



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

France is about half the size of Bolivia, or slightly smaller than the U.S. state of Texas. French sovereignty extends to the island of La Corse (Corsica) as well as several overseas territories, collectivities, and départements (overseas divisions of France that have representatives in the French government as well as some local autonomy), including French Guiana, Guadeloupe, French Polynesia, New Caledonia, Réunion, and Martinique.

Because France is hexagonal in shape, it is sometimes referred to as *l'hexagone*. The terrain is varied, including plains, mountains, and forests. Mountains stretch along the borders with Spain, Italy, and Switzerland. France boasts one of Europe's highest peaks, Le mont Blanc (Mont Blanc), at 15,774 feet (4,808 meters). Le Rhin (The Rhine) River forms part of the border with Germany, and the Seine River is an important waterway through Northern France. A flat plain with rolling hills dominates the northern area.

The southern climate is Mediterranean, with cool, moist winters and hot, dry summers. The north is temperate and rainy. The west is also rainy and influenced by the Atlantic, which moderates winter temperatures. The central, east, and upland areas have a continental climate, with fluctuating temperatures. In the mountains, thunderstorms are prevalent

in summer.

History

Gauls and the Hundred Years' War

Some of the earliest inhabitants of present-day France were a Celtic people known as the Gauls. By 51 BC, the Romans had conquered the Gauls, who then adopted the Romans' customs, language, and laws. Clovis I, king of the Franks, defeated the last Roman governor in AD 486. The French consider his conversion to Catholicism in 496 the founding act of the nation; the move won him the support of the Catholic Church and Gallo-Roman people, who helped him defeat surrounding Arian kingdoms.

Over the next several centuries, France expanded its territory and fought for control of its kingdom. The land was part of Charlemagne's vast empire until its disintegration in 987, when France emerged as a successor kingdom. Intermittent conflict followed, particularly with the English. Tensions over who should rule the French Kingdom led to the Hundred Years' War, which was fought from 1337 to 1453. In 1429, Joan of Arc led the French to victory in a battle with the English. Burned to death by the English in 1431, she remains a French heroine and a patron saint of France.

Reformation and the Age of Nobility

As Protestantism spread throughout Europe, rising European factions waged a series of wars over religion that left millions dead. In France, Roman Catholics fought with Protestants

called Huguenots. The wars ended in 1598, when King Henry IV issued an edict granting Huguenots religious freedom. However, persecution continued, and religious freedom remained tenuous. Tensions over religion affected politics for years to come.

By the late 1600s, France emerged as the leading power in Europe and expanded its reach to overseas territories in the Americas, Africa, and Asia. Under Louis XIV (the Sun King), the monarchy consolidated power and moved toward a centralized government. The king's reign was marked by grandeur and luxury, while many French citizens suffered in poverty.

The French Revolution and Napoleon

In the late 1700s, a period of social and political upheaval contributed to the collapse of the monarchy. Conflict with England led to the loss of French territories in Canada, India, and the Caribbean. These losses, along with royal extravagances, class inequities, and financial problems, brought about the French Revolution. In 1789, the French stormed the Bastille, which was a symbol of royal tyranny, and overthrew Louis XVI's monarchy. The period after the French Revolution became known as the Reign of Terror, as many nobles were murdered. The French Revolution marks a milestone in world history because it started a movement toward democracy.

After a decade of instability, Napoleon Bonaparte took power, declaring himself emperor in 1804. Napoleon conquered most of Europe before embarking on a disastrous campaign in Russia in 1812. Two years later, Austrian and Prussian forces seized Paris, and Napoleon was exiled. His 1815 return to power, called his Hundred Days, ended in defeat by English- and Prussian-led forces at Waterloo. The monarchy was restored but was followed by the Second Republic (1848–52) and then the Second Empire (1852–70), under Napoleon III. Defeat by Germany led to the Third Republic in 1871.

World Wars and Colonial Empire

The turn of the 20th century ushered in France's Beautiful Age, or *Belle Époque*, characterized by economic prosperity and cultural innovation. During this time, France expanded its colonial empire in Africa and Asia, making it the second-largest empire in the world behind the British. Stability was short-lived, as France became a major battleground during both world wars.

Although France and its allies emerged victorious in World War I, the country was heavily damaged, and nearly 1.5 million French people lost their lives. France was still recovering from that war when World War II broke out. During World War II, Germany occupied France, dividing the country into two parts: the occupied zone in the north and *Vichy France*, a German-friendly government, in the south. The D-Day invasion that took place on the French beaches of Normandy turned the tide of the war in favor of the Allies, who liberated France in 1944.

World War II took a heavy toll on France. An estimated 600,000 lost their lives, and bombings left the country in need of reconstruction. In the aftermath of the war, relations deteriorated between France and its colonies in Asia and Africa. Conflicts and revolts forced France out of Vietnam

and Algeria, and by the early 1960s, fifteen other French possessions in Africa had gained independence. The French Empire largely came to an end by the late 1970s.

Economic Problems

Despite losses from the colonial independence movement and the costs associated with rebuilding the nation after World War II, France enjoyed economic growth under President de Gaulle's rule. However, in 1968, students and workers protested over a rigid educational system and poor working conditions. Their protests resulted in lasting social change, including laws that raised the minimum wage and continue to influence French society and culture. In the mid-1990s, protests and strikes rooted in social and economic issues again broke out, leading to the resignations of three successive prime ministers.

Internationally, France assumed a leading role in efforts to economically unite Western Europe. A founding member of the European Community in 1953, France remains a central force in today's European Union (EU). Among the first wave of EU countries to adopt the euro, France voted against the EU constitution in 2005 but ratified a modified version, the Lisbon Treaty, three years later.

Current Challenges

France continues to face economic issues and resulting civil unrest. In 2005, massive rioting broke out among youth in immigrant neighborhoods, highlighting the lack of opportunities and the discrimination faced by France's immigrant community. Anti-immigrant sentiment has risen, fueled in part by 2015 and 2016 terror attacks in Paris and Nice, which involved some foreign-born French residents in addition to some French and Belgian citizens and were connected to terrorist groups such as the Islamic State (ISIS) and al-Qaeda. This, along with negative reactions to the recent influx of refugees fleeing conflicts in Africa and the Middle East, has contributed to the rise of the right-wing National Front political party.

In 2017, centrist Emmanuel Macron defeated the National Front candidate, becoming the youngest president in French history. Macron was faced with the challenge of repairing France's economy from the lingering effects of the 2008 global recession and the 2011 euro crisis and addressing the nation's high unemployment rate. In 2018 and 2019, his proposals to limit employment benefits and increase taxes were met with months of planned strikes and protests; this so-called Yellow Vest movement later expanded to communicate grievances over costs of living and quality of life. Frustrations grew when the coronavirus pandemic hit in 2020 and France quickly became one of the countries most affected by the virus. The pandemic and the ongoing protests continue to threaten the long-term stability of the French economy.

THE PEOPLE

Population

The Paris metropolitan area is home to over 11 million inhabitants, and Lyon and Marseille, to well over 1 million. Ethnically, the French have a Celtic heritage that has mixed

with various other European groups (Latin, Nordic, Teutonic, Slavic, and more) over the centuries. Primary immigrant groups include Portuguese, Italians, Spaniards, Turks, and people from former French colonies in North Africa, West Africa, the Caribbean, and Southeast Asia. Although they have integrated into French society, the various ethnic groups do not always mix with one another. North Africans tend to remain the most separate because of their religion, Islam. As in much of Europe, the small Roma population in France is often ostracized, and some French feel the government does not do enough to crack down on Roma camps.

Language

French is an important international language. It is an official language of the United Nations and is the official language of 29 countries including France. The French government has stressed the language so much that almost everyone in France speaks French, despite the different nationalities represented. Regional dialects were in danger of disappearing, but the French government has recently made an effort to preserve them. It is possible to study regional dialects at school, just as if they were foreign languages.

French students begin learning their first foreign language at age six, though some schools hire native English speakers to teach students even earlier. Instruction in a second foreign language begins at age 11 to 12. Communication skills are emphasized over grammar and theory, though that has not always been the case. English is the most common first foreign language. Spanish and German are common second foreign languages. Despite its emphasis on foreign-language instruction, the French government resists the inclusion of foreign words in the French language. The *Académie française* is the government body that tries to keep French pure. However, many businesses have English names. In 1994, the French passed a law that required radio stations to broadcast French music at least 40 percent of the time from 6:30 a.m. to 10:30 p.m. In 2016, Parliament members voted to reduce this requirement to 35 percent.

Religion

About half of the French population is Christian, primarily Roman Catholic. Most French Catholics celebrate the various religious holidays and attend Mass once or twice a year. Half have a religious wedding, and many still baptize their children. These religious ceremonies have become mostly social rites for most French, who tend not to have strong religious beliefs. Active worship is increasingly rare, as is the practice of visiting shrines and other places of devotion.

A smaller percentage of the population practices Islam, which is the second largest religion in France; a growing number of people are converting to Islam. A small number of people are Jewish or Buddhist. Many claim no religious affiliation. There is a strict separation between church and state in France. For example, in a court of law, witnesses swear on the French constitution rather than a Bible or other book of scripture. Wearing religious symbols is prohibited in schools and public places, although this law is not always enforced.

General Attitudes

The French measure success by educational level, family reputation, and financial status, as demonstrated through their housing, cars, and other material possessions. Among the most patriotic people in the world, the French are extremely proud of their culture, heritage, and way of life. This patriotism fosters a general expectation that visitors have some knowledge of French and show appreciation for French culture. The French are often reserved and private but tend to be more hospitable outside Paris. Politeness is valued, and *S'il vous plaît* (Please) is a common phrase.

Although the country is very multicultural, it seeks to maintain its identity by resisting the growing popularity (especially among young people) of cheap fast food, foreign sitcoms, and U.S. American music. The government restricts the percentage of non-French entertainment on national radio and television channels.

While the culture of Paris has traditionally directed French attitudes, political and social trends have caused the French to reexamine their national identity. This introspection has led some to predict that French society will experience fundamental change during the next generation. Areas of change may include education, immigration, economics, the central government's structure, or even language.

French Saying

Il ne faut pas vendre la peau de l'ours avant de l'avoir tué.
("You shouldn't sell the skin of the bear before you kill it.")

Personal Appearance

In general, the French take great care to dress well, whether they are wearing formal or casual attire, and they feel more at ease with visitors who show the same degree of attention to appearance. Paris is home to many of the world's leading fashion designers.

Professional attire, depending on the business and location, tends to be formal. Parisians dress more formally than people in other cities. In the southern region of France, dress is more casual but not less stylish. Most French women value a natural look and wear very little makeup.

French students are not required to wear a uniform to school, but they do have to follow a dress code. Students wear sports clothes during P.E. Young people wear more casual clothes on weekends or when at home and more stylish clothes when they go out with friends or family. They also like to try out different clothing and hairstyles until they find their own style.

French people generally believe religious dress is contrary to the principles of France's secular society, and some Muslim women in France face controversy over the way they dress. In 2004, France banned the wearing of headscarves in schools and other public buildings, and in 2011, the country banned the wearing of face veils.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

When greeting someone other than a friend, a handshake is

customary but not required. The French handshake is a light grip and a single, quick shake. Women customarily are kissed on both cheeks by male and female friends. Men only kiss the cheeks of males who are relatives or close friends. When people give kisses, they generally just touch cheeks and “kiss the air.” The number of kisses given varies by region and ranges from two to four.

Standard phrases for greeting include *Bonjour* (Good day) and *Comment allez-vous ?* or the more informal *Ça va ?* (both meaning “How are you?”). Greetings are usually combined with the person’s name or a title and always precede any conversation or request. Good-bye is *Au revoir* (Until we meet again) or the less formal *À bientôt* (See you soon). A favorite among young people is *Salut* for both greeting and parting. Friends and close colleagues use first names; otherwise, professional titles and titles such as *Monsieur* (Mr.), *Madame* (Mrs.), and *Mademoiselle* (Miss) are common.

Gestures

The French are careful about their personal habits, being discreet when sneezing, blowing the nose, etc. They do not use personal items, such as combs and toothpicks, in public. It is improper to speak with one’s hands in one’s pockets or to chew gum in public. Sitting with legs spread apart is impolite for women; one should sit straight with knees together or with legs crossed at the knee. Feet are not placed on tables or chairs. The “okay” sign used in the United States (a rounded index finger touching the tip of the thumb) means “zero” to older French generations. The French gesture for “okay” is the “thumbs up” sign. Slapping the open palm over a closed fist is vulgar and should be avoided.

Visiting

The French are formal in their visiting customs, and people do not often visit unannounced. Families enjoy getting together when possible, often on Sundays. Guests usually arrive on time because punctuality is a sign of courtesy, although this rule is more flexible in the south. However, for some social events it is also polite to arrive a few minutes late, allowing the hosts extra time for final preparations.

Guests do not enter a home until invited inside. They generally sit where the host directs. It is a polite gesture to bring candy, wine, or flowers to the hostess, except red roses (reserved for romantic love) and chrysanthemums (used in cemeteries). Unless certain of its high quality, foreign guests should not give wine as a gift. At mealtime, eating is never rushed because the conversation is appreciated as much as the food, though it is best to avoid personal questions and topics such as religion or money. The hosts should be complimented on the meal; good cooking is a matter of pride in French homes. When ending a visit, a guest waits for a polite silence before rising. At the door, small talk, expressions of thanks, and repeated good-byes continue; it is impolite to be in a hurry to leave.

Eating

Lunch was once the main meal of the day, but urban society

has changed, and many people now have a light lunch, not eating their main meal until the evening. In Paris, *déjeuner* (lunch) is usually eaten around noon or 1 p.m., and dinner often is not before 8 p.m. In other parts of the country, particularly rural areas, people eat earlier. Families usually gather for dinner; cooking together and sharing meals is a bonding experience for many French families.

Etiquette is important to the French. Traditionally, both hands remain above the table at all times. A man may rest his wrists, and a woman her forearms, on the table edge. One does not place the elbows on the table. The French eat with the fork in the left hand and the knife in the right.

In formal contexts, lettuce is folded into small pieces with the fork but never cut. Fruit is peeled and cut with a knife and eaten with a fork. Bread, eaten with every meal, is broken with the fingers and used to wipe the plate. It can also be used to push food onto the fork; in this case, the bread is held in the left hand and the fork in the right. One places the knife and fork parallel across the plate when finished.

Formal lunches and dinners may last more than two hours, with as many as eight to twelve courses. Social meals begin with an appetizer, followed by *hors d’œuvres*; a first course of soup or salad; a main course of fish, pasta, or a meat cooked in a crust or sauce; cheese; and then a dessert. Coffee or liquor finish the evening. A typical family meal has two to four courses. Meals with extended family can last up to four hours. When eating out, the person who invites or makes the suggestion usually pays.

Wine is consumed with most meals, except breakfast; numerous varieties are available. In most of France, red wine generally accompanies meat and cheese, white wine is drunk with fish, and rose wine is an appetizer. In formal meals, champagne is drunk with either the appetizer or the dessert.

LIFESTYLE

Family

Structure

Most families enjoy a comfortable standard of living, although class distinctions are still fairly visible in dress, housing, and family size. The average French family has one or two children, but immigrants tend to have larger families. Pets outnumber children in France and receive special attention. Both the nuclear family and the extended family are important in France.

Parents and Children

Grandparents play an important role in French families; they sometimes care for grandchildren while the parents are working. However, some people are now moving away from their extended families to work or study. Still, many children remain at home until they finish their education, and some stay until they find a job.

Gender Roles

A French mother is the core of the family unit. Though more women now work outside of the home, mothers still find time for their families, especially their children. Women often choose to finish their educations and begin their careers before starting a family of their own. This can be challenging

in France, where many women have to work harder than their male colleagues to prove that they are capable. Most French women do not marry and have families until they are in their thirties.

Housing

Most people live in urban areas, with a growing number moving out of city centers into suburbs. After the Second World War, many French were homeless. Beginning in the 1960s, the federal government built cheap buildings containing dozens of apartments for poor families. These low-rent lodgings have grown old and dilapidated. Many are now being torn down to allow for the construction of less generic and more attractive homes.

Housing style varies by region, with local mayors occasionally insisting that all houses in their district conform to certain standards. In Alsace, for example, older houses are painted in bright colors and have outside beams and flower baskets that must be kept in good condition. In the north of France, most houses have gray slate roofs, while in the south most roofs are made of red tile.

Many people rely on government subsidies to afford expensive housing. Environmentally friendly housing is valued, and the government reinforces this by subsidizing solar panels, wood heating, and other “green” features.

Dating and Marriage

Dating and Courtship

French youth initially form relationships by socializing casually with a group of friends. Favorite activities include going to parks, friends' houses, cafés, dances, and movies. Boys and girls spend their time laughing and talking, and friendships often lead to more serious relationships. Parents are usually supportive of relationships and may even allow a young adult couple to live in their home for a period of time.

Marriage in Society

Many French people no longer believe marriage is important; this is partly because of high divorce rates. *Le pacs*, an agreement that two parties make in front of a legal representative, affords couples the same rights that accompany formal marriage. *Le pacs* can be ended easily, without a divorce. Couples often commit to this type of arrangement instead of getting engaged; it is a way to see if the relationship will work out before getting married. In May 2013, France legalized same-sex marriage, and a 2017 poll found that around three-quarters of French people favored that legalization.

Weddings

Wedding days are very important in France; they require a lot of preparation and money. Traditionally, the wedding is celebrated in the bride's hometown, and the bride wears a white dress.

There are two separate ceremonies. The first is at the city hall, where the couple is legally married by the mayor. This ceremony is considered the official marriage. A second, optional religious ceremony takes place at a church. Friends, family, and acquaintances all attend the city hall ceremony and then follow the couple's car to the church. They honk their car horns along the way.

After the ceremony, *le vin d'honneur*, a light meal, is served for all the guests. Gifts, usually of money, are given to the couple. At night, friends and family attend the reception, where a big meal—with many courses and a traditional wedding cake—is served and dancing lasts until dawn.

Life Cycle

Birth

Pregnancy is usually a happy time of preparation. France has generous parental leave policies, including 16 weeks of fully paid maternity leave for all women. Mothers can take 3 to 6 weeks before and 10 to 13 weeks after each child's birth. Working fathers are also given a mandatory paid leave of 11 days after the birth.

After the baby is born, close family members often visit the very same day. Friends usually wait until the second day. Friends and family may give baby clothes as a gift, particularly if it is the parents' first child.

Although relatively few French citizens are regular churchgoers, most observe traditional Catholic rituals. A few months to a year after birth, a baby is baptized and given godparents.

Milestones

At 12 or 13, many Catholic children take their First Communion. This is usually a big event, involving a religious ceremony and a large family gathering with plenty of food.

Children named after a saint from the Christian calendar often celebrate their name day, the day to which that saint is linked. For example, boys named Nicolas may be given small presents on 6 December (Saint Nicolas Day).

Although there is no official graduation ceremony, the biggest transition from childhood to adulthood is high school graduation. Students must take a *bac* (short for *baccalauréat*) exam to qualify for university studies. At age 18, French young adults can drive a car. National military service is no longer compulsory.

Death

When a person dies, a ceremony is held to honor him or her, after which friends and family follow the coffin to the cemetery, where the person is buried. Cremation, which is less expensive, is becoming more common. Religious funerals are held at a church. Secular ceremonies are often held at a crematorium. A light meal is then provided at the family's home, and friends and family share memories of the deceased with each other. Families often bring flowers to the gravesite at every anniversary of the death and on All Saints' Day (1 November).

Diet

The French consider cooking an art, and French cuisine is famous worldwide. The first French cookbooks date back to the Middle Ages, and French standards were the early gauge of fine cooking. Regional traditions are strong. There are several types of cooking, ranging from hearty, inexpensive fare to sophisticated dishes with costly ingredients. Nouvelle cuisine (new cuisine), created in the 1960s, was a reaction to heavy cooking. While still made of expensive ingredients, it is much lighter, portions are smaller, and the presentation is more artistic.

Although most people eat a light breakfast of coffee and bread or a croissant, often purchased at a *boulangerie* (bakery), donuts and other non-French pastries are often available in supermarkets. Filled croissants and sandwiches can be bought in shops and cafés. Cafés also offer croque-monsieurs (toasted ham-and-cheese sandwiches) and salad-type vegetables for a light meal. Pâtisseries (pastry shops) sell cakes, and some restaurants sell *crêpes*. The French population tends to resist foreign fast food because of health concerns about genetically modified foods and worries about globalization, which is seen as a threat to France's small farmers. Even so, many hamburger restaurants operate across the country.

Recreation

Sports

Soccer and rugby are popular spectator sports; France hosted and won the 1998 World Cup soccer competition. The annual Tour de France cycling race and the French Open tennis tournament are popular national events.

Participation is higher in individual sports such as cycling, fishing, tennis, hiking, skiing, and sailing than in team sports. Others enjoy hunting, riding horses, and golfing. People of all ages enjoy pétanque, a form of bowling that originated in southern France. It is becoming more common for adults to jog, walk, or ride bicycles.

Young boys play soccer or rugby in clubs. Swimming is also popular among boys but more popular among young girls, who may participate in dance and gymnastic classes as well. Teenage girls play a variety of sports, while teenage boys tend to continue playing soccer.

Leisure

The French enjoy spending leisure time with their friends or family. They love to cook and eat together. On the weekends, many people also like to go to the movies, hike, camp, or picnic with friends. Many French women love to shop. Summer music festivals occur throughout France.

Vacation

Most people take five weeks of paid vacation each year—four weeks in the summer and one week at Christmas. During August, when many people travel, some shops and factories close. Many families vacation within France; the Atlantic and Mediterranean coasts are common destinations.

French students enjoy two weeks of vacation after every six weeks of school, which enables them to visit their extended families. If they can't spend time with their families, students often attend daytime outdoor activity centers or holiday camps. Camp activities vary according to the season and may include skiing, horseback riding, hiking, or swimming. Students also have about three months of summer vacation. During the summertime, the whole family is able to go on vacation together, usually to the beach or to the mountains. Camping is a popular activity in the summer.

The Arts

French literature, art, and architecture have greatly influenced the modern world. France claims classic writers, such as Voltaire and Victor Hugo, as well as modern writers, who helped introduce movements such as surrealism,

existentialism, and postmodernism. The impressionist movement in art, which emphasized subjective representation and the reflection of light, began in France at the end of the 1800s. This movement included the famous painter Claude Monet. France is also home to world-renowned art museums, such as the Louvre and the Pompidou Center. Famous examples of French architecture include the Eiffel Tower and Gothic cathedrals, such as the Notre Dame de Paris.

The first photograph was taken in France in 1827, and Jacques Daguerre and other French artists soon helped make photography into a respected art form. The first motion picture was shown in 1895 in France, and later French contributions included the film projector and trick photography.

France is also known for its cuisine, philosophy, ballet, ceramics, and fashion. French designers such as Christian Dior, Coco Chanel, Cartier, and Louis Vuitton retain a prominent place in the world of international high fashion.

Holidays

The French celebrate several holidays each year, including New Year's Day (1 January), *Mardi Gras* (Shrove Tuesday), Easter Sunday and Monday, Labor Day (1 May), le Huit Mai (French Armistice Day, 8 May), and World War I Armistice Day (11 November). They also celebrate Catholic holidays, such as Ascension, Pentecost, Assumption (15 August), and All Saints' Day (1 November).

La Fête Nationale

La Fête nationale (literally, "National Holiday," also known as Bastille Day) is held on 14 July and commemorates the first anniversary of the storming of the Bastille prison in Paris during the French Revolution. It is celebrated with a huge military parade in Paris; thousands gather on the Champs-Élysées, and thousands more watch it on television. The parade ends in front of the president and his guests. Smaller parades are held in virtually every French city. Friends and families get together to play games and have picnics. Fireworks shows are standard.

World War I Armistice Day

World War I Armistice Day, 11 November, is a national holiday and a time of contemplation. Some cities host parades, and political figures give speeches about World War I. Military cemeteries commemorate this day with ceremonies in which stories are told and pictures of veterans are displayed. Television stations show documentaries about the war.

Christmas

Christmas is important in France. At *Noël* (Christmas), the tree is decorated before or on Christmas Eve. People prepare for Christmas by decorating, putting up lights, and shopping for gifts. Many towns host a Christmas market, where vendors sell handicrafts, food, and drink. Christmas is a magical time for French children, who leave their shoes by the fireplace for Père Noël (Santa Claus) to fill.

On Christmas Eve, families gather and share specialties like escargots, foie gras, oysters, smoked salmon, turkey, cheese, and baguettes. For dessert, they serve the *bûche de Noël*, a cake with vanilla or chocolate frosting and flavored filling. Families also often go to Midnight Mass on Christmas

Eve at the nearest church, where they listen to the choir sing and hear the Christmas story. Families then return home and open the presents *Père Noël* has left for everyone.

Holiday festivities last through New Year's. On 6 January, Epiphany (which celebrates the Magi's visit to the baby Jesus) is celebrated by sharing a *galette des rois* (king cake), a round, flat cake with a lucky charm hidden inside.

Other Holidays

Many French celebrate New Year's Eve with parties and fireworks. In February, *Mardi Gras* (Shrove Tuesday) is celebrated with parades, costumes, and parties. Labor Day (1 May) is marked by parades and celebrates the coming of spring; throughout France, lilies of the valley are sold. On 21 June, the French celebrate *la Fête de la Musique* (Music Day), a night celebration commemorating the beginning of summer and the longest day of the year. People gather in cities and villages to listen to groups sing and play music at free concerts.

SOCIETY

Government

Structure

France is a semi-presidential republic; its constitution was adopted in October 1958 and has been amended many times. Because the current constitution is the country's fifth, the current government is commonly called the Fifth Republic. France is divided into 18 regions, including its 5 overseas regions of French Guiana, Guadeloupe, Martinique, Mayotte, and Réunion.

The president is directly elected, serving as head of state for a five-year term, and is eligible for a second term. The president appoints a prime minister, typically from the majority party in the National Assembly, and has the right to dissolve the Assembly to call for new elections. The president has no veto power but can rule by emergency decree in a crisis. The prime minister, also called the president of the Council of Ministers, serves as the head of government. When the president and the prime minister are from the same party, the prime minister acts as a subordinate of the president. When they are from opposing parties, called a cohabitation, the prime minister enjoys broader executive power.

The National Assembly and the Senate make up France's bicameral Parliament. The National Assembly's 577 members are directly elected to five-year terms through an absolute majority system. The Senate's 348 members serve six-year terms. One-half of its members are indirectly elected by an electoral college every three years. Both houses include representation from France's overseas departments and territories.

Political parties are legally required to include a balanced ratio of male to female candidates; the difference of male and female candidates cannot exceed 2 percent in National Assembly elections nationwide, and ballots for the Senate must include an equal ratio of male and female candidates. Only the *Parti socialiste* (Socialist Party) includes a voluntary quota, requiring 50 percent female candidates for all electoral

lists.

The judicial branch consists of the *Cour de Cassation* (Supreme Court of Appeals), *Conseil Constitutionnel* (Constitutional Council), and *Conseil d'Etat* (Council of State). The nine members of the *Conseil Constitutionnel* are appointed by different government leaders: three by the president, three by the president of the National Assembly, and three by the president of the Senate.

Political Landscape

France has a multiparty system, with the centrist *La République En Marche!* (The Republic on the Move!, LREM) and the center-right *Les Républicains* (The Republicans, LR) acting as the two major political parties. Other major political parties include the far-right *Rassemblement national* (National Rally, RN), the center-left *Parti socialiste* (Socialist Party, PS), the centrist *Mouvement démocrate* (Democratic Movement, MoDem), and the center-left *Les Verts* (the Greens).

Typically, right-leaning politicians and parties have favored free markets (economic liberalism), while those who are left-leaning support socialism. Immigration, economic reform, and political corruption are major political issues.

Government and the People

The government sometimes struggles with transparency. There is little infrastructure to deal with conflicts of interest between politicians and the private sector or to regulate the interaction between members of Parliament and lobbyists. Political parties are widely perceived as being corrupt by the public, who also largely find the government's efforts at combating corruption to be ineffective.

Civil rights and liberties are generally respected. However, while freedom of religion is a constitutional right, laws ban the wearing of conspicuous religious symbols in public spaces. Muslims and international human-rights organizations have described these laws as an infringement on religious freedom. The voting age is 18. Nearly three-quarters of the eligible population regularly participates in presidential and parliamentary elections.

Economy

France's large industrial economy and welfare-style government allow its people to enjoy the benefits of economic prosperity. Inflation is low, but high unemployment and budget deficits are ongoing challenges. Youth unemployment reached just over 24 percent at the end of 2012. The global financial crisis of 2008 prompted France to develop a US\$33 billion economic stimulus package. Under former presidents Nicolas Sarkozy and François Hollande, the government responded to the financial crisis with austerity measures and cutting both public spending and taxes on businesses in hopes of creating more jobs, but the economy has continued to struggle.

As one of Europe's leading agricultural producers, France is self-sufficient in most foods. The agricultural sector employs about 3 percent of the workforce and is a world leader in the production of wine, milk, butter, cheese, barley, and wheat. One-third of the land is arable. Major industries include motor vehicles, aircraft, chemicals, and food processing. The steel and textile industries were once major

parts of the economy but are less important today. Exports include machinery, transportation equipment, and beverages. Half of France's electricity is generated by nuclear power plants. The service sector employs roughly three-quarters of the labor force. France attracts more tourists than any other country in the world. In 2002, the euro officially replaced France's former currency, the *franc*.

Transportation and Communications

France's public transportation system is well-developed. Buses serve most cities, and train service extends to many small towns. Trains are best for long-distance travel. The train à grande vitesse, or TGV, is a high-speed passenger train, often reaching 200 mph (320 km/h). Subways are known as the *métro*. Many people own private cars, which are generally French brands, such as Renault or Peugeot. The French domestic air system is efficient, and car ferries link France with La Corse (Corsica) and Great Britain. A trip from Paris to London by train crosses under the English Channel and takes about three hours; tunnel time is 35 minutes.

The communications system is modern. Pay phones generally use a credit card or a *télécarte* (phone card) purchased at a post office. The post office is the center for various forms of communication and transactions; it also functions as a bank. France publishes more than a hundred daily newspapers. With the exception of defamation laws, the French press is free. Virtually all French people have cellular phones. Internet is widely used in French offices and households. Minitel, a pre-World Wide Web online service created in 1978, allowed users to do tasks such as buy train tickets, chat, and search telephone directories before the internet made these services available to households. Minitel was widely popular and considered groundbreaking until the late 1990s; its services were retired in June 2012 due to the popularity of the internet.

Education

Structure and Access

Schooling is free and compulsory from age 3 to 15. Nearly all children enroll in preprimary schools because the French believe that preschools are important for developing the communication skills of young children.

Secondary education, lasting from ages 11 to 17, is offered by *collèges* and *lycées*. *Collège*, similar to junior high school, lasts for four years. After *collège*, students take an exam called the *brevet*. Students then have more than one option: continue on to high school (known as *lycée*) or go to a trade school to gain experience in a specific trade.

School Life

The public primary school day starts at 8:30 or 9 a.m., has a two-hour lunch break around noon, and then lasts until 4:30 or 5 p.m. Children go to school on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday, and have Wednesday, Saturday, and Sunday off. In *collège*, school goes from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday to Friday, with a half-day on Wednesday. French *lycées* involve a full week of classes and a large amount of homework.

Parents who work bring their children to school before it starts; children are taken care of by school staff during the

lunch break. The French education system values individual work, as well as testing, to judge the knowledge of individual students. All French students are required to study English. Primary and *collège* students are prohibited from using smartphones during the school day according to French law.

There are many private Catholic schools across France, as well as evangelical Christian, Jewish, and Islamic schools. Private schools are partly subsidized by the state.

Higher Education

After secondary education, students take an exam to determine whether they may go on to higher education. Students can either go to traditional universities or to professional schools that offer school classes combined with work experience. Businesses tend to look favorably on students who go to professional schools because of the experience they gain in their chosen field. Some students attend a university because they do not yet feel ready to enter the job market.

Education is relatively inexpensive at France's 60 universities, including the Sorbonne, in Paris. However, the best students take further preparatory classes in order to attend the *grandes écoles*, where they study for careers in government, the military, education, and industry (engineering, marketing, and management).

Health

The French enjoy good health and have a high life expectancy. Medical care is generally good and is available to all citizens through a socialized system. Prices and fees are fixed by the government. Many French people also carry private insurance to pay fees not covered by the government. In addition to public hospitals, private clinics are available. In 2012, the government raised taxes on cigarettes in an effort to curb the number of smokers in the country.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

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Country and Development Data

| | |
|-------------------------|------------------------|
| Capital | Paris |
| Population | 68,084,217 (rank=21) |
| Area (sq. mi.) | 248,573 (rank=42) |
| Area (sq. km.) | 643,801 |
| Human Development Index | 26 of 189 countries |
| Gender Inequality Index | 8 of 162 countries |
| GDP (PPP) per capita | \$42,000 |
| Adult Literacy | NA |
| Infant Mortality | 3 per 1,000 births |
| Life Expectancy | 80 (male); 86 (female) |
| Currency | Euro |

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