An outside observer might be forgiven for being somewhat confused by France’s position in the TI Index’s ‘somewhat corrupt’ category. Well into its second decade of regular revelations about politicians’ misdeeds, France betrays a level of political corruption that is startling in its longevity if not its intensity. In addition, looking at the TI corruption ranking trends between 1980 and 1997, France shows a greater ‘acceleration’ in corruption than most of its European neighbours, including Italy: only Belgium shows greater disparity (della Porta and Vannucci, 1999b: 7).

In the search for explanations, evidence is not hard to find. The bright backdrop of François Mitterrand’s promised political and social revolution in 1981 made the subsequent shadows of economic decline, party finance scandals, misappropriation of public funds and kickbacks all the darker. As prosecutions of ever more senior politicians increased, and the means by which they attempted to hamper the investigations became more and more blatant, so the problems with France’s institutional structure and political culture became increasingly apparent. Of course, we should not lose sight of the fact that there are undoubtedly instances of corruption which have not come to light, and indeed by the same logic other potentially more corrupt countries may have seen fewer actual scandals. Yet, French exceptionalism lies in the frequency and longevity of perceived corruption. The triumphant return of a renewed Socialist-led government in 1997, its insalubrious elements apparently extirpated, provided only a brief respite before corruption once more appeared and, in many ways, more insidiously than before. Much of the corruption of the 1980s and 1990s had been rationalized as partly attributable to two specific aspects of the French institutional framework: the system of notables at the local level; and the lack of structured party financing laws. These problems have been addressed, starting with the party financing law of 1988, but apparently not solved.

This chapter will look at why the scandals and corruption appear not to have gone away. It will argue that, while much of the current fiasco is in part a vestige of the past, the French elite have often done themselves no favours
in the manner in which they have dealt with the original scandals and their underlying causes. Moreover, it will be argued that a number of elements of the current institutional framework still provide a fertile setting for practices that threaten to sustain the longevity of French corruption ever further.

Political corruption: the historical context

The seeds of contemporary problems within the system can be traced back to the post-revolutionary period and the establishment of the Jacobin ideal, namely a highly centralized culturally, socially and to some extent politically homogeneous state. With the construction of an efficient transport infrastructure and the spread of national media, this led to the increasing domination of Paris and the central administration.¹

Centralization has served to engender a political and administrative situation conducive to high levels of impropriety. This does not mean that corruption did not exist at the local level, simply that effects in the periphery usually had no national importance and thus gained little or no broad coverage. The first period to receive the greatest publicity for scandals was the 1930s, due to the coincidence of the press’ interests and wider interests (Weber, 1994: 129). The Stavisky affair, which had started with the issue of fake bonds in the town of Bayonne and subsequent losses by purchasing insurance companies, gained prominence because of the involvement of the town’s mayor, a Radical deputy, and a Radical minister. The death of Stavisky, a con man involved in the scandal, led the right-wing press to announce a cover-up as part of the ubiquitous Jewish, Masonic and Communist conspiracy. The left-wing press joined in to denounce the self-serving centrist Radical bourgeois politicians. But as Weber (1994: 132) notes, ‘[p]oliticking cost … [e]lections also cost’. Unlike the Communists with their party dues or the Right with their wealthy industrialist and aristocratic backers, the governing moderate centre had to find funds from elsewhere. As we shall see, the problems of moderate fund-raising remained a commonplace of the Fifth Republic system, and a key cause of many of the party finance scandals of the 1980s and 1990s.

A second effect of the Jacobin centralization was paradoxically to reinforce a level of local autonomy where notables haggled over state resources and local influence. The increase in mayoral powers beginning in the 1870s under the Third Republic produced a role complementary to and competing with the prefect, particularly in terms of resource allocation and relations with local interests. By the 1980s, the power-balance had swung, in some cases to mayoral hegemony reinforced by the infamous cumul des mandats – the accumulation of political positions of power. The influence of these notables and their close circle of delegates provided fertile soil for the growth of illicit practices.

In the following sections, we will separate out three institutional domains which have encouraged corrupt practices, together with three developments