

Valéry Giscard d'Estaing

The optimist of the European integration process

SUMMARY

Valéry Giscard d'Estaing was one of Europe's leading figures in the generation which came after that of the founding fathers. He was close to Jean Monnet, but he himself said that his main source of inspiration was Robert Schuman. For both Schuman and Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, their relationship with Germany was a thread running through their lives.

Valéry Giscard d'Estaing was born in Koblenz, Germany, where his father had been posted in the French administration after the First World War. Giscard d'Estaing was involved in the liberation of Paris at a very young age and then in military operations at the end of the Second World War. After studying engineering, he chose a career in public administration, going on to be an economic adviser in various post-war French governments.

He was later elected as an MP in Auvergne, where his family had roots, and was then appointed Secretary of State for Finance at the very young age of 32. He held various ministerial positions in this field, moving in European circles and spending time with colleagues from other European Community Member States.

Elected French President in 1974, he favoured a policy of economic and social liberalism. His main accomplishments came in the areas of women's, young people's and disabled persons' rights. At international level, he drew on the support of the German Chancellor, Helmut Schmidt, to develop political and monetary initiatives.

Defeated in the 1981 elections, he continued his political career at regional, national and European level. He carried on working to bring about monetary union and develop the Franco-German partnership, before chairing the Convention on the Future of Europe, which culminated in the drafting of the Constitutional Treaty. Despite his disappointment at the rejection of that treaty, he continued to serve Europe until the end of his life.



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The 'Europe' graduating class

Valéry Giscard d'Estaing was born on 2 February 1926 in Koblenz, Germany, where his [father](#) was attached to the Inter-Allied Rhineland High Commission, under whose mandate France occupied part of Germany. After completing initial studies in Paris, he enrolled in classes to prepare for the exams granting entry to the *grandes écoles*, before [leaving](#) to join the French forces that liberated Paris in August 1944. Then, during the final year of the war, he was involved in military operations which took him as far afield as Austria.

After resuming his studies at a prestigious engineering school, in 1949 he joined one of the first classes of the new École Nationale d'Administration (National School of Administration) as a member of the graduating class known as 'Europe'. He completed his [internship](#) in the Saarland, a German region which had become economically integrated with France at the end of the Second World War. In [2014](#), he said that he had always been inspired by another French figure who also had close ties to Germany by virtue of his personal history and was an advocate of a united Europe, [Robert Schuman](#).

In 1951, he was appointed to the General Inspectorate of Finance. He subsequently held various positions as an economic adviser to liberal politicians such as Edgar Faure. In 1956, he was elected an [MP](#) for the first time in Puy-de-Dôme, a region in central France in which his family had roots.

Minister of Finance

He was only 32 when President de Gaulle appointed him Secretary of State for Finance. He held various ministerial [portfolios](#) in the area of finance almost without interruption from 1959 to 1974. As a senior civil servant, he sought to raise his profile with voters by winning terms of office as mayor of Chamalières in central France.

Valéry Giscard d'Estaing made his European ideals central to his work as a minister and forged friendships with many European politicians, in particular from Germany, when attending meetings of the Council of the European Communities. From 1966 onwards, he [strengthened](#) his ties with [Jean Monnet](#) and his Action Committee for the United States of Europe. As a minister, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing backed proposals to transform the Council into a 'European [senate](#)' and was involved in the preparatory work to set up the European Monetary System, which prefigured the single currency.

President of the French Republic

In 1974, at the age of 48, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing was elected [President](#) of France. He ran a notably modern campaign which demonstrated a flair for communication with the public, drawing on American innovations, as introduced by John F. Kennedy in particular.

Modernising France

President Giscard d'Estaing sought to [modernise](#) French society by means of a series of major social reforms. He lowered the voting age from 21 to 18, introduced divorce by mutual consent, extended the scope for referring matters to the Constitutional Council and put an end to the government's significant influence on public television and radio. He appointed Simone Veil as Minister of Health and supported her fight to legalise abortion. Whilst in power, Giscard d'Estaing fostered the integration of persons with disabilities into public and economic life by pushing through a set of ground-breaking laws.

He also launched major [infrastructure](#) projects, including the TGV high-speed train, the development of nuclear energy and the creation of new communication networks and means of communication, such as the Minitel.

Strengthening the European Communities

As part of his European agenda, President Giscard d'Estaing proposed that European summits be replaced by regular meetings of a more formal body, the European Council. At the close of the last biannual summit, chaired by France, he [declared](#) 'the summit is dead, long live the European Council!'. In turn, his partners, including the German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, were adamant that the European Parliament be elected by universal suffrage, which was to happen for the first time in 1979. The initiative was announced at that same summit, along with a 'passport union', which would harmonise European passports, and a [report](#) on the future 'European union', to be drawn up by the Belgian Prime Minister, Léo Tindemans.

Franco-German cooperation was a key element of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing's international policy. He [met](#) Helmut Schmidt in the 1960s when both were involved in the Action Committee for the United States of Europe. From then on, they worked together as ministers of economic affairs. Following their election as leaders of their respective countries in 1974, their deep mutual understanding prompted them to join forces on the European stage. 'I was fortunate to have him as a colleague' said President Giscard d'Estaing, 'we were elected leaders of our respective countries within three days of one another. We knew each other very well. We shared the same vision of Europe.'

Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and Helmut Schmidt



Source: [European Parliament](#), 1992.

Together, they [launched](#) the preparations for the single currency, by setting up a '[European monetary system](#)' which curbed exchange rate fluctuations between Member States and acted as a common foreign exchange reserve to foster this stability.

As a true Hellenophile, he was one of the main supporters of the [accession of Greece](#), a country in which democracy had only recently been restored, to the European Communities. In response to sceptics, he [declared](#): 'you don't make Plato play in the second division', and he is still known today for his role in support of Athens.

A policy based on balance and dialogue

Beyond his commitment to Europe, President Giscard continued France's policies based on balance and dialogue with countries behind the Iron Curtain. He [pushed](#) Leonid Brezhnev, the then Soviet leader, into accepting the Helsinki process, which was instrumental in easing tensions between the West and East. At the same time he pursued a [policy](#) of modernising the French armed forces, and responded to Soviet policy by showing greater solidarity with NATO allies and by supporting the deployment of Pershing missiles in Germany to counter the Soviet SS20s.

He was also the [driving force](#) behind the establishment of the G7, which brings together the world's seven largest economies. The first summit took place in Rambouillet, France, in 1975.

Continued commitment to Europe after 1981

In 1981, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing lost the presidential election to François Mitterrand. He then decided to resume his local political career, as an MP from 1984, and then as President of the Regional Council of Auvergne.

In 1989, he was elected to the European Parliament, where he was chair of the Group of the European Liberal, Democrat and Reform Party (ELDR), before joining the ranks of the European People's Party (EPP).

Along with Helmut Schmidt, he continued to encourage debate on the single currency, even after his presidency ended. Together they set up a '[Committee for the European monetary union](#)', providing the spark for Jacques Delors' ideas regarding a single currency.

In 2001, the [Laeken European Council](#) appointed Giscard d'Estaing as head of the Convention on the Future of Europe, whose purpose was to propose a European constitution. A [majority](#) of convention members praised his efforts to build consensus around such a complex idea. The result was a compromise text which sought to respect the red lines laid down by a number of Member States. As a former head of state, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing remained mindful of the role of national sovereignty in European integration and [declared](#) himself in favour of 'decentralised federalism'.

Despite the rejection of the draft text in referendums held in France and the Netherlands, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing will always be seen as an eternal optimist of European integration and Franco-German cooperation.

Closing session of the Convention on the Future of Europe



Source: [European Parliament](#), 2003.

An artistic, literary and European legacy

President Giscard d'Estaing was both modern in his tastes and some of his political opinions and loyal to the traditions established by his predecessors, in particular in his passion for the arts and literature. He himself wrote novels, memoirs and essays. In 2003, he was [elected](#) to the Académie Française, taking seat number 16, which had previously been held by the writer, and Senegal's first President, Léopold Sédar Senghor.

He died on 2 December 2020, at 94 years of age, a victim of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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