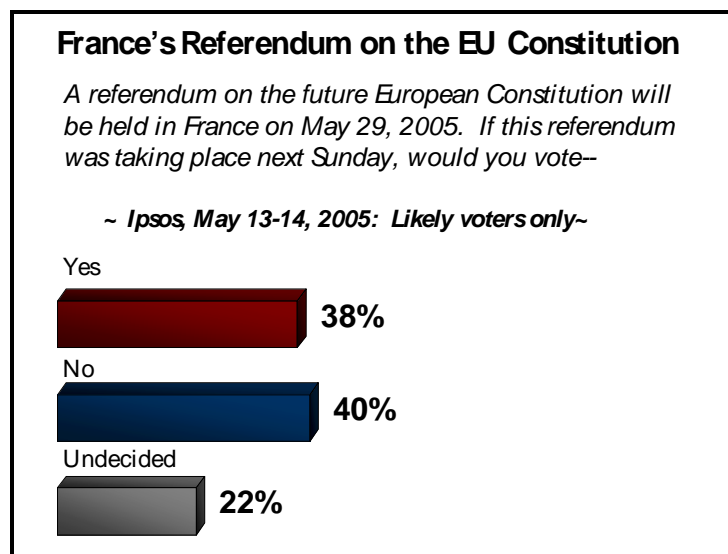


French Divided Over EU Constitution Support for EU Strong, But Little Enthusiasm for Its Institutions

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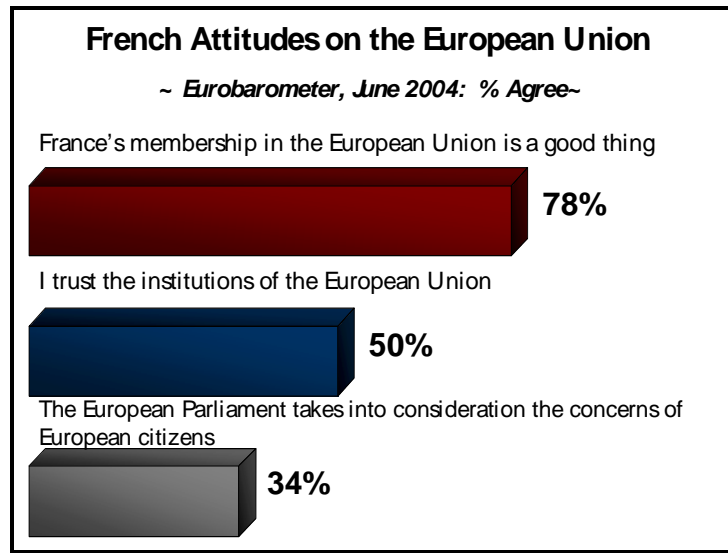
European politics has been rocked in recent weeks by polls that show a seesaw battle among French voters over accepting the new European Union Constitution, which is up for a referendum in France on May 29. Polls showed opponents leading supporters for some weeks, prompting widespread speculation that the European project may be in jeopardy. More recently, though, supporters and opponents have been running neck and neck, with a high number of undecided voters. Still, many are asking how, after France has been a major champion of the EU, the French people could be losing their nerve at this key moment.

First it should be noted that--contrary to some media reports--at no point has a poll shown a majority of likely voters saying they will vote against the constitution. The French media have reported poll numbers in a way that leaves out a large group: those who say they are very sure they will vote, but are still undecided. For example, in a May 13-14 Ipsos/Le Figaro/Europe 1 poll--among those who said they were certain they would vote--38% said they would vote yes, 40% no, while 22% were undecided. However, by excluding the undecideds, this result was presented by Le Figaro online with the headline: "The 'no' back in the lead with 51% of intentions to vote." In a mid-April Harris poll in which a full 33% of likely voters were undecided, the "nos" were reported as winning by 53% to 47%: but actually 36% intended to vote no, 31% to vote yes.



Going beyond the simple thumbs up-thumbs down polls on the constitution reveals a more complex mix of both strengths and weaknesses in French support for the European project. Support for the EU itself is actually quite strong. Within the last twelve months, an overwhelming majority (78%) called membership in the EU a "good thing." However, in the same poll, only 50% said they trusted the EU's institutions--and only

34% thought the European Parliament “takes into consideration the concerns of European citizens” (all Eurobarometer, June 2004).



So—given the majority’s underlying support for the EU, along with majority skepticism about how its institutions operate—it is perhaps not surprising that many French, faced with the EU Constitution, have a struggle making up their minds. But as we shall see, most of the doubts expressed about the Constitution are constructive doubts, not a rejection of the EU itself.

Another key reason the French are willing to consider opposing the constitution is that they are not responsive to the widely-repeated argument that if the constitution does not pass, this will be the end of the EU. Ipsos tested repeatedly the argument in favor of the constitution that “a no vote would bring the pursuit of European construction to a serious halt” and found that only 36% agreed while 54% disagreed. Currently, 62% think that, if the “no” vote wins, France will probably get a renegotiation of the constitution draft, while only 30% think not (Ipsos, May 13-14). This view dipped in late April, perhaps thanks to Chirac’s strenuous efforts, but is clearly resilient.

Underlying Support for the EU

Among an overwhelming majority of French, there is strong underlying support for the European Union and a personal sense of being a citizen within it. Not only do 78% think EU membership is a good thing, but 72% feel they are “a citizen of the European Union” (Eurobarometer June 2004).

An overwhelming majority want to see—in one way or another—a strengthened EU. One poll question has asked whether the EU should become a superpower like the US. The word “superpower” may be an unfortunate choice for expressing what most French really mean—for instance, this does not translate into support for higher defense

spending. However, when offered this question, 83% of the French said yes, the EU should become a superpower (German Marshall Fund, June 2004).

Little Enthusiasm for EU Institutions

At the same time, the French are reluctant to write a blank check to the EU as an organization. Only half say they trust the EU's institutions. When asked whether the phrase "You trust the institutions of the European Union" described their own attitude, 50% said yes and 46% no. In this the French were not being more skeptical than other Europeans: the average response across the EU's 25 countries was 46% yes.

And the French seem to join in the frequent criticism of a "democratic deficit" in the EU. A clear majority—59%--disagreed with the rather modest statement that "the European Parliament takes into consideration the concerns of European citizens." On this question the French were more critical than Europeans in general: the average EU-wide response was divided (45% agreed, 44% disagreed).

At the same time, the doubts and criticisms take place against a background of much deeper underlying support for "European construction" than exists in, for instance, Britain or Denmark. Hence much of the confusion apparent in efforts to interpret French attitudes.

Turnout Likely High

One possibility, of course, is that those trying to decide how they will vote won't go to the polls in the end, and turnout will be low. But the choice to participate has been growing, with 61% recently saying they will vote (Ipsos, May 6-7).

According to Pierre Giacometti, general director of Ipsos-France, this suggests voter turnout is likely to be high. Giacometti comments "the willingness of the French to go vote on May 29 grew more than 10 points over a single week [in late April]"—and is now only slightly less than that measured one month before the 2002 presidential elections in France. "If this level is confirmed over the last four weeks of the campaign, participation could be between 60% and 70%," he added.

If Giacometti is right, then voter turnout could approach that of the 70% turnout for the referendum of 1992, when the French were asked to vote on the Maastricht Treaty, which changed the old "European Community" into the European Union and set the course for introducing the euro currency.

But high turnout does not, however, ensure robust support. The "yes" vote for the Maastricht Treaty on European integration was approved by only 51%.

Not a Right-Left Dichotomy

The media discourse in France has tended to follow a conventional route of dividing the French into left- and right-wing camps, according to party preference, and then assuming that the thinking in each camp about the EU Constitution must be markedly different.

Indeed, support for the constitution is stronger among right-wing voters than left-wing voters. However, the reasons people give for their choices suggests that their thinking is not strongly driven by a left-right dichotomy.

When Ipsos presented arguments for and against the constitution (April 22-23), there was little difference in the responses between those on the left and those on the right. Among six arguments presented for a “yes” vote, five showed virtually no difference (1-5 points) between left- and right-wing voters. On three out of five arguments for a “no” vote, the difference was only 4-7 points. An important “no” argument that President Chirac and others have struggled to refute—that a “no” vote will just lead to new negotiations and a better constitution—is equally appealing to right and left. Out of five arguments for a “no” vote that IPSOS presented to voters on the left and on the right (April 22), only one showed a difference of 20 points or more (the constitution draft contains too much laissez-faire economic thinking).

Voters on the right are somewhat more concerned that rejecting the Constitution will leave France with less influence in the EU, and more likely to connect the Constitution with their negative feelings about Turkey becoming a candidate for membership. Voters on the left are more open to moving toward a Europe that will be one political entity someday, and more concerned that the Constitution is overly influenced by classic free-market economics. But in other regards, the right-left divide does not divide voters that much over the EU Constitution. And the argument that a “no” vote will allow the renegotiation of a better constitution draft has adherents on the right and left, and could prove to be the strongest.