstrations can go on for weeks, crippling the economy and destroying the legitimacy of the government in power. Backing down gets the people off the streets, but it means that important changes the government seeks to implement are not enacted. It also provides an incentive for mass mobilization the next time around, since the state has shown itself to be weak. In practice, the state often grants significant concessions to the protestors. However, it typically does not give them everything they want, nor does it usually deliver on all of its promises, scaling them back once the initial heat has subsided. The French state is, thus, an independent and calculating actor during prominent cycles of protest.

Examples of Protest

Massive demonstrations of 100,000 or more people are not everyday occurrences in France, yet they do occur with a certain regularity. Let us look more closely at three major protest events in recent decades to see what role interests, identities, and institutions have played in explaining protest. The French institutional setting has created frustrations and tensions that encourage outsiders to mobilize. Underlying identities provide the raw material for action and increase the likelihood that
people will use protest to express themselves. And, in most cases, specific actors pursuing their interests ultimately catalyze the protest movement.

The Events of May 1968  France experienced a baby boom after World War II, and students in this generation began arriving at universities in the 1960s. In response, the French state hastily constructed several new campuses across the country. However, the central authorities’ top-down approach to education had not changed. There were restrictions on visitation rights between men’s and women’s dormitories, professors were distant, and university authorities were losing their patience with the squatters, drug dealers, and other minor troublemakers who were populating their dormitories. When administrators enforced what seemed to the students to be hidebound and irksome rules and regulations, they drew attention to the symbolic distance between the government and the people. When about 300 members of the general student movement, the student union UNEF, and the more radical Revolutionary Communist Youth group gathered at the Sorbonne—France’s premier university—on May 3, 1968, to protest against these rules and regulations, the university rector ordered the police to arrest them, in spite of their having agreed to leave. Other students quickly arrived on the scene and leveled verbal abuse at the authorities, surrounded the police vans, and threw stones. The police responded with tear gas and further arrests.

Students organized a second wave of protests on May 6, with more than 60,000 people taking part. During the so-called “night of the barricades” on May 10–11, students felled trees and turned over cars to block the police, who overran the students with a stronger type of tear gas and dragged them out of cafés and buildings. Soon, teachers and workers struck out of sympathy for the students and frustration with the system of strict, top-down authority that rubbed them the wrong way in their own workplaces. There was a pervasive sense that French society was tightly controlled by employers and a few leading politicians, and that the rules they set were too confining and irritating for the times. By mid-May, automobile manufacturing plants were closed, air traffic was impossible, and rail travel had been suspended. At the height of the events of May 1968, between 7 and 10 million students and workers were protesting and the country was at a standstill.6

The dynamics of this massive and prolonged protest illustrate the points made throughout this chapter. First, the fact that French political institutions tend to concentrate power and freeze workers, students, and other interest groups out of policy discussions contributes to widespread discontent. Because they feel that traditional political channels will fail to address their interests, citizens express themselves in more confrontational ways. Second, the wealth and stability of French society in the postwar era incubated anti-authority post-materialist values, especially among younger French citizens. Finally, organized interests channeled these growing sentiments into active protests. Student groups such as the UNEF and the Revolutionary Communist Youth mobilized their members, and labor unions joined in with workers’ strikes. The government responded by granting universities greater autonomy to set rules, and with pay hikes for workers, including half-pay for strike days lost. However, the protests only ended when President de Gaulle dissolved the National Assembly at the end of May, called for snap elections in June, and threatened to impose a state of emergency.
if the unrest continued. The demonstrations subsided after a resounding majority of voters re-elected the Gaullist party to power in parliament.

1986 Education Reform Protests If the students of 1968 wanted to relax the restrictions placed on them by authority figures, by 1986, they wanted jobs. When the new conservative government of that year proposed an overhaul of the higher education system, it triggered a massive response. University and high school students were leery of the government’s plans to increase university fees and to identify on a diploma which particular university had granted the college degree. Students felt that higher education had to be accessible to all, regardless of their ability to pay, and that all universities had to be equally good. Raising the cost would financially squeeze some prospective students, and identifying the university on the diploma—a common step in most countries—would disadvantage students who did not attend what most informally regarded as the best universities.

From the government’s perspective, higher education reform aimed to promote economic development, and it calculated that since university campuses had been relatively quiet since 1968, serious opposition to proposed reforms was unlikely. But by 1986, youth unemployment was running around 39 percent, so the government underestimated students’ anger at proposed policy changes that might threaten their ability to attend university or to get a job once they graduated. Teacher and student unions voted to participate in a one-day strike on November 23 and to create an ad hoc committee to coordinate a series of demonstrations. They also received support from the anti-racist group S.O.S. Racisme, which helped to mobilize hundreds of thousands of high school students to attend the December 4 and 10 demonstrations that amounted in total to more than a half million students.7

During the protests, police and right-wing youths were caught on film attacking some of the participants. One student lost a hand, another lost an eye, and one student was clubbed to death. Public support quickly turned against the government and shifted squarely behind the students, who responded to the brutality by blocking traffic, erecting barricades, and breaking windows. In an effort to quell the violence and to shore up its flagging popularity, the government withdrew its proposed reforms. 8

In this case of mass protest, organized interest groups played a leading role in generating protest, drawing on materialist, post-materialist, and anti-racist identities to oppose state institutions that had not taken their perspective into account.

Urban Protests and the Backlash to Reforms of 2005–2006 The term “suburb” conjures up an image of a leafy, placid neighborhood in the United States, but French suburbs (called banlieues) are more like what Americans think of when they hear the term “inner cities”—areas of poverty, joblessness, and, at times, lawlessness, especially for young people. A wide range of ethnic groups populate France’s suburbs, including immigrants from France’s former colonies. Although many of these immigrants and their descendants are French citizens, they are often perceived as outsiders in France, including by the police who have a tense relationship with the inhabitants of the banlieues.

When two immigrant origin youths died fleeing the police in a Paris suburb in September 2005, it lit a powder keg of nationwide discontent. Over the
ensuring weeks, young men of predominantly Arab and African descent set fire to more than 9,000 cars and damaged dozens of schools, day-care centers, public buildings, and private businesses, causing approximately $300 million in damage and resulting in one death and more than 200 injuries. These protests, unlike the student protests of 1968 and 1986, were not organized by any central body. They occurred across the country, but were spontaneous and local, mostly involving forms of vandalism (like burning cars) that had been common for decades in these neighborhoods. The participants clearly shared an identity of feeling isolated and alienated from society, but they also shared interests in prompting the state to provide more concrete economic opportunities for the residents of these down-and-out neighborhoods.

The government responded with a mix of policies. It cracked down on the protestors, instituting a curfew and invoking state of emergency powers not used in mainland France since the early years of the Fifth Republic when Algerian decolonization still roiled the country. They also reached out to residents of the *banlieues* with a series of policy proposals encapsulated in a March 2006 law on equal opportunities. This law proved incredibly controversial, especially a provision called the *First Employment Contract*, designed to relax protections for young workers looking for their first job. The proposal was meant to encourage employers to hire young workers—particularly those from the suburbs—by granting them more flexibility to dismiss new employees than is available under France’s restrictive labor laws, where firing people after the three-month probationary period is difficult and costly. However, the government used a series of policies...
of legislative maneuvers to pass the law that gave members of the National Assembly little time to debate it or power to amend it. Parties on the left appealed to the Constitutional Council, but to little avail, since it approved the First Employment Contract dimension of the law.

While the bill was working its way through parliament, the left parties, labor and student unions, and other groups ramped up opposition to the plan both inside and outside of parliament. Opponents of the law feared that it would place young people in an especially vulnerable position, with bosses able to pressure them and then to fire them for no good reason. They dubbed it the “Kleenex contract,” because it allowed employers to use and discard young employees.9 Protests against the law began in February and came into full force in March and April. Hundreds of thousands and then millions of university students, high school students, and workers jammed the streets, blockaded universities, and disrupted transport and mail services—all to show their massive rejection of the government’s plan. Although the prime minister at first would not back down, saying that the government refused to “capitulate to the logic of ultimatums,”10 President Chirac began to hedge on his support for the law at the end of March, and by mid-April the government withdrew the First Employment Contract, giving in to the overwhelming pressure of nationwide protest. In these cases, therefore, immigrant and class identities combined with concrete economic and social interests in the context of an exclusive institutional structure to produce one of the most intense sequences of protest events in contemporary French history.

To the casual observer, demonstrations involving millions of citizens may seem like a spontaneous outpouring of anger. Yet, these protests are most often organized events with a specific set of goals in mind. As the summary table below indicates, interest groups such as labor unions, student unions, and anti-racist groups play an important role in mobilizing members into the streets. They also represent their particular interests in demanding more freedom in the dorms, no university names on diplomas, or the preservation of workers’ rights for young people entering the job market. Concrete interests and the leadership of interest groups are almost always central to mas-

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sive demonstrations. However, they are not always of primary importance, as we saw in the 2005 riot events. Moreover, even when they are critical, they are not enough to explain protest. In France, understanding interests has to be combined with a grasp of institutions and identities in order to comprehend the many instances of high-profile protest that have rocked the country during the decades of the Fifth Republic.

**CONCLUSION**

The urban protests of 2005–2006 epitomize the intricate relationship between institutions, identities, and interests that characterizes many protest events. As an actor with interests, the government responded to the 2005 wave of suburban disturbances by repressing the violence and by introducing legislation aimed at preempting further unrest in the banlieues. However, it used the strength of the executive branch to push its plan through with little debate and excluded input from workers, students, or other groups relatively isolated from power. Labor unions, student unions, and high school students mobilized along class lines and student identities to fight for their interest in preserving protections for young people. Participants in the 2006 protests stood up for workers’ rights, even though protecting those rights may mean fewer jobs for young people as a group. The government responded by quickly using the strong institutions to repeal the objectionable law.

**Why do French citizens engage in such frequent and dramatic forms of protest?**

The evidence suggests that we need to analyze how history, institutions, identities, and interests have interacted to produce France’s particular circumstances. Historically, French citizens have a long track record of participating in intense protests. Dating back to the French Revolution that toppled the Ancien Régime and stretching through the popular uprisings of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, revolts have formed part of the fabric of French history. They provide an understandable “repertoire of collective action” that allows today’s French citizens to sympathize with many protests when their Americans counterparts might not.

The institutions of the Fifth Republic also play a significant role. Since 1958, France’s political structure has tended to insulate top-level decision-makers from the input of average citizens. In response, people have to make their case in other ways. While protest is far from ubiquitous in France, it is more frequent and intense than in many other advanced democracies, partly because French political institutions force the hand of those who are discontent with state policies. Since they feel they cannot be heard through more institutionalized channels of participation, they have a greater tendency to march through Paris by the thousands, blockade highways with their trucks, burn cars in the banlieues, or use their tractors to dump tomatoes in town centers.

Protesters often mobilize around important group identities within France. The unemployed, far-right anti-immigrant activists, proponents of the separation of church and state, and anti-globalists draw on class, nationalist, secular, and post-materialist identities to rally their troops to action. These identities divide groups within society and are, therefore, the seed beds from which dramatic protest can grow. They are not permanent, nor are they the only salient identities within
France’s borders, but in their various and evolving forms they have constituted the main axes of conflict within the country since the inauguration of the Fifth Republic.

Without concrete interests at stake, however, these identities are much harder to mobilize. Students want jobs and job security, workers want to preserve their pensions, nationalists want to protect France from the influences of immigration or the European Union. These interests often bump up against those advocated by other domestic groups, such as employers who seek a more flexible labor market or openness to foreign trade, or even against the interests of the state in trimming the welfare state to lower its budget. The public clashes between groups and the state that so often dominate international headlines typically revolve around the distribution of key economic or social resources.

In sum, France’s track record of revolution, revolt, and turmoil has laid the groundwork for popular understanding of the power of protest and has shaped the country’s repertoires of collective action. The centralized and insulated institutions of the Fifth Republic help the state take relatively decisive action, but they also tend to freeze some voices out of the discussion. This increases the incentive for marginalized actors to take to the streets to make their opinions heard. Long-standing cleavages across dimensions of class, nation, religion and post-materialism provide the raw materials for many political conflagrations. And concrete interests and organized interest groups help funnel action in specific instances of strikes, marches, and violence. Although there is no iron law of social protest, understanding how these factors interact provides a much clearer picture of why a stable, rich democracy like France continues to experience so much disruptive contentious politics.

KEY TERMS

_Ancien Régime_ 118
Estates-General 118
constitutional monarchy 119
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REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What are the most important reasons why protest is so common in France?
2. Have institutions, identities, and interests been equally important in all cases of French protest?
3. Is being a student a class identity, a post-material identity, or both?
4. Should states negotiate with protestors to take their opinions into account, or does this only invite more protest in the future?
5. What do lessons from France imply about protest in other countries?

SUGGESTED READINGS


NOTES

3. See the ATTAC website at http://www.attac.org/.