

France

France was one of the six founding members of the European Community in 1957. Situated in western Europe, it has land borders with Luxembourg, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Spain, Monaco and Andorra. To the west it is bordered by the Atlantic Ocean. It has a population of 63 million people and the national language is French. The French Republic is made up of mainland France, five overseas provinces (*departments d'outre mer*) and several other territories that used to be part of the French Empire. France has a permanent seat on the United Nations (UN) Security Council.

Recent History

The Fifth French Republic was created in 1958 following a referendum that overthrew the previous constitution. French governments have traditionally been made up of **coalitions**: the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) and the Union for French Democracy (UDF) are the main parties on the right, while left-of-centre coalitions have consisted of the French Socialist Party, the French Communist Party and the Greens. From 1958 to the present, France has been governed by centre-right coalitions, except between 1981 and 1995, when it was led by President François Mitterand of the Socialist Party. The current President is Nicolas Sarkozy (UMP) who was elected in May 2007, replacing Jacques Chirac who had held the post since 1995. Legislative elections, also held in 2007, saw another victory for the centre-right; François Fillon is the current Prime Minister, head of a UMP led **Coalition** Government.

In recent years, French politics has witnessed many upheavals. In the 2002 presidential election, Mr Chirac faced a stiff challenge from the far-right leader Jean-Marie Le Pen and since then France has been upset by riots, strikes and student protests. France's current political debates centre largely on tackling unemployment and improving social integration.

The French Government

France is a unitary state with a unique semi-presidential system. That means that while some executive power rests with the President, other powers rest with the Prime Minister. The French Parliament, based in Paris, is made up of two chambers – the *Assemblée Nationale* and the *Sénat*. Centre-right parties currently have a majority in both houses. The President is directly elected for terms of five years and has the power to select the Prime Minister. The cabinet is answerable to Parliament, which also has to approve all government legislation. Mainland France is made up of ninety-six localities (*départements*) and twenty-two larger regions. Each is controlled by a Council and a President. The French Constitution, which is based on the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, is guarded by the Constitutional Council.

France and the EU

Since the foundation of the European Union, France has been a driving force behind many European projects. Two of the men who did the most to create the EU, Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman, were Frenchmen. So was Jacques Delors, who led the European Community during the period of its most rapid transformation between 1985 and 1995. France participates in all of the most far-reaching EU projects, including Economic and Monetary Union and the Schengen Convention.

However, this does not mean that the French always accept EU action unquestioningly. President Charles de Gaulle, French President throughout the 1960s, was a strong critic of European integration, even going as far as carrying out a six-month boycott of the European Community in 1965. Ambiguous attitudes continued. Having narrowly accepted the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, the French electorate rejected the European Constitution when it was put to them in a referendum in May 2005. The referendum debate demonstrated that many in France have a different vision of Europe that stresses social protection above the promotion of free markets. Furthermore, in September 2010, France drew criticism from the EU when it enacted a policy of 'voluntary' repatriations of Roma, paying individuals €300 to leave France. The EU Commission said it would investigate and take legal action against France if its policy were found to be illegal (i.e. in violation of the EU's 2004 Free Movement of Persons Directive).

Nevertheless, France remains at the centre of EU politics. For example, the country is the largest beneficiary of the EU's controversial Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), which costs 41 percent of the annual EU budget. France is also very influential in the EU. It has 29 votes in the Council of the European Union (the same number as the UK, Germany and Italy) and elects 72 MEPs. France held the Presidency of the Council of the European Union for six months from 1 July 2008.

Facts and Figures

- The currency of France is the Euro.
- France is the world's fifth biggest economy.
- France is the most popular tourist destination in the world.
- France is a major manufacturing country with particular strengths in automobiles and aerospace.

Quotes

'To understand Europe, you have to be a genius - or French.'
Madeleine Albright, US Secretary of State, 1997-2001

Technical Terms

Coalition: a formal agreement between political parties to share power in government.

Links

- <http://www.premier-ministre.gouv.fr/en/>
- http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/country_profiles/998481.stm#facts