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Then Again, Maybe Not–The French Say No to the European Constitution

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French voters handed French President Jacques Chirac a devastating political defeat on Saturday, and their rejection of the proposed European constitution could spell the end of the vision for a European superstate. Chirac and his government have been leading advocates for a united Europe, pushing the idea of a European counterweight to the influence of the United States. As polls closed, French voters rejected the proposed constitution with a 55 percent “no” vote in the national referendum.

Ironically, Chirac did not have to call for a referendum in the first place. In a terse comment issued after the vote, Chirac said, “France has spoken democratically. A majority of you have rejected the constitution. This is your sovereign decision.” He also stated the obvious: “France’s decision inevitably creates a difficult context for defending our interests in Europe.”

The cumbersome constitution (with 448 articles) was unpopular from the start. Drafters debated for months before deciding to make no substantial reference to Europe’s Christian foundations. The constitution would have centralized authority in the European Union, diluting national sovereignty and blending Europe into an awkward confederation of states.

Writing in [The Weekly Standard](#) before the vote, Gerald Baker, U.S. editor of the [Times](#) of London, set the stage clearly: “Though a rather bold step, the constitution was not expected to run into trouble when the process of ratification by 25 member states began. For years, European political elites have happily worked at creating a European superstate without worrying much about what European publics wanted. They knew that under some national constitutions—Denmark’s, Ireland’s, etc.—the treaty would be put to a vote, and they knew that these countries might get difficult and throw the treaty out, as had happened in the past. But it was generally assumed such minor setbacks from such insignificant states could happily be ignored, as had also happened in the past.”

No longer. As Baker anticipated, “After reluctantly agreeing to consult the people, the European Union’s leaders now have absolutely no idea what to do if the people vote No. In the last few days, European leaders have looked like Keystone Kops as they’ve tried to give a coherent answer to the question, What next?” What next, indeed? Chirac urged other nations to go ahead and adopt the constitution. British voters may face a referendum next year, but hostility is so great that, after the French rejection, Prime Minister Tony Blair’s government may withdraw the proposal. Several countries—including Spain and Germany—have already adopted the constitution. But, without France, the dream of a European superstate has a big hole in its center.

THE REVENGE OF THE FRENCH LINKS: [The Washington Post](#), [Business Week](#), [The New York Times](#), [The Guardian](#) [London], [The International Herald Tribune](#), and [Agence Francaise de Presse](#). The text of the [Draft Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe](#), [European Union/Europa](#).

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