The purpose of this class is to help students

1. understand major features of the French political, economic and social situation in a context of crisis within the country and the European Union.

2. follow this year’s developments in French politics after the election of socialist President Hollande.

The focus will be placed on the transition from President Nicolas Sarkozy’s influence on the constitutional framework, his “hands on” conception and practice of the presidency, to a possibly more “normal” presidency.


Reading material will also be handed out to the students to complement the book.


Articles and various readings will be handed out when necessary.

classes 1 and 2:

General presentation of the course and of the course work.

. Questions and answers on the requirements.

Historical overview:

. From the French revolution of 1789 to the fifth republic of 1958. Why fifth and why 1958?

A tradition leading to a parliamentary system, but much rationalized.

. What are the major differences between a parliamentary and a presidential system?
. Does the constitution of the fifth republic qualify as parliamentary?
. How flexible has it proved to be? How flexible has it needed to be?
. The reform of 2008
. Towards a VI th Republic?

class 3:

A dual executive:

. Presidential powers in the constitution and presidential practice.
. The uneasy role and situation of the Prime Minister.
. The "hyper-presidence", or Nicolas Sarkozy’s personal reading and practice of the constitution. A problem for Hollande?
Classes 4 and 5:
Parliament: from "les godillots du général" to an attempt at gathering more clout.
- Parliament in a constitutional straightjacket. What after 2008?
- The ambivalent role and influence of the Constitutionnal Council;
- Usual causes for dissolution and the unusual rationale for 1997.
- The responsibility of MPs.
- Differences between socialist and "Gaullist" practices.
- Upcoming changes

Class 6:
Political parties and "groups", in the fifth republic.
- Their historical roots and chaotic evolution.
- Parties in the fifth republic: strengths and weaknesses
- From a wealth of minor parties to a struggle for survival: the National Front, the greens, the communist party and the Front de Gauche, their evolution, and its significance.
- Swings from dominant coalitions to strong majority parties through periods of a weak two party system.
- What is the actual balance between the left and the right?
- What future for smaller parties?
- Is France different from the rest of the European Union?

Class 7:
Electoral patterns in the fifth republic:
- Types of elections: national or local and their use by the elector.
- Referendums and the evolution of their significance.
- Dissolutions and 1997, an unusual setback for a president of the 5th republic.
- The impact of "parité".

Class 8:
The state and the ruling elite: which serves which?
- A strong tradition of geographic and social centralization.
- The process of selection of the elite in the fifth republic.
- Some confusion between private and public careers and interests: "pantouflage".
- Central State reform, with difficulty.
- Where does France stand in comparison with other major European countries?

Class 9:
Decentralisation and deconcentration:
- Les Jacobins et les Girondins.
- The successive attempts at deconcentration and decentralisation and their various levels of success, the reforms of 1981 and 1982 etc.: towards more local democracy or a return of "les notables"?
- Does the country remain more centralized than its neighbours?

Class 10: Social challenges of the 21st century
- What future for the French "pacte social"?
- Pressure groups and unions.
- The plague of unemployment and its social consequences.
- What form of integration for the first and second generation French?
- Is France’s social system different from that of other European countries?
Classes 11 12 :
The tradition of the Welfare state and the demands of globalization and of the EU
  . From the oil crisis to the globalization of the economy : how is France responding
to the challenges of the early 21st century.?
  . The uneasy bet on a European economic and political entity.
  . France within the EU in a critical situation.

Class 13 :
A global outlook :
  . The position of France in a post cold war setting.
  . Shrinking spheres of influence : from "grandeur" to modesty?
  . What future and what role for France within the European Union?