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Fourth Republic Politics, 1944–58

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Keywords

the Algerian War; anti-Communism; the Cold War; the Fourth Republic; Pierre Poujade; the Third Force

Q. What were the political divisions in France in the immediate post-Liberation period? Which were the strongest parties and why?

A. Immediately after the Liberation, or at least after the first post-war elections, the strongest parties seemed to be the Communists (the PCF) and the newly formed Christian Democrat Party (the *Mouvement Républicain Populaire* or MRP). In the medium term, things turned out to be more complicated. Tightly structured parties (like the PCF or the MRP) were not flexible enough to play the various games of Fourth Republic politics, in particular, they did not always respond to local politics well enough. Numbers of voters or numbers of seats in parliaments did not always count for very much. Very small parties that could use their 'hinge' position to negotiate sometimes had more influence than big parties that refused to compromise.

Q. What impact did the Cold War have upon the Fourth Republic?

A. Anti-Communism soon came to dominate Fourth Republic politics. It explains how Pétainists were allowed back into political life and why apparently disparate parties were able to unite in coalition governments and cross party groupings.

Q. What was the Third Force?

A. The Third Force was an alliance of Socialists, Christian Democrats and others who stood between the Communist left and the Gaullist right. In some ways, Fourth Republic politics were all about a struggle between two different kinds of anti-Communism, i.e. that offered by the Gaullist RPF and that offered by the Third Force.

Q. What was the significance of the 1951 general election?

A. The 1951 elections saw a return to political life of conservatives, of loosely structured parties (pulled together, to some extent, by the *Centre National des Indépendants*), and those people who had supported Vichy.

Q. What was the significance of the 2 January 1956 elections? Why did Pierre Poujade's party make such an impact?

A. Pierre Poujade's party (the UFF) became a general focus for dissatisfaction with the Fourth Republic. Its vote went well beyond the original group mobilized by Poujadism among small businessmen. Poujade himself always claimed that even Charles de Gaulle had voted for the UFF in 1956. The election was, however, a

dubious victory for the UFF. By moving into party politics, Poujadists left their natural base behind. The movement became more divided, and it became increasingly identified with the right (which had not been the case in 1953 and 1954) and Poujadist parliamentarians proved ineffective.

Q. What events led to the end of the Fourth Republic? Why did it collapse?

A. The short answer is Algeria. A nationalist rebellion had been going on there for at least four years. France had retreated from Indochina in 1954 but the army was unwilling to make another concession, and the fact that there was a large European settler population in Algeria made it a more problematic area. The political leaders of the Fourth Republic in 1958 (Coty and Pflimlin) were weak men where those of the late 1940s (Queuille, Moch and Auriol) had been exceptionally tough. I am not sure, however, that this answer is sufficient in itself. In some ways, the Fourth Republic's own system made the Algerian issue hard to solve because the very great importance given to certain centre-right parties exaggerated the influence of the French Algerian lobby. The Fifth Republic, with its much simpler electoral system, made it clear that support for French Algeria was, in fact, quite limited.

A broader reason for the fall of the Fourth Republic lies in anti-Communism. Communism had seemed a real threat in the late 1940s and this had pulled the whole bourgeois system together. The death of Stalin in 1953 and, curiously, the Soviet invasion of Hungary diminished the threat. The Soviet Union looked like an ordinary great power rather than a centre of revolutionary agitation. In some ways, the Fourth Republic fell because the particular kind of bourgeois unity that it had offered was no longer needed. Economic and social change also had an effect. The advent of the Fifth Republic went with the rise of companies that operated at national (rather than local) level, with the spread of television (very important to de Gaulle's presidential style and very important for cutting the old Fourth Republic notables out of the picture), and, of course, with the fact that the graduates of the Ecole Nationale d'Administration (founded in 1945) began to reach positions of influence in the government.

Key publication by Richard Vinen

France, 1934–1970 (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996).

Further reading

Robert Gildea, *France since 1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

Jean-Pierre Rioux, *The Fourth Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).