

Abstract

This article contributes to the body of the developing theoretical research in leadership and presidential studies by adding analysis of what I have termed ‘comportmental style’ as a factor in leader/follower relations. Within institutionalism and the wider structure/agency debate in political science, one of the challenges as regards the study of leadership is to identify factors that offer scope to or else militate against leaders’ performance. The comportmental style of Nicolas Sarkozy (President of the French Republic 2007–2012), deployed in the context of the – changing – institution of the presidency, was a major factor in his extreme unpopularity, and contributed to his defeat in 2012. What this tells us about the nature of the changing French presidency and the role of style will be discussed in the conclusion.

Keywords:

France; presidency; Sarkozy; style; institutionalism

Introduction

Leadership research and presidential research ([t’Hart and Rhodes, 2013](#)) are undergoing a major moment of development and consolidation, drawing upon many disciplines and research areas. There have been developments in, *inter alia*, constitutional theory ([Duhamel, 2003](#)), psychology ([Haslam et al, 2011](#)), biography ([Theakston, 2012](#)), political party research ([Bell, 2000](#)), political communication theory ([Esser and Pfetsch, 2004](#)), feminism ([Baxter, 2006](#)), business studies ([Grint, 2010](#)), and many others. Leadership studies are pursuing – still – a definition of the subject itself, partly in an attempt to situate the topic within the wider theoretical debate about structure and agency ([Hay, 2008](#)). The aim of this article, using Nicolas Sarkozy as our case study, is to identify individual style and its public reception, and appraise it as a moment of agency in its institutional context. In order to do this, we shall organise our discussion as follows: we shall look at French presidential leadership style in both its theoretical and empirical context. We shall then analyse Sarkozy's relationship to public opinion, examining first his style and the creation of his ‘character’, and second, what this means in terms of some of the ‘real’ politics of his presidency. We shall then widen the discussion to appraise the relationship between the French presidency and the French, and, in this context, the consequences of the emergence of Sarkozy's persona and character. We shall then examine how the character ‘played out’ (very negatively) in relation to opinion. In order to place Sarkozy in historical and cultural context, we shall then widen the discussion further and examine two of the essential elements that Charles de Gaulle, in and after 1958, brought to French politics that so informed the nature of the relationship between the President and the French: the myth of himself; and a ‘Gaullist Settlement’, five emotional-stylistic elements of which were: ‘self’, capriciousness, proximity/intimacy, emotional intensity and popularity. We shall then examine how the intense personalisation of Sarkozy's style and relationship to public opinion played itself out in the 2012 election campaign. We will then draw a set of conclusions related to leadership in its institutional context.

Political Leadership and the French Presidency

Perhaps the most persuasive and developed area of leadership studies, and which this study sees itself as being a part of, is that aspect that concentrates upon leadership and institutions

([Elgie, 1995](#); [Helms, 2005](#)), that is to say, the approach that situates leadership and agency within its constraining and facilitating institutional contexts. Before coming on to the role of style, in the case specifically of Nicolas Sarkozy's presidential term (2007–2012), let us situate our approach more firmly in the theoretical debate concerning the institutional frameworks of leadership performance and their relationship to leadership rhetoric and style.

One important area of leadership studies, and even more the sub-discipline of presidential studies, has been the belated recognition, most spectacularly from research in the United States, of the role of rhetoric in the construction of presidential persona ([Hall Jamieson, 1988](#); [Windt and Ingold, 1992](#)). This research has seen a revival of Aristotelian categories, in particular those of *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos* and their role in rhetorical delivery ([Aristotle, 1991](#)). What contemporary research is beginning to focus upon is the question of how, through the rhetorical deployment of *ethos* (for the purposes of analysis here, let us call it the persona of the speaker) ([Gaffney, 2001](#)), Presidents and other leaders create an image of themselves, a 'character' with a style (which we shall define below), and use it to a range of leadership purposes: public mobilisation, agenda-setting and coalition building, for example.

There are two reasons why 'style' has been relatively eclipsed from study. First, because, in the French case, 'presidentialism' has come to be seen as being one particular style – de Gaulle's and variations of it, rather than as a mode of political behaviour and an imagined President/public relationship, which can take a variety of forms, including new forms, depending upon the institutional frameworks prevailing, a wide range of circumstances and the personalities involved. Second, in the wider emerging analysis of presidential rhetoric, the emphasis upon the *ethos* of the rhetoric itself is made in terms of its mobilisation of *pathos* (emotion) and *logos* (logical argument). For us, what is equally important is a better understanding of precisely the elements and role of *ethos* or persona in the projection of the political 'character' who accompanies the rhetoric; not simply how he/she persuades through emotion and argument, but who is the he/she 'seen' in the rhetoric, and also imagined as existing outside it, and possessing of a particular character and style. In order that the character be 'recognised' and 'understood', he or she must portray a particular style, so that a pattern of behaviour can indicate character; in this way, we can identify a Kennedy style, a de Gaulle style, and so on, as well as the construction of new styles and new characters. It is the identifying and analysis of the construction and deployment of style in the Sarkozy case that is of interest to us here.

The rhetorical persona is deployed within a given (and in the French case today, evolving) set of frameworks that have particular institutional effects and functions: the scope for and the persona and the rhetoric of an Irish President or UK Prime Minister will, for example, be different from those of a French President. This raises the question, not only of institutions, but of the role of tradition and culture, both within the institutional frameworks and upon leadership performance and style ([Revel, 1988](#)). We shall come back to this below.

By situating the presidential persona and rhetoric within their institutional frameworks, we can appraise the public performance of presidential and other leadership figures, and their scope to act. A corollary to this is that the institution, here the presidency, is not just a constraint upon (although it sets parameters) but also a condition of presidential performance. We shall come back to this below. Let us first raise a related issue in order to see how our research fits into the developing scholarship. Much of the research on presidential rhetoric (overwhelmingly American) and its place in its institutional framework has a tendency to emphasise its role as generic to the presidential institution, which in great part it is. The

presidency is, as it were, 'created' in an Austinian sense by the Presidents (and vice versa), largely through their rhetoric ([Austin, 1975](#); [Kohrs Campbell and Hall Jamieson, 2010](#)). Our own emphasis, however, wishes to take analytical account of the relative autonomy of the one from the other, and this for two reasons. First, following [Elgie \(1995, Chapter 8\)](#) and [Helms \(2005\)](#), we wish to emphasise the scope for action within the institutional framework. In fact, we put great emphasis upon this and stress both its relation to and autonomy from the institutional framework, that is to say, we stress its creative as well as its generic quality. In this way, we treat the interpolation of leadership (rhetorically and in terms of acts and image) as a performance that takes place within the institutional framework as if, to use a theatrical metaphor, upon a stage. In this way, we can appraise leadership as a creative act; and equally appraise good performances – and bad, which we shall return to below. We should add that scope for action is also informed by the cultural aspects of both the institutional framework and the wider culture, shared by the audience and the performer within that institutional framework ([Geertz, 1980](#); [March and Olsen, 1984](#); [Thompson et al, 1990](#)).

The second reason for our emphasis upon the relative autonomy of performance (and, therefore, upon the mutability of the generic), is that we are interested, especially in this case study, with performative failure ([Helms, 2012](#)). Autonomy of performance is crucial to understanding both rhetorical and stylistic failure as well as success. The example of Nicolas Sarkozy's presidential term is a case in point. We shall demonstrate what appears to be an 'inappropriate' institutional and cultural use of a particular style. From our discussion of de Gaulle, however, we shall argue that Sarkozy's inappropriate style was possible because de Gaulle brought less a particular presidential style (although he did this too) than the notion of, and performative freedom for, consequential style within new institutional frameworks. If the notion of a generic style is exclusive, then it is an inadequate term. This, coupled with significant changes within the institutional frameworks themselves (Cole, 2012), has meant that the 2007–2012 period witnessed an almost experimental modification of presidential style.

De Gaulle, by bringing his own style so dramatically into the political mainstream, also heightened the significance of other related characteristics which would become, in different forms through different French Presidents, equally consequential: proximity, emotional intensity, a sense of the immediacy of the leader/audience (President/public) relationship, and a series of related qualities to the relationship (instability, popularity, a sense of the personal 'rally' ([Graham, 1993](#)), rejection and so on), and drama itself; these are some of the characteristics that we shall analyse below.

Because of, first, the dramatic nature of the Fifth Republic's advent ([Rémond, 1983](#)), second, its mixing of both a highly political and highly symbolic role for the presidency ([Cerny, 1980](#)), third, its relationship to the political parties and the presidential system ([Duverger, 1963](#); [Elgie, 2011](#)), and fourth, a textured and consequential political culture ([Gaffney, 2012](#)), France offers a richly demonstrable example of the role of personalised leadership in a dynamic institutional context. And the complexity that arises from this institutional ambivalence makes of the French presidency an evolving structure of political opportunity ([Gaffney, 2003](#)).

We shall take style to mean a particular comportment and behaviour, a series of actions, language, and perceived attitudes, which, over time (therefore involving repetition, insistence, and public recognition of the persona), become associated with the character of the leader, here, the President, and are seen as indications of his or her personality, character,

and emotional, psychological and moral makeup. The style is seen as reflecting the character. Style is those repeated and recognised aspects of behaviour, which evoke public perceptions of character.

The contrasts in comportmental style between the first President of the French Fifth Republic, Charles de Gaulle, and the sixth, Nicolas Sarkozy, are marked: de Gaulle, distant, monarchical and often elsewhere ([Touchard, 1978](#); [Lacouture, 1985](#)); Sarkozy, ever-present and ever-active, a ‘Hyperpresident’ ([Maigret, 2008](#); [Hayward, 2012](#)). This raises the question of what is meant by ‘presidential’ and its relation to notions of ‘proximity’ to and ‘distance’ from public opinion, and to symbolic politics and the wider political culture ([Gaffney and Holmes, 2011](#)). The Presidents of the Fifth Republic, both as (imagined) individuals ([Gaffney, 2001](#)), and as leaders in a symbolically charged relationship (also arguably ‘imagined’) to the French, have become central to the political process. It is also worth pointing out here that de Gaulle’s ‘style’ had been marginalised throughout the Fourth Republic ([Tenzer, 1998](#); [Hanley, 2013](#)), and therefore its triumph was all the more marked.

After 1958, the presidency very rapidly became the most popular political institution in France and, from 1965, the election of the President by direct universal suffrage became the most popular political act ([Pouvoirs 99, 2001](#)). It is not an exaggeration to say that, at the national level especially, the personalisation of politics in the presidentialised republic became the organising principle of political activity. This raises a series of related issues for presidential scholarship, which will structure our discussion in this article. The first, of course, concerns why this kind of leadership exists in, and appears essential to, contemporary France. A second related issue is presidentialism’s relationship to French history, to the political culture and to the institutions. A third and, again, related issue concerns the conditions and parameters of performance and the consequences of style for leadership today.

Nicolas Sarkozy and Public Opinion

Sarkozy’s defeat in 2012 was not a ‘normal’ one, but the passionate disavowing of the personality and character of the President ([Gerstlé and Abel, 2011](#); [Neumann, 2012](#)). His sudden disappearance from the scene in the aftermath of his defeat on 6 May threw into relief the 5-year public and media obsession with Sarkozy ([Badiou, 2008](#); [Hafez, 2008](#); [Rayski, 2010](#)). This preoccupation of the French with the President of the Republic invites examination for what it tells us about the parameters and contexts of Sarkozy’s presidency, and about the Fifth Republic overall. We should make a methodological point here, that, throughout this analysis, the apparently trivial and the ‘substantial’ are constantly mixed together, the trivial (celebrity culture, ‘peopolisation’) often having major symbolic significance. This was more true of 2007–2012 than of the other presidencies of the Fifth Republic, in part because Sarkozy’s style enhanced personal politics and the central role played by this in the configuration and ‘enactment’ of the institutions. The 2007–2012 presidency offered an astonishing display of the personal nature of the Fifth Republic, and the influence of the comportmental style of the President upon the relationship between the President and public opinion within the political process.

Character and style

As regards character and style, let us make three points here. First, before 2007, Sarkozy was not ‘just’ liked or disliked, but liked or disliked intensely and in equal measure. In all polls before the 2007 election (*Le Baromètre/Figaro Magazine*), there was constant controversy

surrounding his personality, and a great deal of public attention. Rather like Margaret Thatcher in 1979 (a comparable but rare display of ‘character’ in UK politics) he said he would get on with everything, break the mould, and prepare France for the new conditions of France in the world; he would pull France into the twenty-first century, and France would lose its inertia and be free to prosper and succeed. And as Home Secretary between 2002 and 2007 he had already achieved national notoriety for his assertions about cleaning up French society, for example pressure hosing riot ‘scum’ off the streets (see *Le Monde* June, October, November, 2005). Such promises created both enthusiasm and fear, again in equal measure, as well as anticipation ([Nay, 2007](#); [Ottenheimer, 2007](#)). The overall result was that a very particular style strongly characterised Sarkozy as he took office in 2007 ([Lambron, 2008](#)).

Second, in 2007, the focus was on Sarkozy as energetic, bold and ‘can do’. He was bound to be judged on all this, but we should emphasise that it was *he* who would be judged, rather than just *this* that would be judged. From 2007, highly personalised and subject to Sarkozy's further displays of character, the French presidency intensified this sense of the barely containable character of the President, and this to critical proportions, we might venture ([Duhamel, 2009](#); [Hewlett, 2011](#)).

Third, these attitudinal and stylistic displays made up a sequence of performances. He was seen as activist and very ‘male’ (cf. too, that his rival in 2007 was a woman ([Lambron, 2006](#))). 2007 was like a first referendum on him; his style was seen as new to mainstream politics; he was an expression, moreover, of the, also new, celebrity culture (which began to take on a very high media profile from around 2000); his marriage to Cécilia Albéniz was also highly mediatised, and included displays of her own personality, and the volatile nature of the marriage. From 2007, the situation intensified dramatically, given that, as an activist President, he was constantly in the spotlight (not least for the dramatic ending to his marriage within weeks of becoming President, then the sudden romance and wedding with Carla Bruni). The initial incidents were all ‘celebrity culture’/‘people’-related moments, and created a kind of non-stop ‘Sarkozy show’, preceding then paralleling the President as ever-active and ever-present policymaker. The concomitant fall in popularity from 2007 – intensifying acutely by 2008 – was striking and, over time, relentless.

Style and reality

As we have mentioned, Nicolas Sarkozy's popularity saw a near-unstoppable decline between 2007 and 2012. The country faced a sudden economic recession, along with most of the rest of the world, a recession, which, as it were, broke over the West in 2008. Almost inevitably, many of Sarkozy's radical promises of the election campaign to refashion France for a globalised economy were mitigated, arrested or abandoned ([Cahuc and Zylberberg, 2010](#)), as efforts were made to stave off the fallout of the world economic crisis. Sarkozy's earlier notions of the ‘Atlanticisation’ of France gave way very quickly to a return to close collaboration with Germany, and a more state-centric approach, closer to Gaullism. It was less, however, the relative policy modifications that undermined Sarkozy, than a compartmental style that had implied that policy ‘retreats’ were out of the question.

In foreign policy, however, there were major successes. Let us mention several examples to illustrate this. France's profile in European/EU activity was highly activist (particularly from 2008 with Germany in economic matters), and often lifting of the profile of the whole EU in world affairs. Sarkozy helped find diplomatic solutions – he also contributed to stopping the fighting – to the problems between Russia, Georgia and the West, when a military crisis

erupted in Georgia (formerly a Soviet republic) in 2008. His then wife, Cécilia, collected the Bulgarian nurses and Palestinian doctor from Tripoli in July 2007, after years under arrest and sentence of death. In July 2008, Sarkozy welcomed to France the newly released French-Colombian hostage, Ingrid Betancourt, whose kidnapping by Farc rebels had created a kind of national vigil for 5 years. And what was essentially France's initiative in leading NATO's aid to the Libyan rebels in Spring 2011 was seen as successful, bold and decisive. He had also earlier reintegrated France into NATO's military command structure, as if in preparation for such decisiveness. In 2012, Sarkozy's summitry, essentially with German Chancellor Merkel, addressed the Eurozone debt crisis, giving France further gravitas in the EU arena.

These positive successes in 'real' politics raise the question as to why Sarkozy's 5-year term was seen by so many, and so intensely, as a failure. By mid-2011, less than a year before the presidential elections, he was so flat-liningly unpopular, it seemed that almost any candidate could beat him (see, for example, *LeMonde.fr*, 6 May 2011). The realities of the post-2007 situation contrasted strongly with Sarkozy's earlier ebullience and, because of his earlier harsh and activist style, the contrast itself suggested failure. Can-do became 'can't-do'. This was arguably the case throughout the Western world from 2008 onwards, but with Sarkozy, resentment was focused on his persona. As we shall argue, this was in part because of the nature of the presidency and changes within it, in part because of the style he had adopted as President. At the heart of Sarkozy's presidency lay two issues that had little relation to either his policies or the recession: his 'image' and his relationship to the French.

Image, Style and Public Opinion

In France, the relationship between the President and the people is of a singular kind. It has a character and an intensity that set it apart ([Pierce, 1995](#)). As we said earlier, the imagined, constructed relationship between the President and the public is the organising principle of the republic itself, and the motor of political activity, driving the Fifth Republic forward, for better and worse. A constant and determining feature of this has been the 'proximity', even 'intimacy' of the President of the Republic and the French people, with something approaching a passionate relationship involving extremes of popularity. Examples of this are: the extreme popularity of de Gaulle (but we should not forget his unpopularity in 1968), Giscard's unpopularity in 1980 during the Bokassa-Diamonds affair, Mitterrand's deep unpopularity in 1985 and his huge popularity in 1988, and so on. Let us look at this relationship in Sarkozy's case.

Sarkozy and the French

As we have seen, Sarkozy's fortunes were not tied strictly to his policies but to how he lived his part of the imagined relationship between President and people. As early as the 'bling' celebration of his 2007 victory at *Fouquet's* restaurant, his image started to become the target of an intense animosity.

After an active and successful presidential election campaign in 2007, based essentially upon his perceived dynamic personality and national appraisals of it, followed by, by French presidential standards, a decisive win, the reversal of his fortunes began almost immediately.

On the night of his election, Sarkozy celebrated his victory in *Fouquet's* restaurant in the Champs Elysée. What was a somewhat *nouveau riche* expression of conspicuous consumption seemed to put a curse on Sarkozy's presidency. He followed that celebration

with a short holiday break in Malta on *La Paloma*, the yacht of a rich friend, Vincent Bolloré. Photographs of the President-elect on the deck of the yacht appeared in all the magazines. These rather innocuous images of the new President damaged Sarkozy's image. He had implied during the campaign that a period of reflection before taking the highest office might involve withdrawal to a monastery (rather than to *Le Fouquet's* and a yacht). A sense of the new President's dismissive shallowness informed the image of his presidency from the start.

We can make two points here as regards public attitudes. First, because of his high profile, perceptions of and assumptions about his character were widely confirmed: he appeared 'bling' and rather 'common'. Second, this strong public sentiment was expressed *immediately* in response to these portrayals (in all the media) of the 'character' of the new President – on a yacht in sunglasses, soaking up the sun instead of thinking about France. We can say, therefore, that a volatile and unpredictable feature is embedded in the presidential Fifth Republic and the culture of French politics, and is exacerbated by the institutional framework, which we shall come back to in our conclusion. Sarkozy's honeymoon period with the French was more or less over before it had begun, and his popularity did not recover in 5 years. Among both the general public and the elites, he triggered an intense public hostility towards him *as a person*. For the rest of his presidency, the media focused unremittingly on his character and style and his fraught relationship with the French, and their often highly personal and angry attitude to him.

Omnipresence as style

Irrespective, therefore, of the economy, and domestic and foreign policy, was the problem of his style – interventionist, 'hyperactive', interfering even, accompanying a 'noisy', sometimes boorish image. And we should stress that, from 2007, the term 'hyperactive' became associated with his persona, as he became involved in all government decision-making and all media representations of the political process. His image was now both omnipresent and seen as inappropriate in the sense of its extravagance, particularly in an era, very suddenly arrived, of austerity. The 'bouclier fiscal' (a tax concession to the very wealthy) introduced in July 2007, was seen, not as a way of getting the economy moving (which it could have been more vigorously argued as being), but as a free gift to the rich; it further undermined Sarkozy's image in public opinion – for some he was seen as nothing more than a front-man for the mega-rich ([Ariès, 2005](#); [Portelli, 2009](#)) – at the moment thousands upon thousands of people were losing their jobs (the measure was withdrawn in 2011). This means that the elements and displays of his character, which brought him success in 2007, were exactly the same as those dragging his popularity down to the depths in its aftermath. And greater negative salience was given to these traits of character because of an intensification of both the 'presence' of the President and the equal intensification of what appeared to be a non-presidential style; and this at a moment when economic conditions could not provide success, and every failure would be personally attributed to the ever-present, un-presidential President.

In February 2008, one of Sarkozy's utterances, picked up by microphones and broadcast around the world, captured what seemed to be happening to the republic, namely, the banalisation of decorum, and the collision between public and private, a relationship in French society of great complexity. In reply to an insult from someone in the crowd at an agricultural show, Sarkozy said in a low voice 'Casse-toi, pauvre con' (the expression means something akin to 'Fuck off, you twat'). President Sarkozy, therefore, spoke like his interlocutor *in public*, expressing his immediate and, again, *ordinary* feelings of anger, thus

making the presidency itself ordinary. It was as if the President had little more class than a rich footballer. Sarkozy appeared to be replacing a refracted though individualised presidential persona with nothing but ‘his own’ character. Was this ‘out of character’ with the Fifth Republic? Before answering this, we need to identify what exactly we mean by the character of the Fifth Republic in this domain. Let us look then at how Fifth republican presidential character emerged, because although it did so half a century ago with de Gaulle, its conditions of emergence and the institutional configuration it created, then, and ‘performs’ within now, are crucially relevant to the presidency today.

De Gaulle: Style and Self

De Gaulle returned to power in 1958 to make France ‘great’ again (that at least was his view) ([Rémond, 1983](#); [Berstein, 2002](#)). The new Fifth Republic France was to have *grandeur* and *rang* (status), and would shine (*rayonner*) its civilising mission around the globe. From 1958, France would be France again, after 14 years of instability, military capitulation (in Vietnam), governmental paralysis and petty party politicking, and finally (because of Algeria), the collapse of state authority. And all of this *redressement* (putting France back on its feet again) would emanate through one person, the man, Charles de Gaulle, *le grand Charles* (1.92 cm). Had *Le petit Nicolas* (1.65 cm), by generally lowering the tone, shaken the Gaullist settlement, the key to political stability and therefore prosperity? Had he undermined the Republic? If that is the case, it follows that the *grandeur* of the presidency and its personalised expression have an essential stabilising political function. We need, therefore, to examine the myth of presidential character further, for is it not a myth that one man can alter the destiny of a nation ([Tenzer, 1998](#))? Let us summarise the myth.

De Gaulle, the myth

In June 1940, to keep it safe, the young General de Gaulle as if put France in his pocket and took it to London. In 1944, as leader of the new Provisional Government, he brought it back again. In 1946, he resigned as Prime Minister, putting France again back in his pocket, and went off to brood for 12 years in the little village of Colombey-les-deux-églises. Such is the myth that, in one sense, he was himself France, or at least could magically take possession of it in crisis. In 1958, the French went to find him, and he came back once again, pulled France and *grandeur* out of his pocket yet again, and gave it back to the now grateful French. Grateful but fickle, the French, ungrateful yet again, after a decade of prosperity, rejected him in 1969, thus allowing for the myth of rejection and renewal to embed itself in the culture, and associate France's fortunes with the relationship between the leader and opinion. Did ‘Sarko’ sully this presidential myth? Not really. Let us look at why, for the Gaullist myth obscures what truly the ‘Gaullist settlement’ was.

The Gaullist settlement

De Gaulle came to power in a moment of drama, in 1958. The rising by the *pieds noirs* (Algerians of European origin) and the military coup that took place in Algiers on 13 May 1958 in defiance of Paris and the Fourth Republic constituted, more than anything else, a dramatic event, sudden and shocking, virile, dangerous, defiant, and ... aimless; one could say, almost theatrical. After 4 weeks of no government at all before 13 May, the Pierre Pflimlin government, voted in on 14 May, was the ‘strongest’ in the Fourth Republic (274 votes for/179 against); but it watched the Algiers coup, paralysed, fearful and utterly speechless. The coup was able to take place because Paris had lost its political authority on

both sides of the Mediterranean; had lost it in Paris, as well as in its most cherished of colonies (constitutionally, Algeria was not actually a colony, but a part of France, which made things even more complicated). Crucial to the conditions of de Gaulle's return, however, was that neither Algiers nor Paris actually did anything. In Algiers, activity mainly consisted of people throwing paper out of government building windows and, in the streets, beeping their horns non-stop on their Lambrettas and Vespas. Such is revolution. In Paris, activity mainly consisted of having meetings, doing nothing and hurrying back to constituencies to do nothing even more than usual. Such is government.

De Gaulle stepped into this freeze frame the next day saying he (he, de Gaulle, the man, without support, without resources, without legitimacy, without a party, without troops) was ready to 'assume' the powers of the Republic, and restore state authority, which he did. The essential point here is that 1958 validated 1940 and 1946 (the lonely exile(s) of the visionary) and brought the myth of the extraordinary individual into the new republic as its defining feature. The first President of the Fifth Republic, now with his own constitution – which he then ignored – comported himself in an unashamedly personalised manner, and choreographed (unconstitutional) referendums, overcoming all opposition, and sealing a kind of magical bond with the French, which enabled him to do politically more or less whatever he pleased, and this, essentially, because de Gaulle had conflated the office and the man, in fact, had conflated France and the man. We can see that the central idea of the Gaullist settlement is not grandeur and state authority, but character and personal style within a, then new, institutional framework.

How does this brief historical tour help us understand Sarkozy's fortunes, and his significance in the Fifth Republic, given that so much has changed since 1958, politically, rhetorically, culturally, institutionally and internationally? The previous section has shown that what de Gaulle brought to French politics was not just (or, given he often ignored it, even) a new presidential constitution, nor *grandeur*; he certainly acted with high protocol, but the France he nurtured: Renault Dauphines, fridges and televisions for all, holidays, and the tourniquette pour faire la vinaigrette, was the same consumer-society France that had been developing since the War and that, in a very different framework, Sarkozy (crisis *non-oblige*) would preside 50 years later. France is a consumption-driven capitalist society organised by the Fifth Republic, begun by de Gaulle and bequeathed to his successors; but what de Gaulle brought to French politics was not essentially either modern capitalism or old style *grandeur*, but 'self'; that is to say, himself. Himself as a character, a *personnage*, free to 'perform' in the political space, on the political stage, deploying his character traits and creating an imposing presidential style, and these with far reaching political effects, so that Fifth republicanism was whatever he happened to be thinking and doing. This is the real Gaullist settlement, and which distinguishes France: a regime in which the character and personality of the leader, perceived as necessary and possessing of authority, can, and indeed must, act and perform with all the character faults, caprice, errors of judgement, vanity and arrogance that are bound to arise when an individual is afforded such scope in a democracy. Such kingly caprice really only exists in fairy tale kingdoms; which is what Fifth Republic France is at one level (see the opening lines of de Gaulle's Memoirs to see quite how much he believed in fairy tales).¹ In de Gaulle's imagination, France is a chivalric land, where knights conquer power (slay dragons, cross deserts, lonely but determined, rescue princesses and become President), but sometimes lose their *virtù* after coronation; so new knights emerge and the cycle continues. Late capitalism meets Camelot. By bringing a character with such views into the institutional framework of the Republic, the presidency was bound to have more than just its constitutional status. It was driven by personal politics, and indeed much of

its subsequent institutional development was the result of the personal style and choices of its incumbents who might or might not be revered for their character and style, but would be given the scope to deploy them. We shall come back to this in our conclusion, but let us just look briefly at four of the character traits of the presidency: capriciousness, proximity, emotion and popularity.

Capriciousness

All of de Gaulle's successors have conducted themselves in a highly personalised way, often with the capriciousness of a pantomime king: Pompidou, unceremoniously sacking his too popular Prime Minister, as he too had been unfairly sacked, Giscard with his monarchical pretentiousness, Mitterrand with his Machiavellian vindictiveness, Chirac with true miscalculation dissolving the National Assembly in 1997, unnecessarily bringing his arch rivals to governmental power for 5 years; all took personal caprice to new heights – and these are just a few of hundreds upon hundreds of examples; the presidency gave them the scope to show that they were truly the children of the most capricious of them all. Sarkozy's 'character' needs to be seen in this light: the mediation of his breath-taking ego; driven ambition up the ladders and down the snakes of *fortuna*; and his triumphalism and temper tantrums, constituted variations on a set of founding and fundamental characteristics of the regime.

Proximity and intimacy

De Gaulle brought something else to the presidential template in 1958, something else of enormous consequence to French politics. In the wake of his 'self', he brought to the new regime the notion of a highly emotional relationship with the French, themselves 'imagined' in the constructivist sense, but no less emotionally charged for that ([Gaffney, 2001](#); [Anderson, 2006](#)). What de Gaulle constructed, in the wake of his imposing personal entry onto the political stage, and in the heart of the new republic, was an unmediated and passionate relationship with the French ('imagined' as the 'Nation', *la France profonde*, or *le pays, le peuple*, or '*Françaises, Français*'). Hence the referendums, the *bains de foule*, and the direct election of the President (introduced in 1962), and, today, the universally shared – and highly mystical – idea that the presidential election is *la rencontre entre un homme et un peuple* (a rendezvous between a man and a nation), this latter phrase repeated interminably by the entourages of the candidates during the 2012 campaign (de Gaulle coined the phrase, of course). This notion of an unmediated relationship between leader and people had always existed in French politics, in a range of 'isms'; from monarchism via Bonapartism to Pétainism, but never, until 1958, in mainstream democratic politics; a relationship imagined as emotional, affective, visceral, mutually dependent and, above all, unstable in its intensity.

Emotional intensity

Democracy, paradoxically, gave the added dimension of emotional choice to those subscribing to the relationship. Today, in the collective memory, de Gaulle is remembered with love and devotion. It was not always thus: exasperation, anger and, in 1968, lampoon and derision were also intensely felt and meted out (as well as several assassination attempts!); by 1969, he was seen by many as an archaic embarrassment, and in the (quite unnecessary) April 1969 referendum, as we have seen, the ungrateful French rejected him. From the start of the Fifth Republic, all national elections and referendums have carried this intense personal quality. For Sarkozy, the intensity of feeling was in inverse proportion to the

devotion de Gaulle had also known (although he did marginally better in 2012 than de Gaulle did in 1969, 48.3 per cent and 47.6 per cent, respectively). And it is not without significance that the 'casse toi' incident took place in one of the French presidency's magic moments, namely, the *bain de foule*, the presidential walkabout. Between 2007 and 2012, Sarkozy became intensely disliked, but in a truly Fifth republican manner, those polled all having a personal opinion, often intensely felt, of their President. Sarkozy put people into a rage. Huge numbers of French people could not bear him. This phenomenon does not exist in many comparable regimes. It is not simply that, in the United Kingdom for example, the institutions preclude it (although they do), rather, it is not in the culture. And the instability of this intense emotion means that its expression, or a sudden reversal of opinion, is as unpredictable as, paradoxically, it is likely, because the Fifth Republic allows for this consequential emotional intensity within its institutional framework.

One damning aspect of Sarkozy's presidency was the perception of him by the French as unstable, narcissistic, and perhaps neurotic; he was also seen by some as dangerous for democracy. The Toutsaufsarkozy.com website was an internet expression of this inordinate dislike (contemporary comment seems to have forgotten that de Gaulle was often accused of the same). The concerted 'proximity' and the omnipresence were major factors in the solid disapproval of him by the public. The likelihood of such or similar views lies in the nature of the office and the imagined relationships themselves. The Fifth Republic modulates and mediates an imagined relationship between leaders and led. The innovation of Charles de Gaulle, thanks to a set of dramatic circumstances, was to bring to the heart of the republic the phenomenon of personal allegiance, thus 'reconciling' the 'Republic' with the deeply rooted and chivalric, but un-republican tradition of the 'providential man'. The providential man cannot, however, always be providential ([Garrigues, 2012](#)).

Popularity and the office

Semiotically, the President 'embodies' the Fifth Republic, and is in an imagined emotional relationship to all the other people in the nation. The crucial factor here, and the most relevant to Sarkozy's presidency, was the way this relationship was conducted and deployed: how proximity, intimacy and exchange were mediated, what language was used, and what the implications were for perceived presidential character. It is clear that one of the characteristic features of Sarkozy's presidency was not simply his strong media presence, but the high profile given to 'the private' (his marriages, bad language and casual dress code, for example). With Sarkozy, the public and the private collide, and this at a moment when this trend was becoming stronger in France, as elsewhere (even though it remains very unclear what the public's overall view of such an evolution of protocol is). Sarkozy seemed to allow a conflation of the medieval notion of the 'King's Two Bodies', the mortal and personal, and the perpetual and transcendent, and this, in Sarkozy's case, to the detriment of each.

Comportmental Style and the 2012 Election

At the beginning of the 2012 election, as before round one of the 2002 election, public interest was extremely low, partly because there seemed nothing else to do but to wait 3 months for the moment the French could vote Sarkozy out of office. A high abstention rate was predicted. Then came the spate of killings in March 2012, in Montauban and Toulouse. For several days, the country was truly in a state of shock at the killings of three defenceless soldiers, and later the murder of three Jewish children and their teacher going to school, and, soon after, the killing of the killer, Mohamed Merah. By Wednesday 21 March, the election

campaign, suspended out of respect for the dead, started again; and the fundamental feature of Fifth Republic politics, namely, the character of the pretenders to the presidency, immediately re-emerged – how did they react to the killings, how did they conduct themselves, were they respectful, did they try to profit from the tragedy? And three-quarters of those polled were impressed by the way Sarkozy had responded to the Toulouse crisis. The President became for 48 hours the appropriate symbol of the country's mourning. Perhaps for the first time since May 2007, he became, in control of his impetuous side, President of all the French. It was not enough to save him, however. Overall, his campaign was aimless, and to try and counter the hard right candidate, Marine Le Pen, he moved to the right, making himself seem divisive and un-republican. But the subtle shift in Sarkozy's image, which led in part to a not too dishonourable defeat on 6 May, tells us much about the shifting symbolic significance of presidential character.

On 6 May, his speech to his weeping fans conceding defeat to François Hollande had a register he had so lacked for so long. 'From the bottom of my heart', he said, 'you are the eternal France The responsibility for this defeat is all mine', 'I love you'. With more *mea culpas* and expressions of such affection along the way, things might have turned out very differently. If Sarkozy had been more aware of the effects of his personality upon opinion, he may have more carefully constructed a character like the Sarkozy in defeat.

Conclusion

Our analysis has shown that the unusual and overbearing behaviour of Nicolas Sarkozy as President created a view that he had somehow strayed from a presidential norm. We have seen, however, that such apparently contradictory comportment helps us discover more about the real nature of the Fifth Republic and how it functions; helps us grasp what the real 'Gaullist settlement' was. De Gaulle brought to the mainstream of French political culture – by embedding it in the presidency – a hitherto marginal view of leadership, certainly within republicanism, that the character of the President could define the nature and dynamic of the regime. Fundamental to this is the idea that this character is in a relationship to the French, a relationship that is intense, emotional, and arguably unstable. But it contributes to a political system, and even to its stability, by allowing myths of providential behaviour to circulate consequentially within the political culture. From it arise a whole range of possible characters, and a range of potential changes to the relationship between presidential character and opinion.

Leadership types – managerial, heroic, revolutionary, collective, transactional and so on – have styles attached to them. Our analysis of Sarkozy's style suggests that this issue is more complex than has been understood, and this essentially because of the relative autonomy of agency and action within the structures that are themselves the conditions of performance. Leadership style has a certain autonomy from leadership type. We hope to have shown this here through analysis of an essentially failed style. At this point, we can not only speculate, but also venture that, almost by definition, Sarkozy's comportmental style has entered the presidential range, as it were, and, from 2012, will become a major comparator to President Hollande's own style.

[Cole \(2012\)](#) has shown recently that the move, after 2002, to the 5-year presidential term, as well as shifts in the overall culture of presidentialism have encouraged a new style. The 5-year time frame, and the necessary presidential involvement in and coincidence with the legislative term, mean that a domestication of the President's style is inevitable. This means

that Sarkozy's style was in certain respects institutionally appropriate (but new). It is the case, moreover, that his comportmental style was one of the factors in his election in 2007. As President, however, it did him serious political damage, and contributed to his defeat in 2012.

Style is a complex and volatile political resource. Its complexity is related to the ambivalence of the office itself, and to the presidency's conflation of the political and the symbolic, as well as to the character of the office holders. In the French case, the political and symbolic qualities of the office are in a dynamic and, in part, unpredictable relation to one another, and presidential style is a crucial element in that relation.

Notes

¹ De Gaulle's memoirs begin: 'All of my life, I have had in my mind a very particular idea of France. It is shaped as much by feeling as by rational thought. The emotional part of me imagines France quite simply like a fairy tale princess or the Madonna in a painting, and fated to have an unusual and glorious destiny. Instinctively, I feel that providence created France in order that she achieve great triumphs or else undergo great misfortunes' (my translation) (C. [de Gaulle, 1954](#), p. 1).

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