

“A Republic, If You Can Keep It” Assessing Contemporary Threats to the French Fifth Republic

In the 1787 Constitutional Convention Elizabeth Willing Powell asked Benjamin Franklin the following question. “Well, Doctor, what have we got, a republic or a monarchy?” To which Franklin answered “a republic, if you can keep it”. This vividly captures a principle now widely recognised in contemporary political science, which is that republican governance is not self-sustaining, as its survival depends on civic participation, institutional resilience, and the maintenance of shared democratic norms. Although Franklin spoke in 18th century North America, his words resonate strongly with 21st century European democracies. The French Fifth Republic, established in 1958 to provide stability after decades of political unrest, is increasingly subject to such pressures. These include rising political polarisation, the ascent of anti-system parties, declining trust in institutions, constitutional strain, persistent social unrest, identity conflict, and socioeconomic inequalities that collectively challenge the resilience of the Fifth Republic. Drawing on contemporary examples, the following arguments will attempt to support the notion that Franklin’s statement is still relevant today, particularly when assessing France’s current political climate, where the capacity to “keep” the republic depends on the active engagement of citizens and the effectiveness of democratic institutions; both of which are declining.

Political scientists widely agree that democratic resilience requires a certain degree of civic unity and shared political identity (Norris, 2017). Recent developments in France indicate a sharp erosion of this common ground. Census data from 2017 onward demonstrates substantial reconfiguration of political alignments, with traditional central left and right parties losing ground to both far left and right movements. This phenomenon has produced ideological clustering and intensified political polarisation.

This can be explained through systemic polarisation, which rather than standard ideological contestation, poses particular risks. As McCoy and Somer (2019) argue, it creates mutually exclusive identity blocs that impede compromise, reduce trust, and stimulate democratic erosion. France exhibits several indicators of such polarisation, such as deep territorial divides, generational cleavages, and sustained hostility between political ideologies. In this environment, political opponents are increasingly framed not as natural opposites but as external threats. The erosion of intersecting identities reduces the possibility of consensus, thus undermining the stability of republican governance. Franklin’s statement is therefore very relevant as a republic depends not just on institutional structures but on the collective participation of citizens to maintain civic commitments.

The rise of anti-system parties further complicates France’s political landscape. Contemporary democratic theory highlights the capacity of populist actors to undermine institutional norms even while operating through electoral mechanisms (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). In France, parties such as the National Rally and France Insoumise have become increasingly mainstream, frequently framing their platforms around distrust of existing institutions, with critiques of “elite” governance, and calls for complete constitutional restructuring. These movements originate from legitimate grievances but also

present potentially dangerous characteristics of what Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) call “stealth authoritarianism,” in which democratic norms are eroded subtly from within the system. The National Rally has relentlessly challenged the legitimacy of judicial institutions, the independence of the media, and the European legal structure as a whole. France Insoumise goes as far to suggest a transition to a Sixth Republic, which would fundamentally reshape executive and legislative institutions. While reform is not inherently hazardous, political scientists warn that anti-system actors can exploit constitutional change to consolidate power, moving the government closer to a close oligarchy that fits their agenda. (Ginsburg & Huq, 2018). The increasing normalisation of these movements underscores the fragility of the Fifth Republic. Furthermore, Franklin’s remark relates closely to the French situation, as a republic cannot succeed when the population lacks commitment to the institutional order that sustains it.

Trust in political institutions is a central indicator of democratic health. Fukuyama (2014) identifies institutional trust as foundational to political legitimacy, and OECD (2022) data shows that trust has been steadily declining across the world’s most developed democracies. France is notable in this regard as their own national surveys conducted by the Institut Montaigne reveal consistently low levels of trust in not only the presidency and parliament, but the law enforcement and institutional authorities. Low institutional trust is not only a symptom of discontent, it’s a structural vulnerability. As Norris and Inglehart (2019) note, declining trust increases susceptibility to radical narratives, weakens compliance with government policy, and reduces the acceptance of democratic outcomes. In France, widespread perceptions that institutions are unresponsive or elitist fuel anti-democratic sentiments, which intensify political cynicism. Franklin’s emphasis on civic vigilance aligns with these concerns, as a republic can only be maintained when citizens know its institutions are legitimate and accountable.

The Fifth Republic was designed to strengthen the executive after the instability of the Fourth Republic. Yet the concentration of power in the presidency has become increasingly contentious. Critics argue that the frequent use of Article 49.3; which permits the government to enact legislation without a parliamentary vote, undermines democracy. A recent report by the Fondation Jean-Jaurès (2023) notes that public opposition to 49.3 has increased, with many viewing it as a tool to restrict the power of publicly elected representatives. While France remains a robust democracy, prolonged reliance on exceptional powers risks normalising deviations from standard constitutional procedures. Franklin’s insistence on maintaining institutional balance resonates here: unchecked executive authority threatens the long-term health of a republic.

Political unrest is not abnormal for France even in its most modern history. The Yellow Vest movement in 2018–2019 signalled profound disillusionment with political representation, economic inequality, and social policy. Subsequent protests including mass demonstrations against pension reforms and riots following incidents of police violence in 2023 illustrated tension between the state and segments of the population. Habermas (1996) argues that legitimacy in democratic systems depends on public deliberation perceived as fair and responsive. The scale of contemporary French protests suggests significant weakness in this

regard. Rosanvallon (2008) similarly identifies a “crisis of representation” in modern democracies, where institutions no longer mediate effectively between state and society. Persistent unrest in France aligns with these statements, as does Franklin’s warning, highlighting the fragility of republican stability, for when citizens no longer believe institutions responsive to their needs, the republican order becomes increasingly difficult to maintain.

The French republican model is built on the principle of *laïcité*, or strict state secularism. However, its interpretation and application have become deeply contested. Conflicts surrounding religious expression, especially relating to Muslim communities have grown increasingly prominent in political discourse. Modood (2019) argues that rigid models of secularism can worsen social fragmentation in diverse societies, and France’s identity conflicts reflect this idea. The tension between universalist republican ideals and the lived experiences of minority groups creates social divisions that undermine social solidarity. Franklin emphasised the necessity of unity for republican durability, as when identity conflicts intensify, the shared normative foundation is essential for sustaining a republic drastically reduces.

Economic inequality is another structural challenge for the Fifth Republic. Data from Piketty (2014), the OECD, and INSEE show consistent disparities between affluent metropolitan centres and more rural areas. While typical these inequalities directly correlate with political unrest in France, contributing to support for disengagement from mainstream political processes. Political scientists widely agree that democratic stability correlates with widespread economic opportunity (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2019). Historically, when citizens perceive systemic unfairness, they become more receptive to radical alternatives or narratives questioning the legitimacy of the republic itself. Therefore, Franklin’s insight presupposes a tried and tested socioeconomic equality that allows citizens to remain committed to republican norms. France’s persistent disparities challenge this necessity, especially when considering movements advocating for a Sixth Republic, notably among supporters of France Insoumise. These arguments reflect broader concerns about the Fifth Republic’s institutional design. While constitutional reform could potentially bring democratic renewal, a call for total reform also signals dissatisfaction with entire structures, and while this may put a significant halt to new versions of the republic, such a radical change may risk complete democratic collapse. Furthermore, the debate over a potential Sixth Republic highlights tensions between executive authority, parliamentary representation, and its citizens, and the intensity of this discourse indicates a system under considerable stress.

Critically speaking, Benjamin Franklin’s statement “a republic, if you can keep it”, provides a valuable analytical framework for assessing contemporary pressures on the French Fifth Republic. Modern political science highlights the same conditions Franklin warned against; polarisation, institutional distrust, executive overreach, social fragmentation, and socioeconomic inequality. France today confronts all of these challenges simultaneously. While the Fifth Republic remains a functioning democracy, its resilience is far from guaranteed. The preservation of the French republican model depends on the sustained engagement of citizens, the reform and accountability of institutions, and the capacity to

rebuild trust across a fragmented society. In this context, Franklin's words are not merely historical, but they articulate an urgent contemporary warning about the fragility of democratic governance.

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