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The French Political Landscape After the “Non”

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In a referendum on May 29, French voters rejected the EU draft constitution by a vote of 55% to 45%. This follows a series of approvals in nine other European countries, including one (in Spain) by referendum. But since the document must be ratified by all 25 countries in order to come into force, the constitution is now in limbo.

The rejection of the constitution will have major domestic political consequences in France. The campaign was extremely intense and divisive, both between and within the major parties. President Chirac's first step was to designate Dominique de Villepin, one of his closest political associates, as the new Prime Minister. The opposition Socialist party emerges seriously shaken from the campaign and the unity of the Left might prove a thing of the past, while anti-EU right wing parties will attempt to capitalize on the political frustrations of the French electorate. The warm-up period for the presidential race is starting amid a redefinition of the French political landscape: French politicians now know that Europe can no longer be taken for granted.

The Future of the Right

The rejection of the EU constitution is a major political blow for President Chirac. He chose the referendum route, inherently riskier than a parliamentary ratification. He positioned himself, especially in the last six weeks of the campaign, as the leader of the “yes” camp. The first victim of Chirac's defeat was the Prime Minister, Jean-Pierre Raffarin. President Chirac had announced before the result that he would not resign if French voters rejected the Constitution so the Prime Minister was left alone to pay the price for failure. Raffarin, who was very involved with the “yes” campaign, had been in place for three years, an unusually long tenure, and was deeply unpopular because of his efforts to reform some of France's most cherished social programs. Chirac no doubt felt that the government needed a new political impetus that Raffarin could not provide.

The ruling UMP (*Union pour un Mouvement Populaire*) party, which had overwhelmingly endorsed the Constitution, remains united behind Nicolas Sarkozy, who campaigned for a “yes” vote while keeping his distance from President Chirac. The UDF (*Union pour la Démocratie Française*) adopted a low profile during the campaign, especially considering its pro-European Union credentials, and was marginalized by a UMP that put forward an identical program of support for the constitution and opposition to the Turkish entry into the EU.¹ The UDF strategy during the past three years of constantly criticizing the government while usually

¹ For an analysis of the intertwining between the Turkish issue and the referendum campaign, please see Nicolas de Boisgrollier, “Will the EU Constitution Survive a Referendum in France?”, *U.S.-Europe Analysis Series*, March 2005, www.brookings.edu

supporting its policies in parliament may have reached an impasse. No ministers from the UDF will participate in the new government as UDF members, although specific individuals may join the government unsanctioned by the party.

Given the heterogeneity of the “no” camp, it remains to be seen how smaller parties will be able to capitalize on their “victory.” The FN (*Front National*), which also kept a low-profile in the referendum campaign, will not be able to make much of the result; the same is true for the MPF (*Mouvement Pour la France*) of Philippe de Villiers. They have few alternative proposals, and a durable alliance between them (as well as with other right-wing proponents of the “no”) is very unlikely, for both personal reasons (each leader wants his own little fiefdom) and political ones (their political bases are different and the French electorate is highly volatile).

Upheaval on the Left

The party that suffered most from the referendum campaign is the Socialist Party (*Parti Socialiste*). Although the party as a whole decided to support the treaty, opponents within the party vocally pursued a campaign against it. The clash was all the more brutal because the simple “yes” or “no” format of the referendum does not leave any room for compromise. Laurent Fabius, a former Prime Minister and deputy leader of the Socialist party championed the “no” throughout the campaign. His strategy was to use the referendum as a stepping stone to reposition himself within the party and to gain an advantage on his socialist rivals.

It is worth keeping in mind that the Socialist Party, traditionally split into several political factions, has experienced—and survived—numerous similar crises. The Socialists understand that they will need unity to have any hope of winning the 2007 presidential election, and their leaders remember that previous Socialist heretics have not fared well after leaving the party. The implosion of the Socialist party, predicted by some observers, is thus unlikely, but the battle for control will be fierce. Lionel Jospin, former Prime Minister and former standard-bearer of the party might emerge from his quasi-retirement (he weighed in favor of the “yes” during the campaign) as the leader most able to keep the party together.

Even beyond the referendum induced crisis and the fact that one faction of the Socialist Party was instrumental in the rejection of the constitution, the party is facing an identity crisis. The French Socialist party is the only European socialist party to have split on the constitution; every other European Socialist Party endorsed the treaty. The French Socialists’ uniqueness stems from the fact that, unlike most of their European peers, they have not officially adopted a version of the “third-way” compromise between socialism and capitalism. Despite having pursued many market-oriented policies while in power in the 1990s, the Socialist party has not officially acknowledged its ideological revolution. In part this is because the concept of *libéralisme* (economic liberalism) remains repugnant to many in the party, where a vocal minority remains motivated by socialist ideology.

It is also important to look beyond the *Parti Socialiste* itself. Indeed, while commentators frequently subject the French Extreme Right to intense scrutiny, they usually ignore the Extreme Left. Fifteen years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, France still has not only an anachronistically named *Parti Communiste*, but also a *Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire* and a party called *Lutte Ouvrière* (Workers’ Struggle). The Socialist Party is thus continually challenged on its left and finds it difficult to tilt toward the center where presidential elections are won. Laurent Fabius, who until now was considered the leader most capable of moving the party along this centrist path, may soon find his new Extreme-Left friends somewhat cumbersome.

Domestic Politics and the French European Paradox

When it comes to voting patterns in the Parliament, party discipline is pretty much the rule in the French political system. From this standpoint, the recent attitude of the Socialists—one party but in effect two opposing public referendum campaigns— is unusual. In contrast, when the leading Socialist politician Jean-Pierre Chevènement disagreed with the socialist line in 1992 on the Maastricht Treaty, he left the party to

create his own movement (now called the *Mouvement Républicain et Citoyen*) so that he could campaign against the treaty.

This new ability to disunite comes on top of a more traditional incapacity for competing parties to campaign side by side. Thus, those Socialists that supported the Constitution took great pains to explain that their support for the referendum did not in any way imply support for the government's policies. The Green party tried to forbid its members from participating in joint rallies with other parties. Some organizations on the left insisted that their "no" was a *non de gauche* while their counterparts on the right were fighting for the similarly vague notion of a *non de droite*.

As a result, the referendum instrument needs to be handled with particular care in France. In contrast to Switzerland or California where voters frequently decide political questions via referendums (not always on major issues), such opportunities are rare in France. Moreover, referendums are highly personalized in France: "who" asks the question is at least as important as "what" is being asked, leaving voters to reformulate the question as they see fit. There is also the important precedent of 1969 when Charles de Gaulle resigned following the voters' rejection of the reorganization of the Senate. Since then each referendum implicitly questions the political legitimacy of the President. Finally, the timing and context of the vote itself may trigger links in the mind of voters that can confuse the issue at stake. As Bruno Frappat, editor in chief of the Catholic daily *La Croix*, has pointed out, "The culture of refusal is a national sport that seeks every opportunity to manifest itself." And in recent years, irrational fears—often linked to the consequences of globalization (job losses, increased immigration)—have clouded the electorate's view of Europe.

So given all of this, why did President Chirac opt for a referendum? The importance of the European project and the government's concern over the population's lack of involvement meant that the case for a referendum was strong. More to the point, at the moment the decision was made, the executive apparently did not anticipate the possibility of a "no" vote.

The surprise vote also demonstrates that there is a deep ambivalence in France toward the European Union. On the one hand, a majority of the population favors some form of European integration and recognizes the benefits, notably in terms of peace and stability, of the European project. On the other hand, the European Union is often perceived as being too bureaucratic and too eager to meddle with national or regional traditions (like bird-hunting or cheese pasteurizing). More generally, it is often said that Europe has a "democratic deficit." This idea is somewhat odd in the sense that all the powers given to the European Commission have been granted by national governments, themselves representative of their own constituents. In fact, the main problem of the European Union stems from its idiosyncratic and hybrid institutional nature. It is neither a state nor an international organization, but rather a complicated web of international treaties in which participating countries are entangled to varying degrees.

Jacques Delors, former head of the European Commission, famously characterized the EU as an OPNI (*Objet Politique Non Identifié*; Unidentified Political Object), a play on OVNI (*Objet Volant Non Identifié*, French for UFO). This institutional ambiguity makes it easy for all sides to present the EU in the light that suits their political purposes: for some it is a quasi-federal entity while for others it is no more than a political association between nation-states; some argue it is essentially a free-market with a political twist while others see it as a political entity in the making. Brussels is often presented by French leaders either as the source of all France's problems or as a justification for the implementation of unpopular reforms that would have been carried out anyway. Paradoxically, it may be this ambiguity that has allowed a majority to emerge in favor of the European unification process in the preceding decades. The probable failure of the constitution may force the lifting of this ambiguity, with consequences for French politics that are difficult to anticipate.

The French rejection of the constitution brings to mind an important historical precedent. In 1954, the French parliament rejected a treaty that would have established a European Defense Community (EDC), in effect killing a project that had been initiated by the French government to compensate for Germany's rearmament.

In what became an extremely intense political debate, most French political parties split over the EDC, leading to the formation of ad hoc, heterogeneous coalitions. Later that year, the French parliament opened the way for Western Germany to join NATO whereas, noted Alfred Grosser, the EDC was originally devised as an alternative to this very outcome. The still-born EU constitution might well be salvaged by a similar irony of history.

In the meantime, the European ideal is paying for its failure to market its tangible achievements to the French public. Many French voters see the European construction as a series of political and technocratic *faits accomplis* they are expected to ratify, artificially applying a democratic veneer to the whole process. The European construction has been a highly successful endeavor of the European elite: it now needs to root itself in the widest possible public. France, indispensable if the European Union is to be powerful, must seize upon this crisis to reinvent a European role for itself.