
The Pompidou Years, 1969–1974

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1 Change and continuity

A decisive test for the Fifth Republic

The resignation of General de Gaulle on 28 April 1969 did not clear the ground for a seamless succession, and there were many reasons for this. Above all, his resignation came at the end of a convoluted crisis and seemed to represent its logical conclusion. Foreshadowed by the poor election results of 1965 and 1967 which had revealed the gulf that now separated public expectations from government policy, followed by the convulsive crisis of 1968 that appeared to call into question the very foundations of society and cause the state to totter, the resignation was the culmination of a gradual process of erosion in public support for de Gaulle's republic.¹ It was logical to wonder whether the departure of the founder of the Fifth Republic would mean a change of regime or merely a change of personnel.

This indeed was what was at stake in the succession process that got under way that 28 April. The creation of the Fifth Republic had been the personal achievement of General de Gaulle, who had never ceased to fashion as he saw fit, with piecemeal additions and adjustments, both the letter and the spirit of its institutions. From the constitutional reform of 1962, which had introduced presidential elections by universal suffrage, to a style of government that came close to direct democracy by vesting most of the decision-making power in the president, the regime had steadily strayed ever further from the parliamentary system laid down in the founding text of 1958.

This drift, which was deplored by many politicians especially on the left, seemed clearly linked to the personality of the founder of the Fifth Republic, to his pre-eminent historical role, to his charismatic personality and to the imperious style that inclined him to the view that once the ritual of universal suffrage had been celebrated, power was to be exercised by hierarchical, indeed military, command. Many of those engaged in politics felt that the departure of General de Gaulle ought to mark a resumption of normality, returning the regime to the letter of the

constitution: that is, to parliamentary government. With the removal of the larger-than-life personality whose massive shadow had seemed to crush French politics ever since 1958, the era of 'personal power' that the left and a section of the right imputed to de Gaulle would be at an end. The new president of the republic, as one politician among others, would be forced, whatever his personal qualities, to negotiate with his peers, using the institutions in a way more in keeping with the constitution's founding text. Moreover, the notion that Gaullism could not survive the disappearance of its founder was shared by the General's own followers and perhaps by de Gaulle himself, firm in the conviction that he had had no predecessor and could have no genuine successor either. After all, just two days prior to the 27 April referendum, André Malraux, the most loyal of all de Gaulle's followers, speaking at the final meeting of the General's supporters, had stated that the post-de Gaulle era could not be built on the ruins of Gaullism. Malraux had thus pitched the future of the regime into the referendum balance and declared that de Gaulle's republic could not outlive de Gaulle.

But if, for contrasting reasons, this analysis was shared by de Gaulle's opponents and by his diehard supporters, it failed to take account of a number of other facts that were pulling in the opposite direction. First, there was the vast majority that the General had won in the June 1968 legislative elections, each component of which displayed its attachment to the Fifth Republic, even if some, like Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and his Independent Republicans, had opposed the General in the April referendum. Second, with its massive 'yes' vote in the 1962 referendum, the French electorate had ratified the constitutional changes and expressed a clear desire that the Fifth Republic should endure. Third, there was increasing support for the regime's institutions among a section of the opposition that had taken on board the clear shift in public opinion, which was now firmly convinced, contrary to the view taken by the majority of French electors prior to 1958, that a democratic republic and strong executive power could after all coexist. François Mitterrand, the candidate of the united left in 1965, was attempting to win over to this presidential approach a section of those who had previously given him their backing. Meanwhile, in the centre, the managers who supported Jacques Duhamel, Joseph Fontanet or René Pleven sought to distance themselves ever more sharply from those who, like Jean Lecanuet and Pierre Abelin, remained frozen in unwavering opposition to any form of anti-European Gaullism.

It was around this issue that the various political forces, faced with the need to find a strategy and select candidates for the unexpected presidential election that de Gaulle's resignation had triggered, would now group.

The candidature of Georges Pompidou

The twenty-eighth of April 1969 did not turn out to be the day of chaos that General de Gaulle and his loyal supporters had at every election warned would follow any result hostile to the ruling majority. On the contrary, everyone could now assess for themselves the ability of the institutions to weather a crisis. In view of the fact that the outgoing president of the republic had declared that his resignation would take effect at noon, Alain Poher, president of the Senate, who was entrusted under the constitution with the interim period, moved into the Elysée palace the same day at 3 p.m. There was doubtless some friction between the interim president, who was regarded as the true victor of the referendum, and the government, which after all had been appointed by de Gaulle and was still engaged in day-to-day business, but there was no threat of any real constitutional crisis. The Fifth Republic prepared calmly, if not placidly, to find a successor to Charles de Gaulle.

In actual fact, the name of this successor was already on everybody's lips. Georges Pompidou, prime minister from 1962 to 1968, the man who could take most credit for the June 1968 election triumph, and the potential leader of a parliamentary majority that in the main was quite ready to support him, had let it be known repeatedly during the first few months of 1969 that he intended to stand for president. It was believed that General de Gaulle had decided to resign in 1970 on his eightieth birthday and Pompidou was expecting to announce his candidature on that occasion.² Be that as it may, public opinion was in no doubt as to Pompidou's willingness to stand. One might of course object that in the tacit hierarchy of the Fifth Republic the second-ranking officer of state, and as such the heir apparent, was the current prime minister. But even if Maurice Couve de Murville could have been prevailed upon to stand, there were many reasons for him to stand aside. First, his political stature, after serving as prime minister for only a matter of months, was less substantial than that of his predecessor at the Hôtel Matignon (the residence of the prime minister). Second, there was a deep-seated enmity between the two men, since Pompidou remained convinced that, in an attempt to wreck his political career, de Murville had connived at slanders regarding his private life that were spread at the time of the Markovic affair.³ Lastly, if some of de Gaulle's supporters, angry with Pompidou for contributing to the failure of the referendum by presenting himself as a potential successor to the General, certainly felt tempted to block his path, this applied neither to the vast bulk of UDR deputies who saw Pompidou as their true leader,

nor to the political grouping as a whole, which the former prime minister had reorganized around his own handpicked men at the Lille conference in 1967.⁴

Pompidou moved fast to head off any manoeuvre on the part of possible Gaullist rivals. On the 28th itself, in a message to de Gaulle expressing his loyalty and the regret he felt about the General's resignation, Pompidou informed him that, as he had already announced, he intended to present his candidature to succeed him. Early the following morning his parliamentary secretary officially announced Pompidou's decision to run. This received the immediate endorsement of the political office of the UDR, which recommended that the party should give its official support to Pompidou, as a candidate who had emerged from its own ranks. That evening both the parliamentary grouping and the executive committee of the UDR swung behind him.⁵

To the party that had governed France since 1958, Pompidou presented himself as de Gaulle's natural successor, emphasizing the thread of continuity that he intended to make the main theme of his appeal to the electorate. But Pompidou was too shrewd a politician to overlook the fact that the General had lost his referendum as a result of dissent among the centre right, following the decision by Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and the majority of centrists to join the 'no' camp. To secure the presidency Pompidou knew that he had to attract back into the majority fold all those who had withdrawn their support from the General, while persuading the UDR to forgo taking revenge on its former allies for breaking the solidarity pact that had held since 1962. Pompidou therefore told the UDR deputies, reminding them of the elementary rules of electoral arithmetic, that in order to reach the decisive threshold it was essential to practise '*ouverture*' or openness, i.e. to form political alliances. Indeed, Pompidou was willing to extend this embrace to include all those who did not back the communist candidate.⁶ It remained to be seen whether those whose support he sought would be willing to enter into the alliance that he was offering.

Support from the right and 'opening' to the centre

Nothing could have appeared less certain than the backing of Giscard d'Estaing for Georges Pompidou's candidature. The young leader of the moderate right – he was forty-three at this time – had never concealed his ambition one day to succeed General de Gaulle. He knew, however, that on this occasion his chances were limited not only by his relative youth but also by the fact that he had no time to do the vital pre-campaign groundwork. But his inability to enter the fray did

not mean that he had to jettison any kind of personal strategy. If he could not himself stand, he could at least work to ensure that the transition he desired to see from Gaullists to moderates be effected by someone congenial to him, while he figured in the role of both stage director and designated successor. Thus, on 28 April, Giscard immediately mooted the idea of a 'candidature of reassurance', to be entrusted to a 'man of experience' – someone who had remained free of involvement in the political battles between majority and opposition. It was a portrait that one could hardly fail to recognize as that of Antoine Pinay. This was a clever move, since Pinay, who had served as prime minister under the Fourth Republic, might hope to attract a sizeable portion of the non-communist left to his candidature. Just one vital ingredient was missing: the agreement of Pinay himself. But, as in 1965, Antoine Pinay again side-stepped the challenge, declaring that he would only stand as a candidate of last resort in the event of a national emergency which, he added, did not then exist.⁷ Giscard's efforts to discover an alternative 'candidate of reassurance' who would be prepared to participate in the proposed venture proved vain, since on 30 April the parliamentary grouping of his party, the Independent Republicans, resolved to back Pompidou, leaving their leader, Giscard, with no choice but to fall into line. Pompidou had thus managed to secure the support of the same majority coalition that until April 1969 had backed General de Gaulle.

But Pompidou wanted to go still further, gnawing into support for the centrists whom he knew to be split over the prospect of joining the government coalition. Ever since the 1967 elections, Jacques Duhamel, Joseph Fontanet, Pierre Sudreau and others had been seeking a dialogue with the government and, as prime minister, Pompidou had developed contacts with them. In May 1969 Pompidou renewed these contacts and, having undertaken, if elected, to preside over a politically open style of government and to relaunch European policy, he finally won the support of this centre ground. On 22 May, at the end of a radio debate, Jacques Duhamel, chairman of the parliamentary grouping Progrès et démocratie moderne, pledged his support for Pompidou's candidature, thereby adding his voice to those of René Pleven and Joseph Fontanet who had both already taken this step. The presidential majority taking shape was thus tri-polar, adding a section of the centre to the Gaullists and the moderates.

Pompidou's candidature looked all the more impregnable, given the utter prostration of his adversaries.

The left in tatters

In 1965, pitted against General de Gaulle, the Left, with François Mitterrand as its candidate, had gained an unexpectedly high vote that had restored its credibility. But the 1969 presidential election could hardly have come at a worse moment. Still reeling from the impact of the *événements* of 1968, the left was deeply divided. The communist party, which was isolated following the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and exposed to the violent attacks of the *gauchistes*, wanted a single left-wing candidate who, as in 1965, would relieve it of the need to assess its numbers and would deprive the right of the ever effective electoral weapon of anti-communism. Any such move, however, would favour François Mitterrand, whose name would go forward as unity candidate. However, the Fédération de la gauche démocrate et socialiste (FGDS), which might have drawn strength from a second Mitterrand candidature, had collapsed in the aftermath of the 1968 events, while Guy Mollet, general secretary of the SFIO, was now worried by Mitterrand's openly declared ambition to lead the left. While the former partners of the non-communist left engaged in a trial of strength, a move by Gaston Defferre put an end to any notion of a single left-wing candidature. On 29 April, Defferre, deputy and mayor of Marseille, unexpectedly sought and won SFIO backing for his own bid for the presidency. The centrist image that Defferre had gained as parliamentary deputy and city mayor, following his attempt to form a 'broad federation' in 1965,⁸ set off a chain reaction. Defferre's candidature was rejected first by Mitterrand's Convention des institutions républicaines and then by Jean Poperen's Union des groupes et clubs socialistes, at their conference in Saint-Gratien. The PCF also rejected the centrist strategy implicit in Defferre's candidature, and chose as its own preferred candidate – not its general secretary Waldeck-Rochet, but Jacques Duclos, an old leader of good-natured and reassuring appearance. These two candidates of the left were quickly joined by two candidates of the extreme left, as the Parti socialiste unifié (PSU) rallied behind their national secretary Michel Rocard, and the Trotskyists of the Ligue communiste presented their leader Alain Krivine.⁹

With the left split, and its public support eroded by the fright felt by the French as they cast their minds back to the 1968 crisis, Pompidou had very little to worry about. Indeed, for Pompidou the only real danger was from the opposition centrists, with the candidature of the interim president of the republic, Alain Poher.

The candidature of Alain Poher

Whereas the candidature of Pompidou had long been expected, that of Alain Poher was the outcome of chance. He had become president of the Senate in October 1968 following the withdrawal, and with the backing, of Gaston Monnerville, but was virtually unknown to the French public. Since the existence of the Senate as an independent legislative chamber had been called into question by the reform put to referendum in April 1969, Alain Poher had found himself spearheading a rebellion of notables against General de Gaulle. The victory of the 'no' camp and Poher's resulting elevation to the Elysée suddenly transformed this discreet and unassuming senator into a prominent personality in French political life and therefore, at a stroke, made him a potential president in the eyes of French public opinion. This prospect, however, appeared to leave Poher cold. When questioned about his intentions, he replied that he would not stand. He stuck to this position even when Valéry Giscard d'Estaing urged him to take the place of the faltering Antoine Pinay. But two circumstances intervened to overcome the reluctance of the interim president. First, the opposition centrists, as well as a sizeable section of the non-communist left, saw him as the man best able to stop Pompidou. Pierre Abelin, Jean Lecanuet and the radical Félix Gaillard therefore urged Alain Poher to throw his hat into the ring. Rather more discreetly, Guy Mollet appealed for a candidate to step forward around whom socialists could rally without misgivings. The other factor that influenced Poher's decision was the findings of the opinion polls. Well before he had reached any decision on the matter, a growing number of electors were stating their determination to vote for him. This shift in public opinion towards Alain Poher culminated in mid-May when SOFRES credited him with 39 per cent of voting intentions in the first round of the election, while IFOP gave him 37 per cent. Either percentage would have placed him as runner-up to Pompidou. The projections for the second round of voting were of even greater interest: the Senate president was forecast to win with 56 per cent of the votes, leaving the former prime minister with 44 per cent.¹⁰

These encouraging prospects clinched the decision for Alain Poher. Having declared on 7 May, 'I am in no way a candidate, I do not wish to be, but I might perhaps be forced into it', by 12 May he had decided to take the plunge. The list of candidates was completed by a seventh man, Louis Ducatel, who represented nobody but himself. On 16 May 1969, the election campaign got under way.

The 1969 election campaign

What, in mid-May 1969, were the hopes and expectations of the French electorate that had just forced General de Gaulle to resign?¹¹ Opinion polls show that, as implicit in their 'no' vote in the April referendum, the French wanted a clean break from the politics of the past. A resounding 51 per cent of French people, as against 31 per cent, wanted the new president to introduce far-reaching change in the way that power was exercised. With the exception of foreign policy, where 51 per cent of French people as against 29 per cent wanted previous policies to be pursued, the desire for change touched every major area of French politics. Unsurprisingly, it was in the field of economic and social policy that expectations were highest, with 64 per cent of respondents as against 18 per cent hoping for a change in direction. The same desire for change was expressed (45 per cent as against 20 per cent) with regard to higher education. On the other hand, if the majority of French people wanted to see a fresh approach to constitutional issues, this was much less clearcut, with 39 per cent as against 30 per cent calling for change in this area. Looking closer, it is clear where concerns were focused and therefore easier to interpret the 'no' vote in the April 1969 referendum: 57 per cent of French people wanted their future president to act as an arbiter, above the fray, while just 32 per cent wanted him, like de Gaulle, to take personal charge of all the main planks of policy. The French people had not handed the General his notice inadvertently but out of a clear desire for change. Obviously the question was who, of the available candidates, could best fulfil this expectation. Until mid-May, opinion favoured Alain Poher over Pompidou.

Given their desire for a president who could act as arbiter, 51 per cent of French people felt that Alain Poher was better placed to play such a role than Pompidou. Poher was also thought more capable than Pompidou of being a 'president for all French people' (44 per cent as against 31 per cent for Pompidou); of 'healing the rifts that had emerged between the two camps at the April referendum' (43 per cent as against 20 per cent); and of addressing the interests of wage-earners (39 per cent as against 22 per cent), of farmers (30 per cent as against 24), and of small shopkeepers (40 per cent as against 18 per cent). Here again, one can see why the mid-May polls predicted a victory for Alain Poher. Pompidou, on the other hand, was viewed as a man of the right by 76 per cent of French people, whereas only 39 per cent attributed this label to Alain Poher, and as a 'representative of capital' by 55 per cent of respondents. To this was added a long list of terms that sketched in a rather unappealing picture of the majority grouping's candidate: among

other things, Pompidou was thought to be self-important, overbearing, pretentious, sardonic and devoid of convictions.

Despite this catalogue of liabilities, all the opinion polls predicted that Pompidou would win the first round with 41 or 42 per cent of the vote. There was obviously a mismatch between the somewhat theoretical desires of the French as revealed in the opinion polls, and their voting intentions. They liked Alain Poher but regarded Pompidou as the man most capable of occupying the highest office of state. The polls showed that the French saw Pompidou as a true statesman who had demonstrated his ability during the crisis of 1968. They could see that he had a set of policies and the backing of a majority coalition to see them through, whereas support for the Senate president was at best patchy. Finally, Pompidou had the advantage of a shrewd election campaign and a cleverly worded slogan, *le changement dans la continuité* ('change within continuity'). If 'continuity' guaranteed him the approval of the overwhelming majority of UDR Gaullists (90 per cent), 'change' secured him 60 per cent of Independent Republican and at least a third of centrist votes. With characteristic skill, Pompidou ran a campaign that highlighted those of his strong points that set him apart from the Senate president.

Well aware of the expectations of French people, Pompidou, like his main rival, promised to bring forward policies to address their day-to-day concerns. In a specific pitch to the middle class, whose numbers and influence had been boosted by economic growth, Pompidou pledged to give industrialization special priority. But he also demonstrated his awareness of the difficulties facing shop-keepers and small businesses, whose recent campaigns had led to the setting-up of an association for the self-employed, the CID-UNATI (Centre d'information et de défense-Union nationale des associations de travailleurs indépendants). Turning to the centrists, Pompidou stated his commitment to broader cooperation in Europe and to the lifting of de Gaulle's veto on Great Britain's entry into the European Economic Community (EEC). Distancing himself from the April referendum, he pledged that the powers of the Senate would not be curtailed in any way. On television Pompidou proved a highly impressive performer and the straightforwardness of his message and the smoothness of the UDR political machine enabled him to reach a very broad section of the electorate. But above all he laid great emphasis on the one point that distinguished him fundamentally from Alain Poher, the constitutional issue. While adopting the stance of defender of the constitution of the Fifth Republic and warning that Alain Poher's proposals could lead to a crisis of government, Pompidou nevertheless acknowledged, bowing to the

desire for change, that the way in which power was exercised had to be modified. 'I am not General de Gaulle', he declared on 15 May during a debate broadcast on the radio. 'I shall necessarily be more persuasive, more conciliatory.' The left-wing Gaullist Léo Hamon interpreted this in his own fashion, asserting that 'the time [had] come to move away from epic, if not mystic, Gaullism to a political Gaullism which, provided it is well balanced, can stand the test of time'.¹² But the success of Pompidou in the first round of voting was ensured not only by his personal qualities and the skill of his campaign, but also by the evident weaknesses of his opponents.

Of all the presidential campaigns held under the Fifth Republic, the 1969 campaign stands out for its moderation or, more precisely, for its lack of drama. Since the two most credible candidates were both of the right, the choice put to the voters involved no overarching social project. Moreover, the character and pragmatic views of the principal candidates made it impossible to stimulate any far-reaching public debate over the choices before the electorate. Lastly, the low-key way the campaign unfolded made any real shift in power appear increasingly unlikely. The real danger for Pompidou would be if the left achieved an outstanding result in the first round and if Poher also did well. In this scenario, when it came to the second round, Poher might be able to ride an anti-Gaullist tide. In the event, nothing of the kind happened. On the left Gaston Defferre conducted a relatively lacklustre campaign, his television appearances revealing his lack of charisma and the failure of the Parti socialiste (PS) to give him its firm backing. Moreover, he seemed to place himself at the margins of the new political game by announcing on 15 May that, if elected, he would appoint Pierre Mendès France as his prime minister: indeed, from that point on the two men appeared together at every campaign event. This had the effect of pushing Gaston Defferre even further into the shadows, while causing the public quite rightly to question just who, under such an arrangement, would be the true head of the executive. As for Mendès France, although he still retained considerable prestige in the eyes of many intellectuals who remembered the promise he had embodied in 1954–5, he no longer held much sway with the broader public who saw him as a man of a dim and distant past who had set his face against the Fifth Republic. As a result, the polls registered a steady decline in support for Defferre's candidature from about 24 per cent of voting intentions at the beginning of May to 5 per cent of votes actually cast on 1 June. Support for Poher's candidature, though it did not fall so far, was also severely eroded. As we have seen, as long as Alain Poher remained out of the race, the French entrusted him with their growing

confidence. But as soon as he announced his candidature and was forced to campaign and expound his ideas on concrete issues, his uncertainties were exposed. There were three main unanswered questions. Would Alain Poher, if elected to the Elysée, seek the backing of the right or of the left? What would be his conception of the function of the president? Would he have to dissolve the Assembly and appeal to the French people to provide him with a new majority or would he agree to govern with the majority produced by the 1968 elections, which left parliament in the hands of the UDR?¹³ On all three points, Pompidou could supply clearcut answers and it is easy to see why he chose to concentrate on an agenda that quickly focused attention on the nature of the regime itself. Many observers took the view that the election of Alain Poher would return the country to a parliamentary system, undermining the pre-eminent role of the president – that is, the mould-breaking characteristic of the Fifth Republic. Realizing that on this issue Pompidou's advantage was beyond dispute, Alain Poher made a late attempt to shift from his earlier position, thereby confirming his image as a waverer. On the issue of the parliamentary majority, Alain Poher remained non-committal, visibly hesitating between a dissolution that would force him to specify the direction in which he would turn for support, and the preservation of an inherited majority, which would leave the Gaullists in control of parliament. If, to these handicaps, one adds the mediocrity of his television performances and the weakness of the party apparatus that supported him, one can see why the polls that had been so favourable to him before he entered the race registered so sharp a downturn the moment he started campaigning. Whereas in mid-May he had enjoyed 37 or 39 per cent of voting intentions, on 1 June he obtained only 23.4 per cent of votes cast. The collapse of the non-communist left and the shrinkage of the opposition centre placed Pompidou in the best possible position, also boosting the communist candidate, Jacques Duclos.

Making great play of his gravelly man-of-the-soil accent, his humble origins and his resulting store of good sense, Jacques Duclos ran a shrewd and reassuring campaign. Drawing a veil over his lengthy Stalinist past, he presented himself as a spokesman for the working classes, attracting the votes of a large chunk of the non-communist left that had remained unconvinced by Gaston Defferre's candidature. So although the polls in early May only attributed him with 10 per cent of voting intentions, when it came to the actual 1 June vote, Duclos achieved a 21.5 per cent score for his party. Indeed, most analysts took the view that if the campaign had lasted any longer Duclos would have taken Alain Poher's place as first-round runner-up. Be that as it may, the

Table 1. *Presidential election of 1 June 1969: first round*

		Percentage of electorate	Percentage of vote
Electorate	28,774,041	100	
Votes	22,492,059		
Abstentions	6,281,982	21.8	
Spoilt papers	287,372	0.9	
Pompidou	9,761,297	34.0	43.9
Pohér	5,201,133	18.1	23.4
Duclos	4,779,539	16.6	21.5
Defferre	1,127,733	3.9	5.0
Rocard	814,051	2.8	3.6
Ducatel	284,697	0.9	1.2
Krivine	236,237	0.8	1.1

way the first-round campaign had developed seemed to make the victory of Pompidou a foregone conclusion (see table 1).

Georges Pompidou's electoral victory

By the evening of 1 June, the verdict of the electorate was decisive: Pompidou had won a clear victory and the chances of his triumphing in the second round were overwhelming. He had broken through the 42 per cent vote share forecast by the polls, whereas every other candidate except Duclos had seen his support collapse. Ahead in every department except one, and with an outright majority of votes in sixteen departments, Pompidou could now be defeated in the second round only if all his opponents formed a coalition against him, a highly improbable scenario. With his election to the presidency a foregone conclusion, all that now mattered to Pompidou were its precise circumstances. Looking to the future, he appealed to Alain Pohér to withdraw from a battle that was in any case hopeless, so that he could put himself forward as the candidate of a national majority, confronting the communists head-on. But despite pressure from his closest advisers, from a section of the centre and even from Pierre Sudreau, whom he had thought of appointing prime minister had he won the presidency, Alain Pohér now refused to quit the field that he had so long hesitated to enter. Yet it was clear that Pohér was about to launch himself into a losing battle. Gaston Defferre withdrew from the race, urging those who had supported him, a paltry 5 per cent, to switch their allegiance to Pohér. But Defferre's example was followed neither by the extreme left candidates, Rocard and Krivine, both of whom withdrew from the race without stating their

Table 2. *Presidential election of 15 June 1969: second round*

		Percentage of electorate	Percentage of vote
Electorate	28,761,494	100	
Votes	19,854,087		
Abstentions	8,907,407	31.0	
Spoilt papers	1,295,216	4.5	
Pompidou	10,688,183	37.0	57.5
Poher	7,870,688	27.4	42.4

preference for the second round, nor, more importantly, by the communist party, whose decision could have clinched the outcome, given that a transfer to Poher of their 21.5 per cent of first-round votes would have put him ahead of Pompidou, perhaps enabling him to mobilize the left behind his candidature. The communists, however, took the view that Pompidou and Poher were as alike as Tweedledum and Tweedledee, and therefore urged their supporters to abstain *en masse*. Viewed objectively, this worked in Pompidou's favour. Indeed, the communist party was clearly determined to ensure the failure of Poher, a staunch supporter of the Atlantic Alliance, far preferring a man who was heir to de Gaulle's foreign policy. They were also resolved to do all in their power to avert the formation of a new 'broad federation' which would bring together socialists, radicals, centrists and moderates, isolating them in the ghetto from which they were trying to escape.

For Alain Poher the game was up. He sharpened up his campaign, lambasted the Gaullist 'clan' that had governed France for twelve long years and, in an effort to woo left-wing voters, even promised constitutional changes to confine the president to a role as arbiter. Nothing worked. Assured of victory, Pompidou now felt free to emphasize the *ouverture* of his political approach, inviting on to his platform those centrists and moderates who supported his bid for the presidency.

In the run-up to the second-round vote, opinion polls gave Pompidou a steady 56 per cent of voting intentions, leaving Alain Poher with just 44 per cent. On the night of 15 June, the gap turned out to be even wider (as shown in table 2).

Pompidou's victory was overwhelming. Not only had he crushed his opponents but, in spite of considerable abstention, which was much more widespread than in the second round of the 1965 election, he had scored a higher overall percentage than de Gaulle himself on that occasion. Having remained silent throughout the election campaign, even making a trip to Ireland during the vote itself, the General now

sent the new president a brief but cordial message of congratulation. Try as the communists might to christen Pompidou 'Mister One Third', pointing to the number of abstentions, the new president could clearly take pride in securing a huge vote of confidence from the electorate. Rather than risk a leap into the unknown, the French had preferred the option held out to them by Pompidou: 'openness within continuity'. Yet the exact meaning of what was still just an electioneering buzzphrase remained unclear. What policies did Pompidou intend to pursue?

Georges Pompidou's conception of government

The man who moved into the Elysée palace on 20 June 1969 saw himself as the unchallengeable heir to Charles de Gaulle. Yet when responding to questions from the press he repeatedly stated 'I am not General de Gaulle', as if to stress that neither his background, nor his historical stature, nor his character were in any way comparable to those of de Gaulle. For although the new president of the republic claimed to draw on the Gaullist view of politics, he brought to public service a temperament and an approach that were very much his own.

There is no doubt that Gaullism lay at the heart of Pompidou's outlook: after all, Pompidou had spent his entire political career since 1945 in collaboration with the General.¹⁴ It was quite evident that he shared de Gaulle's view as to the ultimate goal of policy: to ensure the grandeur of France through its role in the world and, accordingly, to reject the politics of opposing blocks as a form of subjugation to the United States, safeguarding the independence of the French nation through an independent defence capability, founded on its nuclear *force de frappe*. Equally, Pompidou was convinced that this goal could not be achieved unless France possessed a strong state under the direction of the president of the republic. Whatever ambiguities he had allowed to persist during his election campaign, this belief was the cornerstone of his faith. As he expressed it during his press conference on 10 July 1969: 'the president is at one and the same time the supreme head of the executive, the guardian and guarantor of the constitution, the person charged with setting the government's course and shaping its basic policies, while ensuring and monitoring the smooth operation of public powers: he is both the nation's arbiter and its highest officer.' In *Le Nœud gordien*, a book he wrote after his departure from the Hôtel Matignon in 1968, Pompidou went even further, writing about the successor to de Gaulle, a role he intended for himself: 'lacking the charisma of the man who founded the Fifth Republic, the head of state will have to intervene in the management of the state in a constant and

permanent way, and through his day-to-day activity maintain the supremacy that universal suffrage will not of itself automatically confer.'

Yet, like de Gaulle, Pompidou had no wish to see the development of a presidential regime. Here again, *Le Nœud gordien* provides evidence of his loyalty to the constitutional settlement of 1958:

In a multi-party regime, where ruling majorities are formed by coalition, the National Assembly is by its very nature a source of division and instability. This being the case, it is vital to safeguard every provision in our constitution that vests executive power in a head of state who is unaccountable to the Assembly. As for the government, though formed by the president, it is nevertheless appointed in accordance with the need to secure majority backing in the Assembly, and therefore acts as a link. At the same time, the power to dissolve the Assembly, a vital means of pressure, enables the government to follow policies that are acceptable to the majority, though not of its making.

It is quite clear that on this issue Georges Pompidou did indeed represent continuity, holding firmly to the fundamental views of Gaullism.

Yet, even if their objectives were identical, the methods employed by Pompidou differed quite markedly from those used by de Gaulle. In the book that he wrote on the political ideas of Pompidou,¹⁵ Stéphane Rials took care to bring out the contradictions within Pompidou's personality, which were the outcome not only of his background but also of the age in which he lived. Born in 1911 at Montboudif in the Cantal department, Pompidou was an unalloyed product of the republican culture of the first half of the twentieth century. Attached to his rural roots, he clung loyally to the peasant virtues of sound sense, sturdy reliability and hard work but he also shared the peasant's dread of the kind of upheavals that could bring hardship and suffering in their wake. This background gave him both an instinctive distrust for the grand abstract schemes of intellectuals cut off from the day-to-day life of ordinary men and women, and a deep-seated conservatism that became increasingly marked with the passing years. As the son of a primary school teacher, he was a strong believer in the republican ideal of self-advancement through education. It was a path that his own life vividly illustrated. After doing brilliantly at school, he had won a place at the *Ecole normale supérieure*, which he left with an *agrégation* in French, the highest competitive qualification for those wishing to teach. This complex background formed the framework of Pompidou's life until the outbreak of the Second World War, and provided him with one of the features that most distinguished his behaviour – a pragmatism that inclined him to favour material improvements in individual lives, as long as the beneficiaries fulfilled their part of the bargain by making the required effort, and a taste for practical reforms that was far removed

from the resolve to transform the structures of society that the Marxist left advocated. These character traits, which inclined Pompidou towards compromise and conciliation – provided the essentials were not lost in the process – made him shy away from the high-profile outbursts and drama that had constituted de Gaulle's style, favouring instead a calmer way of conducting political business that still left plenty of room for firmness. It is doubtful whether such character traits really justify the 'radical' label that has often been applied to him. After all, he shared little of what was specific to radicalism. On 3 June 1966, when the future president of the republic was asked to outline his political convictions in an interview for the daily newspaper *Paris-Presse*, he gave his article the title: 'Why I am in the centre'. Having rejected the notions of the centre as either 'marshland' morass or pivotal 'hinge', Pompidou supplied the traditional definition of the centre as a 'happy medium':

If, on the other hand, to be in the centre means to take account of people's needs and aspirations, if it means to weigh both the need for movement and change that is obvious in France, and at the same time the need to avoid destroying everything in an old country which has, after all, amassed a lot of intellectual, moral and material goods, then, yes, I am in the centre.¹⁶

Rather than calling to mind any version of radicalism, with its cult of the small-scale, the political behaviour of the new president was more likely to conjure up François Guizot.

This humanist man of letters, who had compiled an *Anthologie de la poésie française*, had a post-war career that diverged sharply from his experience as a young man. Although a Gaullist, Pompidou had never been a member of the Resistance and he displayed great irritation with the kind of Resistance mythology nurtured by the 'barons' of Gaullism, most of whose careers had been forged in the 'Free French' or internal Resistance crucible. Above all, the years 1945–69 had provided Pompidou with two fundamental experiences that transformed the political culture of his youth and provided him with the convictions that were to characterize his politics as president of the republic: first, the lengthy collaboration with de Gaulle when Pompidou was a member of his cabinet in the post-war provisional government; his thoughtful loyalty during the General's chairmanship of the RPF; the contribution he made as head of cabinet when de Gaulle served as the last prime minister of the Fourth Republic in 1958; and finally the long period of over six years during which he acted as President de Gaulle's prime minister. Closer to de Gaulle than anyone else throughout this entire period, Pompidou had a vision of the grandeur of France and the strong state that accorded perfectly with the General's own views, and was far removed indeed from the notions dear to individualistic radicalism.

Second, Pompidou had pursued a post-war career in banking that had opened his eyes to the economic realities of the modern world, leaving him with the profound conviction that there could be no powerful state and no national grandeur without economic prosperity, the key to which, in a world dominated by market economics and free-market values, was industrialization. Thus, both as prime minister and later as president of the republic, Pompidou laid insistent stress on what came to be known as the 'industrial imperative', a thoroughgoing attachment to free-market liberalism and an admiration for profit that inclined him to favour industrial concentration and the development of large-scale profitable enterprises. In this area one would be hard put to detect the legacy of any radicalism devoted to the defence of the 'small-scale'.

It was with this background of ideas and convictions that on 20 June 1969 Georges Pompidou prepared to govern France, a nation still troubled by the repercussions of the 1968 events, and which in the recent elections had expressed its desire for change.

The Chaban-Delmas government takes shape

On 20 June 1969, the new president of the republic appointed Jacques Chaban-Delmas to serve as his prime minister. Chaban-Delmas had been president of the National Assembly ever since 1958 and his appointment as prime minister had long been expected. Nobody appeared better placed to implement the 'openness within continuity' that the head of state had promised. On the continuity side, Chaban-Delmas was a Gaullist 'baron' who had played a major role in the internal Resistance, rising to the rank of brigadier general at the age of twenty-nine. As mayor of Bordeaux since 1947 and a prominent personality first of the RPF and then of the UDR, the depth of his Gaullism was beyond question. But of all the Gaullists, the new prime minister was without doubt the man who best symbolized political *ouverture*. While loyal to de Gaulle, his loyalty had never been blind or unconditional, and indeed he had refused to fall into line with the General on several occasions: during the 1951 elections over the ban placed by de Gaulle, then president of the RPF, on electoral alliances; again, over the General's refusal to allow Gaullists to participate in government under the Fourth Republic;¹⁷ and then in 1958 over de Gaulle's wish to see Paul Reynaud become president of the National Assembly. Chaban-Delmas had spearheaded that wing of Gaullism that had participated in the government of Mendès France in 1954–5, had joined the Republican Front at the 1956 elections and had exercised power in coalition governments right up until 1958. Moreover, since 1958, in his position

as president of the National Assembly, Chaban-Delmas had been anxious to protect parliamentary rights that de Gaulle's style of government frequently eroded – a concern that underscored his proximity to such centrists as the Independent Republicans.¹⁸ Finally, he displayed a degree of social awareness by including within his inner circle such senior civil servants who had been influenced by Mendès France as François Bloch-Lainé or Simon Nora, and even Jacques Delors, a trade unionist of Christian socialist convictions. Yet on constitutional issues Chaban-Delmas, like Pompidou, shared de Gaulle's concept of presidential pre-eminence and on this vital matter he never expressed the slightest doubt. However, owing to the temperaments of the new president and his prime minister, the impression would often be given that, as compared to de Gaulle's time in office, the roles had been reversed. All the drive, creativity and imagination seemed to come from Matignon while at the Elysée the taste for reason, order and balance served to minimize and rein in some of the government's initiatives.¹⁹

The government that Chaban-Delmas proceeded to form, under the watchful eye of the president, fulfilled Pompidou's desire for greater political inclusiveness within a context of continuity. There were two key government appointments that illustrated and symbolized this approach. Michel Debré, the very embodiment of unconditional loyalty to Gaullism, became minister of defence. The new minister for foreign affairs, Maurice Schumann, on the other hand, while he was an eminent Gaullist Resistance figure, had been one of the leaders of the Christian Democrats at the time of the MRP. The same balancing act was performed in the allocation of ministerial portfolios. The UDR, in control of twenty-seven ministries, found itself in a position of strength with three ministers of state: flanking Michel Debré were Edmond Michelet, succeeding Malraux at cultural affairs, and Roger Frey, who was entrusted with relations with parliament. Indeed, all the different currents within the Gaullist party were represented, with Robert Boulin at health and social security, Henri Duvillard with responsibility for war veterans, Olivier Guichard in charge of education, Robert Galley at post and telecommunications, Albin Chalandon at housing and equipment, and Henri Rey placed in charge of overseas departments and territories. To these should be added François-Xavier Ortoli, a former aide to Pompidou, who became minister for industrial development and scientific research.

But the government also threw its doors open to those who had backed Pompidou's candidature. The centrists, now the third pillar of the majority, were well represented, though less in numerical terms than in the importance of the ministries placed in their charge. René Pleven

became minister of justice, Jacques Duhamel minister of agriculture, and Joseph Fontanet minister of labour, employment and population. It was the Independent Republicans and especially their leader Valéry Giscard d'Estaing who were left with the meanest pickings, paying the price for supporting the 'wrong' side in the April referendum. Indeed, Pompidou only allowed Giscard d'Estaing to return to the ministry of finance after Antoine Pinay had turned down the position. Meanwhile, Raymond Mondon became minister for transport, Raymond Marcellin minister of the interior and André Bettencourt minister for national and regional development – but then both Marcellin and Bettencourt were well known for their reservations regarding Giscard d'Estaing's leadership of their party.²⁰

Whereas the selection of ministers clearly entailed Pompidou's approval, the prime minister seems to have had his hands free to appoint the particularly numerous (twenty or so) junior ministers who appeared to be chosen on the basis of a form of political carve-up that Pompidou found infinitely irritating.²¹

However, the president was convinced, as he had written in *Le Nœud gordien*, that 'the only alternatives before us are to accept the well-camouflaged but swift return of an Assembly-dominated regime or to accentuate the presidential character of our institutions'. Having decided, for his part, to pursue the second of these two courses, Pompidou reorganized the Elysée departments accordingly, abolishing the duality inherent in the existence of both a general secretariat and a cabinet by upgrading the former. The president appointed Michel Jobert, a former supporter of Mendès France who had switched his allegiance to Pompidou, as secretary general, with Edouard Balladur as his assistant, and he placed around them a team of men most of whom had been his close collaborators at Matignon. Whereas this team welcomed and supported the appointment of Chaban-Delmas, two other presidential advisers did not. Pierre Juillet, a conservative diehard, strongly disapproved of the new prime minister's reformist streak, while Marie-France Garaud nurtured a fierce hostility towards him. Both advisers were to prove tireless in their efforts to open up a gulf between Pompidou and Chaban-Delmas, laying insistent emphasis on what they saw as the excess of parliamentary zeal apparent in the conduct of the prime minister whom they also reproached for his progressive views and for adopting an attitude reminiscent of prime ministers under the Fourth Republic.²²

For the time being, however, it was up to the new team to prove its ability, and in fact, until the end of 1971, its initiatives seemed to be crowned with success.