

Governments, Parliaments and Parties (France)

By [Fabienne Bock](#)

Summary

Despite its weaknesses, the French parliamentary republic survived the First World War without compromising the constitutional laws that had been in place since 1875. The Union sacrée was formed on 4 August 1914. While this initially resulted in the Chambers letting the government run the country, by January 1915 they had reclaimed their power to control the executive and legislate by shifting most activity towards parliamentary commissions and secret committees. The breakup of the Union sacrée then led a majority of Parliament to throw its support behind the government formed by Georges Clemenceau in November 1917.

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Introduction

Of all the European powers, [France](#) was the only one in 1914 with a republican regime in which most power rested in the hands of Parliament. Since the early 1880s – and given the weakness of French parliamentary groups which, unlike their counterparts in the [United Kingdom](#), did not have a legislative majority –, numerous government crises had undermined confidence in the executive’s ability to stay in power for more than a few months. Would France even be able to weather a war that would pit it against regimes with strong executive branches and allow it to maintain its institutions? Socialist [Marcel Sembat \(1862-1922\)](#) was sceptical when he wrote a pamphlet entitled “*Faites la paix ou faites un roi*” (“Make Peace or Make a King”) in 1911. Although his goal was to promote [pacifist](#) ideas, he nevertheless raised an important question: how could an assembly system in which governments constantly had to rally support to avoid being defeated (and thus forced to resign), go head-

to-head with the [German Empire](#) and the undivided authority of the Chancellor and Emperor who appointed him.¹

In addition to this fundamental issue, key institutional components – the Parliament and especially the Chamber of deputies – risked being seriously disabled. Indeed, the military laws of 1905 and 1913 had not exempted elected officials from joining the military in times of general mobilization. In 1914, nearly one third of deputies were eligible to be called up for military service. Under such conditions, what could be done to ensure the system's sustainability?

Lastly, we should not forget that while the electoral campaign to re-elect the Chamber in the spring of 1914 opposed those for and against the “three years’ law” which, in 1913, had extended the length of military service, the campaign was by no means focused on the idea of an immediate war and even less so on the running of the institutions in the case war. The newly elected deputies and senators² were as such confronted with a situation in 1914 that had not been prepared in public opinion or within the political ranks.

Despite this unpreparedness, the French republican regime survived a war that was unpredictably long and intense. Reinforced by the country's unfaltering national unity, the parliamentary republic changed its rules without modifying its fundamental institutional bases, thus allowing the Chambers to keep the government in check and pursue their legislative activity. The terms of this adaptation can be grouped into three periods of unequal duration. During the first, from August to December 1914, the Parliament let the government pilot the country at war. Then, from January 1915 to the summer of 1917, the Chambers reclaimed their authority while respecting the [Union sacrée](#) by relying on parliamentary commissions and resorting to secret committees. The final period involved support for the government led by [Georges Clemenceau \(1841-1929\)](#) that was no longer unanimous but nonetheless based on a majority (November 1917 – October 1919).

The Illusion of a Short War: the Union sacrée, Adjournment of Parliament and “Chantilly dictatorship” (August - December 1914)

In compliance with French constitutional law, an extraordinary session of Parliament was called following the declaration of the state of siege on the entire country on 2 August 1914. The two Chambers convened separately on 4 August, the day after Germany's declaration of war. During the session, the President of the Council of Ministers, [René Viviani \(1863-1925\)](#), read a message from the President of the Republic, [Raymond Poincaré \(1860-1934\)](#), which called for a “Sacred Union” against the enemy.³ This phrase, which implied that groups and

parties should put aside their traditional disagreements, became a reference for parliamentarians who gave their (in principle unanimous) support to the government until the summer of 1917.⁴ The same day, the two Chambers unanimously approved the eighteen bills presented by the government (after hasty examination by the competent commissions) which sought to place the country in a state of war. At the end of the session, they decided to adjourn *sine die*, leaving the government to conduct the war, which everyone foresaw as short and victorious.

On 26 August 1914, Council President René Viviani announced a major cabinet shuffle. The Viviani government had been formed on 14 June 1914 and included representatives from the left and centre-left, thus confirming the defeat of the right and centre-right in the legislative elections of 26 April and 10 May 1914. But the socialists, who had clearly gained ground during these elections – going from seventy-two to 102 deputies –, refused to give him their support due to the fact that he was unwilling to repeal the 1913 law that extended military service to three years. The 26 August shuffle occurred in the Chambers' absence (and therefore contradicted the constitutional laws of 1875) and it made tangible the *Union sacrée* by including two socialists, Marcel Sembat (minister of Public works) and the patriarch [Jules Guesde \(1845-1922\)](#), who was a minister without portfolio. It also included experienced parliamentarians from the main groups of the two assemblies who became responsible for the large ministries: [Aristide Briand](#) for Justice, [Alexandre Millerand \(1859-1943\)](#) for War and [Alexandre Ribot \(1842-1923\)](#) for Finance.

On the evening of 2 September, Paris was threatened by the German offensive; the government yielded to the insistence of General [Joseph Joffre \(1852-1931\)](#) and retreated to Bordeaux. Although the victory at [the Marne](#) removed the threat to the capital, the government only returned to Paris – in piecemeal manner – in late autumn 1914. Its distance from the front, combined with the clear desire of the Minister of War, Millerand, to let military command direct the war, led this episode to be known as the “Chantilly dictatorship” (Chantilly was the site of General Headquarters starting in November 1914). The civilian authorities were indeed remarkably absent and the government appeared to lack any means of action: it was geographically separated, poorly or incorrectly informed about what was happening at the front and uncomfortably housed in Bordeaux, where the departments had eventually arrived. It was nonetheless obvious that the war was setting in for the long run and the government understood that it could not prolong its exile and relative inactivity.

The situation was also difficult for the mobilized parliamentarians. Nearly 200 deputies had been called up to serve based on their age, officer of the reserve status or had voluntarily enlisted, as had a few Senators (the average age of Senators *a priori* excluded their mobilization). These elected officials were under military orders which further accentuated

the submission of [civilian authority to military control](#) in the first months of the war, particularly given that many were regular soldiers. The Minister of War's circular on 12 November 1914, which aimed to fill the void in coordination caused by the heavy losses during the first months of the war, allowed elected officials to be promoted to the rank of sub-lieutenant, despite reticence from military command which was clearly unfavourable to their presence in the army. Some sixty deputies chose to put their military duties before their elected mandates and fight in the war, some right through to the end. They were an invaluable resource for both assemblies regarding the situation of soldiers and for news of what was really happening at the front.⁵ Ten deputies and one senator were killed in service; six others died either on a parliamentary mission, such as [Abel Ferry \(1881-1918\)](#) or en route to their constituencies near the front.

As for those not called to serve, they devoted themselves in the autumn of 1914 to preparing the country for war, either in their constituencies or by seeking missions from the government. This dispersal of the country's officials ended when Parliament was convened for an extraordinary session on 22 December 1914. The government indeed intended to satisfy the Parliament's basic prerogatives by submitting to it the vote on supplies for 1915. Over the course of the two days of this extraordinary session, the two Chambers unanimously voted provisional supplies for six months (*douzièmes provisoires*),⁶ ratified the decrees passed in their absence by the government and postponed all scheduled elections until peace was restored. They heard a statement by the head of government, René Viviani, that recalled France's [war aims](#) and reaffirmed the government's respect for the role of Parliament since the former was conscious of elected officials' concern over their future.

Parliament's Return: Secret Committees and Commissions. January 1915 - Summer 1917

Despite Viviani's claims and the opening of the 1915 regular session on the second Tuesday of January 1915, the role of the Parliament during the war was still not entirely clear: the outcome of the institutions was actually decided in the first months of 1915. Some members of the government – especially Alexandre Millerand, the Minister of War – would likely have preferred that Parliament vote to adjourn, like it had on 4 August 1914, thus giving the executive *carte blanche*. They do not appear to have considered imposing such a break, however, which would have been a violation of constitutional law. Aware that the war was going to last, most parliamentarians were fully committed to being involved in the government of France. The editorials published by Senator Georges Clemenceau in January 1915 in his newspaper *L'Homme enchaîné*⁷ strongly expressed this determination. It was as such necessary to find a *modus vivendi* between the executive and the Parliament.

We know only the outcome of these negotiations, most likely conducted within the Conference of Presidents.⁸ The government's concessions were presented on 7 May 1915 by the Minister of Finance, Alexandre Ribot, who announced that the government would request a vote on supplies for three months (*douzièmes provisoires*) on 1 June, which was a way of promising the Parliament that it would be in session in September to vote the supplies for the last quarter. Moreover, although the regular session was meant to end on 2 June, the executive relinquished its right to adjourn sessions. Throughout the war, the Parliament was as such permanently in session and was on vacation only when it granted itself time off.

In exchange, the Parliament imposed on itself a degree of restraint and refused to address in open sittings topics related to national defence or that might reveal political weaknesses to the enemy. That is why the Viviani governments, as well as the two Briand cabinets and the Ribot cabinet resigned without having been defeated by the Chamber: they were aware they had lost confidence, as expressed in rumours, some news articles and the targeted questioning aimed at them in secret committees and commissions, and they anticipated the possibility of a non-confidence vote.

As a result, most parliamentary activity actually took place within the main commissions, whose deliberations were not public. In theory, these commissions were responsible for examining bills (presented by the government) and private member's bills (of parliamentary origin) in order to draft the texts that would be voted on by each Chamber. In addition to this constitutional role, the commissions took on a new field of intervention and became a venue to in some ways keep the executive in check, as well as a place for proposals. The commissions could summon ministers and the Council President to hearings they could not refuse: the latter indeed complained of the burden of such obligations which were compounded by the bicameral system. The military commissions of the two Chambers were obviously extremely important, both in terms of their desire to hold the executive accountable and in their drafting of proposals on national defence. Starting in early 1915, the Senate commission compiled an inventory of wartime production as well as a new arms programme that it defended to the Ministry of War which was always reticent to accept such recommendations. The Chamber committee devoted most of its energy to gaining the right to visit and monitor what was happening at the front. Despite opposition from High Command, this right was granted in stages; the Painlevé government finally granted passes to the deputies appointed by the commission in October 1917.

And yet not all parliamentarians were part of the most important commissions (the Chamber's military commission, for example, was comprised of about sixty members); those who were excluded expressed their frustration at not having access to the same information as their colleagues. Further, while the commissions assumed a right of control over the

government's actions, this was nonetheless not on the same scale as the control that the Chambers normally had in plenary sessions. It was these things which led the deputies to embrace the "secret committee" procedure outlined in the constitutional law of 16 July 1875 on the structure of public authorities. When agreed by a majority, the law provided for the evacuation of the public galleries in each of the two Chambers and for sessions to as such be cut off from all publicity.

On 16 June 1916, practically all groups in the Chamber signed a request for a secret committee in order to question the Briand government on the events that occurred in [Verdun](#) and on who was responsible for them. The first secret committee took place from 16 to 22 June 1916 and addressed three topics: the battle of Verdun, the Eastern Expeditionary Corps and the relationship between the government and High Command in conducting the war; the last topic included the issue of the parliament's monitoring of the military. Eight other secret committees were held during the war, the most important of which addressed the Eastern Expeditionary Corps (autumn 1916), the failure of the Nivelle Offensive and the crisis of mutinies (28 June–7 July 1917). The Senate was less enthusiastic about this procedure, but nonetheless wanted the same information as the Chamber from the government; it held four sessions in secret committee.⁹

The system imagined in early 1915 – cemented by the *Union sacrée* and based on the Chambers' work being shifted to the commissions and the use of secret committees – was pushed to its limits in the summer of 1917. Four major events made the summer of 1917 a time of crisis that could not even be offset by the 2 April announcement that the [United States](#) was entering the war. The [Russian revolution](#) in February raised fears that the [Eastern front](#) might collapse; the failed Nivelle Offensive at the Chemin des Dames and the ensuing mutinies were hard on the French army; strikes in May over salaries spread to factories working for the country's defence, thus raising concern over the solidity of the "home front"; and lastly, in September, the socialists' refusal to join the government formed by Paul Painlevé put an end to the *Union sacrée*. The reason for the socialists' withdrawal – which was actually paradoxical given that Painlevé's cabinet was farther to the left than its predecessors – hinged on the fact that the Foreign Ministry had been given to Alexandre Ribot. As Council President from March to September 1917, Ribot had refused to issue passports to the socialist delegates to attend the peace conference scheduled to take place in [Stockholm](#) (which was cancelled in the end).

Moreover, accusations of leniency towards pacifists and even of complacency towards known traitors were slung at [Louis Malvy \(1875-1949\)](#), who had held the Interior portfolio since August 1914. Advanced by *Action française* on the one hand and by Georges Clemenceau on the other hand – in *L'Homme enchaîné* as well as in the military commission he presided and

in the Senate –, such accusations forced Malvy to resign on 31 August 1917. Other, more insidious, campaigns undermined Aristide Briand and [Joseph Caillaux \(1863-1944\)](#), suspected of being interested in Austria-Hungary's offers for a separate peace. Backed only by a small majority, the future of the Painlevé government appeared jeopardized; it seemed likely that Clemenceau, the sworn enemy of pacifists, traitors and cowards, would impose himself at the head of the next cabinet.

The Clemenceau Government (November 1917 - October 1919)

The Painlevé cabinet was defeated by the Chamber on 13 November 1917 and President Poincaré reconciled himself to call on Georges Clemenceau to form the next government.^{[10](#)} Clemenceau had been a senator for the Var department since 1902 and Council President and Minister of the Interior^{[11](#)} from 1906 to 1909, positions which had earned him the nickname of “France's top cop” following his crackdown on strikers in 1907 and 1908, after which he no longer held any ministerial duties. His reputation, along with the hostility between him and Poincaré, hardly qualified him to preside over a socialist-backed government in 1914. It was therefore in the Senate, where he headed important military and foreign affairs commissions, that he imposed his personality and ideas. He had a newspaper, *L'Homme enchaîné*, in which he wrote editorials that were widely reprinted in the national press. He also had numerous contacts within military command that allowed him access to the front. The accounts published in his newspaper helped construct his image as an ardent patriot determined to win the war, but also someone concerned about the lives of those at the front. Lastly, he also had invaluable sources in the police and intelligence services.

While he had by no means spared the Viviani and Briand governments of his criticism – he accused them of laxity –, it was especially as of 1917 that he ramped up his attacks: against cowards “holed up” behind the lines, pacifists and traitors. His violent diatribes within the military commission and in the Senate's public sessions largely contributed to the defeat of the Ribot and Painlevé governments. With strong support in the Senate and from the population, he appeared to be the only solution in the autumn of 1917. He as such formed the first government whose support was based on a simple majority, since most socialists had voted against his nomination. Like his predecessor Painlevé, he reserved the War portfolio for himself and, in his declaration on 20 November 1917, outlined his determination to wage “complete war”.^{[12](#)} In a speech to the Chamber on 8 March 1918, just as the German offensive was being prepared in Picardie, he again repeated “I wage war”.^{[13](#)}

So, was this a “dictatorship” that showed no respect for the prerogatives of Parliament that

Clemenceau had so adamantly defended in January 1915? Actually, like his predecessors, Clemenceau went before the Chambers to defend his policy. The Senate was loyal, and even the deputies offered him a stable majority (on average 380 votes of the 480 present). He also showed up when summoned before the main commissions (on average once a month). However, he refused the use of secret committees on the basis that public debate was integral to any democracy.

Given this, his reputation as a “dictator” is mostly based on his unwavering authority over the members of his government, which was carefully composed of loyal followers that he basically let conduct everyday affairs while he kept for himself the strategic decisions in all fields. In this respect, we might also point up the role he gave himself in the peace negotiations. In principle, the President of the Republic was responsible for negotiating treaties and then submitting them to Parliament for ratification. Yet it was Clemenceau, not Poincaré, who headed the French delegation – and refused to inform the Parliament about the state of negotiations. On 29 December 1918, he justified this refusal with a brilliant but elliptical turn of phrase: “Your confidence in the war was my guarantee of your confidence in peace”.¹⁴ The Chamber, followed by the Senate nonetheless ratified the peace treaty on 2 October 1919 with 372 voices for and fifty-three against (seventy-four deputies did not vote).

From this experience, Clemenceau drew a new nickname – “the Father of victory” – which was far more flattering than the one acquired earlier in his government career, but it was also a lame duck since he never became President of the Republic.¹⁵ On 16 January 1920, a vote in preparation for the election placed [Paul Deschanel \(1855-1922\)](#), who was president of the Chamber from 1912 to 1920, ahead of Clemenceau with 408 votes versus 389. The following day, Clemenceau did not present his candidacy, thus ensuring Deschanel’s election.

Conclusion

France’s parliamentary republic as such survived the war without too many infringements to its basic rules. Deputies and senators helped it run smoothly by accepting the necessary adjustments, first in the context of the *Union sacrée* and then by rallying behind Clemenceau, without abandoning their basic prerogatives. Most participated in the country’s mobilization through the work conducted in commissions and plenary sessions. Some refused to leave their enemy-occupied constituencies (Nord Pas-de-Calais) and were imprisoned as hostages; others chose to serve in the armed forces where ten men were killed at the front and Abel Ferry was killed while on a parliamentary mission. Despite this honourable outcome, the electorate was not convinced. To the contrary: voters actually turned their backs on the work accomplished in the November 1919 elections to renew the Chamber. The Bloc national, a right wing and centre-right coalition formed for this election in the context of the new

electoral law of 12 July 1919 won comfortably with 437 seats, despite the fact that it ran a majority of new candidates, including many veterans who sat wearing their blue infantry uniforms, thus earning the Chamber the title of “Blue horizon Chamber”.

Critiques of parliamentarianism and calls to strengthen the executive’s power increased in the 1920s and early 1930s, voiced notably by parliamentarians who had sat during the war, like Alexandre Millerand and [André Tardieu \(1876-1945\)](#). Ultimately, as Nicolas Rousselier has argued, although it won the war, the parliamentary republic ultimately lost the opinion battle.¹⁶

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Notes

1. Bock, Fabienne: Parlement, pouvoir civil et pouvoir militaire, in: Audoin-Rouzeau, Stéphane/Becker, Jean-Jacques (eds.): Encyclopédie de la Grande Guerre, Paris 2004, pp. 495-508. ↑
2. Senators were elected for nine years, with one third renewed every three years. The last renewal had taken place in 1912. ↑
3. Journal Officiel de la République Française, Chambre, Débats, 4 August 1914 et Sénat, Débats, 4 August 1914. ↑
4. The Viviani government in October 1915, Briand I government in 1916 and Briand II government in March 1917, and the Ribot government in September 1917 were not defeated but they were aware of the deputies’ disaffection – it was palpable in the corridors of the assemblies and in the commissions – and they as such all resigned. The Painlevé government was the only one actually defeated, in November 1917, when the socialists withdrew from the Union sacrée. ↑
5. Ferry, Abel: Carnets Secrets, Paris 1956. ↑
6. Throughout the war, the Minister of Finance was incapable of establishing a budget and relied on the voting of provisional supplies. ↑
7. L’Homme libre became L’Homme enchaîné after it was censored for a series of articles published in November 1914 on the deplorable state of health care facilities at the front. ↑
8. This conference began meeting in 1912 and included the presidents of the parliamentary groups and commissions under the direction of the President of each of the assemblies. To our knowledge, it left no trace of its activities. ↑
9. The minutes of the secret committees of the Chamber of Deputies were published in the Official Journal between 1919 and 1932. Those from the Senate were compiled in a

single volume and published in 1968. They can be consulted online on the Gallica digital library. ↑

10. Journal Officiel de la République française, Débats, Chambre, 13 November 1917. ↑
11. Under the Third Republic, the Council President always had a ministerial portfolio. ↑
12. Journal Officiel de la République française, Débats, Chambre, 20 November 1917. ↑
13. Journal Officiel de la République française, Débats, Chambre, 8 March 1918. ↑
14. Journal Officiel de la République française, Débats, Chambre, 29 December 1918. ↑
15. The President of the Republic was elected by the two Chambers convened in session together. ↑
16. Roussellier, Nicolas: Le Parlement et la Première Guerre mondiale, Parlement(s), 10 (2008), pp. 13-30. ↑

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External Links

- [1914-1918: la Grande Guerre vue du Sénat, procès-verbaux et rapports des commissions \(Sénat\) \(Database\)](#)
- [Clemenceau, Georges: Discours de guerre, includes inaugural address to the National Assembly, 20 November 1917, Paris 1968 \(Gallica\) \(Book\)](#)
- [Clemenceau - Petain - Poincare, France 1918 \(British Pathé\) \(Video\)](#)
- [Dossier thématique 1914-1918 \(Assemblée nationale\) \(Database\)](#)
- [L’Affaire Dreyfus \(L’Affaire Dreyfus\) \(Institutional Website\)](#)

- [Le Sénat, Haute Cour de Justice sous la IIIe République: l'affaire Malvy \(1918\) \(Sénat\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Sembat, Marcel: Faites un roi sinon faites la paix, Paris 1916 \(Internet Archive\) \(Book\)](#)
- [The System of National Conscription of France, 1873-1914 \(151RIL\) \(Article\)](#)

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