

The French and Dutch Referendums: Lessons for Britain

FPC EVENT REPORT

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Summary

The dramas over the recent referendum votes have made it hard to decipher a single vision of Europe, or indeed a single vision of the next steps for Europe. What is clear is that the votes on the Constitutional Treaty have signalled to the Brussels elite the need for greater transparency and public involvement in the EU's development. European leaders must bear in mind the views of their citizens and the political sensitivity of the integration and enlargement process.

An analysis of the votes cast does not indicate a rejection of the Constitutional Treaty per se; rather it was a rare opportunity for dissatisfied voters to voice their concern over European as well as domestic policy issues. This was particularly the case in France, where voters voiced dislike for Chirac's government and high levels of unemployment (11 per cent). The Dutch largely complained that the big countries, namely France and Germany, are too strong and this would increase with the Constitution.

European leaders should illustrate to the electorate that they have registered the message that has been delivered and respond by engaging the electorate. A long overdue debate over Europe has been ignited, particularly in the Netherlands. However, the leadership should not turn inwards and ignore the necessary reforms of the EU system which the Constitution was, at least in part, designed to fix.

Analysis of the results

- French vote: On 29 May, in response to a question: 'Do you approve of the bill which authorises ratification of the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe?' 45 % of those voting said Yes and 55% said No. Approximately 69% voter turn out.

The debate in France was broad, with many voters reading the details of the constitution and feeling strongly in favour of a consolidation of democracy. Nevertheless, the credit of the arguments was largely unequal with misunderstandings prevailing on both sides.

In the context of these misunderstandings and lack of full understanding of the issues involved, the panellists asked the question as to whether a referendum was the appropriate response to gauging attitudes to the Constitution. Further, the French were largely reluctant to the idea of a compromise; yet a treaty among 25 has, by definition, to be a compromise.

The result in France was largely a 'class vote', with clear divisions between social classes. Blue collar voters voted 80% No, with middle/upper classes voting Yes; with the division being more social than political.

Further reasons included firstly, a strong rejection of and disregard for Chirac and his government. Secondly, a broad spectrum of political leaders supported the no camp from the extreme right (influencing nearly 15% of voters) to the extreme left (influencing almost 10% of voters). The right-wing opponent of the treaty, Phillippe de Villiers, also gave respectability to the campaign; as did the former Prime Minister, Laurent Fabius.

The sentiment in France was largely that the European 'contract' to which they subscribed to on entry to the EU has not been fulfilled. Fears remain over globalisation and enlargement, and a lack of protection against the competition of low salary eastern countries. The feeling remains that France is being destabilised by a seemingly endless process of enlargement.

- Dutch vote: On 1 June, the Netherlands electorate voted on the question: 'Are you for or against approval by the Netherlands of the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe'. The vote against was 62%, with 38% in favour. Approximately 63% turn out.

The following reasons were highlighted as to why the constitutional vote failed in the Netherlands:

1. European leaders of the past 40 years
Citizens have not been involved in the construction of Europe and dislike the perceived lack of transparency.
2. France and Germany
 - France and Germany were argued to have killed the Growth and Stability Pact – the feeling that big countries can behave as they please is unpopular among the Dutch, who fear a declining role in the EU.
 - The French vote also killed the claim by the Dutch government that a No vote would result in isolation of the Netherlands.
3. The last decade of Dutch government
There has been a tendency to blame Brussels for what has failed and take the credit for success stories.
4. Valerie Giscard d'Estaing, architect of the Treaty
He made a mistake by labelling the document a 'Constitution' and stating that it would only last for 50 years. Confusion simply fed into the 'No' camp, reinforcing fears of a loss of identity.
5. Europe's raison d'être
The threat of war and crisis no longer binds Europe together: people knew a 'No' vote would not be disastrous in security terms.
6. Current leaders of Europe

The arrogance of the current elite, suggesting that the Constitution would be pushed through irrespective of the results did not resonate well with voters.

7. Divisions in the Yes camp

Lack of unity and desire to rally behind Balkenende.

8. First referendum in Holland

People voted for a 'mythical alternative', a third way; rather than against the Treaty per se.

9. Media

There is little media interest in Europe in the Netherlands, consequently journalists are poorly informed on key issues.

10. Successful organisation of the No camp

They successfully organised parliamentary questions about money going to the Yes camp; Geert Wilders played on anti-immigration fears giving out €180 bills illustrating the Dutch contribution to the EU budget.

It was noted that this was, nevertheless, a victory for democracy in the Netherlands – as finally there is a debate on European issues.

Next steps for the EU

On the question of what can be done now – this appears to be the end for a few years of European political ambition, with a slow down in EU political activity in the short term. The crisis is not in EU institutions and decision-making in Brussels as the EU will continue to operate under the Nice Treaty. The crisis, rather, lies in the domestic political environment: electorates have rejected their national governments and their rhetoric on Europe. The challenges that the treaty tried imperfectly to address will not go away - the era of Napoleonic blueprints is dead and there will now be incremental change.

The issues the referendum was designed to resolve remain; but the EU should now proceed in small steps and decide which bites are small enough for the EU electorate to swallow. Progress may be a slow and tedious process, but there is little choice if the European project is to succeed. We certainly cannot sit around and wait for a new Convention in two years time.

European Council: need to make a gesture to the European public that they understand their concerns:

- Increase the power of national parliaments, avoiding Brussels centralisation
- Use of the Citizens Initiative, enabling the electorate to put issues on the agenda
- Increase the openness of Council meetings and Council spending, particularly on agriculture.
- Rotating presidency of six months was also considered to be too short to be fully effective.

The challenge of asylum and immigration are hot on the EU agenda with future enlargement and Turkish accession. Problems with the May 2004 enlargement are still being discussed more than a year later, with immigration having been on the agenda for over ten years. The need for a collective approach to this issue along with a significant public diplomacy campaign to involve the public is essential for success. Enlargement was argued to be the 'victim' of a lack of understanding: the danger of instability on Europe's eastern border is real and unless the issue is properly addressed to reverse this portrayal, consequences will be serious.

It is possible that there will be little action until a new generation of political leaders emerges with potential changes of leadership in Germany, France, Italy and the UK.

Next steps for the UK

France and the Netherlands have had a forum and opportunity for open debate, one which has been sorely lacking in recent European history. Fear was expressed that this opportunity would not be open to the UK if a referendum is not held.

If the real benefit of the EU cannot be delivered, British voters see little point in supporting the project until the gap between promises and reality has been closed.

A final danger was highlighted: in the current climate of Euro-scepticism, the political costs of discussing reform and insecurity may be high as the electorate is not ready to discuss these challenges.