

French Voters Soundly Reject European Union Constitution

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Published: **New York Times** May 30, 2005

PARIS, May 29 - Turning its back on half a century of European history, France decisively rejected a constitution for Europe on Sunday, plunging the country into political disarray and jeopardizing the cause of European unity.

The victory for the no vote - 55 percent to 45 percent - came in a nationwide referendum on the European Union constitution after a bruising campaign that divided France and alarmed Europe.

Foreshadowed in recent polls, the no vote could doom the 448-article treaty because all 25 members of the European Union must ratify it before it can take effect.

The rejection could signal an abrupt halt to the expansion and unification of Europe, a process that has been met with growing disillusionment among the wealthier European Union members as needier countries like Poland and Slovakia have negotiated their entry.

President Jacques Chirac, who had predicted France's isolation in Europe if the constitution was rejected, smiled stiffly as he struggled to mask his disappointment.

"The decision of France inevitably creates a difficult situation for the defense of our interests in Europe," he said in a brief statement broadcast live on television. Hinting at possible cabinet changes, he added, "I will tell you in the very next days my decisions regarding the government and its priorities."

Early this month, Mr. Chirac had vowed not to change his government if the referendum failed, saying it was "neither a plebiscite nor a moment of political change."

But the vote, which made France the first country to reject the treaty, has deeply wounded the French president. More than 50 years ago, France was a founding member of the six-country precursor to the current European Union. Mr. Chirac had assumed that through the constitution, a document similar in some ways to the Constitution that binds the United States, France could promote a stronger, more unified Europe that could project not only economic but also political power around the world. He repeatedly spoke of a "multipolar world" with Europe as one of the poles counter-balancing the United States.

After the vote, some extreme opponents of the constitution called for Mr. Chirac to resign.

"We are tonight before a major political crisis," said Philippe de Villiers, head of the right-wing Movement for France and a vocal lobbyist against the constitution. He added that Mr. Chirac had two choices: resignation "given the fact that he had been so personally involved" or the dissolution of Parliament.

Jean-Marie Le Pen, the head of the far-right National Front, faulted Mr. Chirac for threatening the French with "chaos" if they voted no, adding, "He isn't qualified, it seems to me, to remain as the head of the country."

About 70 percent of France's registered 41.8 million voters cast ballots, a high turnout on a Sunday that was also Mother's Day here. Throughout the day in Paris, electronic billboards all across town said: "Don't let the others decide for you. Go vote."

Pollsters said the rejection reflected French voters' anger at the 72-year-old president and his center-right government for failing to improve the country's troubled economy, as well as fear that the treaty would erode France's generous cradle-to-grave social safety net.

The debate had been colored by fear of the mythical "Polish plumber," the worker from recent European Union members from the East who is increasingly free to move West and willing to work for lower pay than Frenchmen.

Proponents of the "no" fueled voters with fear of a more powerful European Union where France no longer has influence, and of an increasingly "Anglo-Saxon" and "ultraliberal" Europe where free-market capitalism runs wild.

France's rejection makes it more likely that the Netherlands, where polls show that 60 percent of voters plan to reject the constitution, will vote no in the referendum there on Wednesday. Nine other European Union members have approved it.

The Dutch prime minister, Jan Peter Balkenende, called on voters to approve the constitution despite France's rejection, saying: "There is all the more reason to say yes so that some progress can be recorded with the constitutional treaty. Each country has its own responsibility."

The constitution is essentially a vehicle to streamline decision-making in the expanded 25-member bloc and a blueprint for the next stage of its growth and unification. It eliminates the six-month rotating European Union presidency, creating a president with a maximum five-year term; details a list of basic rights; and determines what functions, such as issuing visas or making rules on immigration, will be governed by the European Union headquarters in Brussels and what others, like foreign policy and defense, will remain with member states.

It is conceivable that the constitution could be voted on by the French again or even revised, although the process would be cumbersome.

Even without the constitution, the European Union will go on as before under existing treaties.

But the vote stalls the forward momentum of Europe and makes it more vulnerable to economic and political uncertainty. It could paralyze decision-making in the European Union for months, complicate the process of admitting new members, and make it even more difficult to impose discipline on members' spending and inflation levels.

European officials quickly expressed anxiety over the ramifications of the vote.

The British foreign secretary, Jack Straw, declined to say if Britain would proceed with a popular vote on the constitution next year. "This raises profound questions for all of us about the direction of Europe," he told reporters. "What we want now is a period of reflection."

In Germany, which has approved the constitution, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder called the French rejection "a blow for the constitutional process, but not the end of it." In a gesture of solidarity with his French counterpart, he added, "It is also not the end of the German-French partnership in and for Europe."

Prime Minister Jean-Claude Juncker of Luxembourg, who currently holds the European Union's rotating presidency, insisted the ratification process must proceed in other countries.

This is the 10th time in the France's 47-year-old Fifth Republic that citizens have been called by the president to vote in a referendum.

The only other rejection was in 1969, when de Gaulle proposed a measure to renovate the Senate, create regions and seek support after the student uprisings of May 1968. De Gaulle pledged to leave office if the "no" won, and when it did by a small margin, he resigned the next day.

While Mr. Chirac said he would not resign, there has been intense speculation, even in his party, and the media in recent weeks that rejection of the constitution would prompt him to fire Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin, whose popularity is at an abysmal 21 percent.

Dominique de Villepin, the interior minister and former foreign minister, is considered a front-runner to replace Mr. Raffarin, and one close confidante said Mr. de Villepin had been quietly assembling a staff and anticipating a cabinet shuffle.

Other contenders include Defense Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie, and Nicolas Sarkozy, the head of Mr. Chirac's party but also Mr. Chirac's political foe.

The referendum polarized France, with extremes of both the left and the right aligning in the no bloc and the center-right in the yes camp. The Socialist Party was badly fractured.

The schism was borne out in and around Paris, where wealthy neighborhoods seemed to vote yes, while poor neighborhoods voted no.

At a preschool turned polling place in the wealthy Paris suburb of Neuilly, 83 percent voted yes. That is the territory of Mr. Sarkozy, who was once mayor there.

"It's like building a house, you don't stop halfway," said Omar Bentchakal, the retired head of a small painting company, as he cast his ballot there. "It would be unfortunate if we were the country who laid the first stone, but that we wouldn't be there to put in the last one, that we're not following through. I would be hurt, really, if we voted no."

At the polling place at the Karl Marx primary school in downtown Bobigny, a working-class suburb of Paris, by contrast, there was no sense that Europe's future hinged on the constitution.

With 18 percent unemployment and a large ethnic Arab and African population, 72 percent of the voters there said no.

Bernard Birsinger, the suburb's Communist mayor, accused Mr. Chirac of fear-mongering and dissembling when he predicted political and economic doom for France if the country rejected the constitution.

"We are already in a Europe of unemployment and regression," said Mr. Birsinger, adding, "We know that the destiny of France is not threatened."

For him, this was a moment to say no to authority, just as the French did in the 1789 revolution.

"Happily, certain people rose up and said no," he said. "They didn't ask the king for permission to make a revolution."