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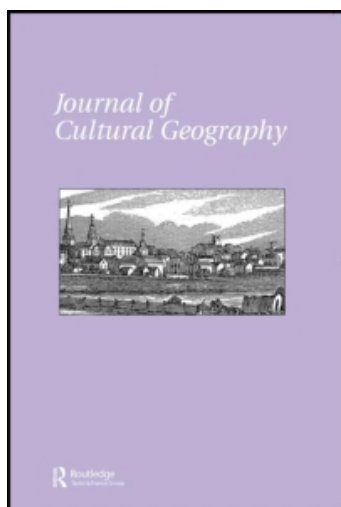
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### Establishing a Constitution for Europe during European Union enlargement? Visions of 'Europe' in the referenda campaigns in France and the Netherlands

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## **Establishing a Constitution for Europe during European Union enlargement? Visions of ‘Europe’ in the referenda campaigns in France and the Netherlands**

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The construction of imaginings of ‘Europe’ is increasingly closely intertwined with the institutions of the European Union (EU). Constitutional reform of the EU is therefore a crucial moment in the production and reproduction of European imaginaries and requires a cultural geography analysis of the public debates surrounding it and the resulting voting patterns. French and Dutch citizens, in referenda on 29 May and 1 June 2005 respectively, rejected the ratification of the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe. This article examines the highly contested visions of political elites and citizens in these two countries to explore how Europe is imagined and re-imagined in a period of rapid territorial and institutional change encompassing both the widening and the deepening of the EU. It focuses on two dimensions of integration: widening (ie. enlargement) and deepening (ie. institutional reforms towards more integration) and the associated visions of ‘Europe’ and ‘European-ness.’ Questions addressed include “who belongs to Europe and who does not?” (with regard to widening), and “what belongs to European competencies and what should be done nationally or locally?” (with regard to deepening).

**Keywords:** EU enlargement; Europe; European Constitution; European Union; referenda; geographical imaginary

### **Introduction**

This article focuses on visions of ‘Europe’ in the 15 ‘old’ European Union (EU) member states. It explores the highly contested imaginings of what ‘Europe’ and the EU should be and addresses the gap between the views of political elites and of citizens regarding the future of the EU and moves to ‘widen’ and ‘deepen’ it. Specifically, it deals with these issues in the context of the French and Dutch referenda about the Treaty on the European Constitution in 2005. Constitutional reforms of the EU are

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crucial moments in the production and reproduction of European imaginaries. When referenda on reform are organized they generate intense public debate in which visions of 'Europe' are produced and contested revealing aspects of the cultural geography of European identity formation.

This paper investigates how 'Europe' was imagined and re-imagined in the mid-2000s, in a period of rapid and institutional change in the EU encompassing both widening – the eastern enlargement of the EU leading to the inclusion of 10 former Eastern European states – and deepening – attempts to adopt a Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe (TCE). The second section introduces geographical imaginations of 'Europe' while the following section discusses the ways the relationship between widening and deepening the EU can be conceptualised. The fourth section deals with the gap between the visions of political elites and citizens which were deployed and contested in the 2005 referenda on European integration. The next section introduces the Treaty and the ratification process. The two main sections which follow present an exploration of the French and the Dutch referenda on the Constitution. The analysis is based on electoral data, *Eurobarometers*,<sup>1</sup> national exit polls and post-referendum *Flash Eurobarometers*,<sup>2</sup> publications in the press and on the internet and secondary sources. In the conclusion the two referenda are compared to evaluate the gap between the visions of 'Europe' constructed by political elites and the public.

### **Geographical imaginations of Europe, reunification and the European Union**

At the crossroads of cultural geography and political geography (more specifically critical geopolitics) issues of identity, meaning and representation have increasingly been addressed (Dijkink 1996; Sharp 1996; Mitchell 2000; Anderson *et al.* 2003; Ó Tuathail 2003; Gregory 2004; Dodds 2005; Dittmer 2005; Dalby 2008). Similarly, the importance of culture and the construction of identities are increasingly being addressed in International Relations and European Studies (Lapid and Kratochwil 1996; Ó Tuathail 1996; Smith 1999). These literatures seek to understand both the ways cultural identities inform (geo)political choices and the ways (geo)political processes shape identities. A considerable part of this literature deals with Europe and the EU. The meaning of 'Europe' (Heffernan 1998) in this context is a much debated issue, as are European identities (Delanty 1995; Graham 1998; Paasi 2001; McNeill 2004) and borders (Anderson *et al.* 2002; Armstrong and Anderson 2007; Van Houtum and Pijpers 2007; Bialasiewicz 2008).

Next to immigration and globalization the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, which ended the imposed post-World War II division of Europe, was one of the main challenges to established geographical imaginations

of 'Europe.' Twenty years later, the transition to liberal democracy and (neoliberal) capitalism is advanced in many Central and Eastern European countries alongside accession to NATO and the EU. This reunification of Europe and the EU-accession process brought about the renegotiation of national and other territorial identities, especially (but not only) in the former state-socialist countries (see, eg., Feldman 2001 on Estonia).

Two dimensions of the (re)construction of 'Europe' are crucial in this context. The first is the horizontal dimension of the construction of the borders of Europe and inclusion and exclusion processes at its borderlands. In the past European identity was constructed with reference to several significant 'Others,' namely the Ottoman Empire, Russia, the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, while the European project can also be conceived of as defined against its own past as a significant 'Other' (Diez 2004). The reunification of Western and Eastern Europe through the integration of the latter into the EU is full of contradictions, as it continues to reproduce Central and Eastern European countries as 'less European' (Kuus 2004, 2007) and the new EU-members challenge established European identities (Agnew 2001; Feakins and Bialasiewicz 2006). Alternative representations of the 'old continent' have also been proposed by US foreign policy makers, especially the division between 'old' and 'new' Europe introduced by Donald Rumsfeld in 2003 to discredit French and German opposition to the US invasion in Iraq and to underline the importance of the new NATO members in the US led "Coalition of the Willing" (Bialasiewicz and Minca 2005; Levy *et al.* 2005).

The second axis is the vertical dimension of the construction of a European scale of governance and identification and its relations to existing scales of territorial identities and governments (Mlinar 1992; Murphy 1999; Mamadouh 2001; Antonsich 2008a, 2008b). In this case the significant Other is national identity. Such representations of 'Europe' contribute not only to the creation of a European identity that competes with or complements existing national, regional and local identities, but also to the conceptualization of territorial identities as hierarchical and nested, and of national identities as exclusive and hegemonic.

In this paper the (re)construction of Europe is explored by analysing debates about reform of its main political institution: the EU. The need for an agreement over institutional reforms and debates surrounding such political decision-making processes are an important context in which visions of 'Europe' are constructed. They are important events which generate new questions and ideas and help shape new visions of 'Europe'.

### Imagining institutional change: widening and deepening the EU

The extensive literature on the post-Cold War transformation of the EU and geographical imaginations of Europe tends to focus on issues of identity, difference, bordering and Othering, and more specifically on the 'European-ness' of Central and Eastern Europe. These studies concentrate on one dimension of European imaginations, the one discussing who and which places belong to Europe, and they tend to neglect imaginings of the appropriate political organisation for Europe. Visions of this imagined political community range from the EU as a free trade area to the EU as a federal state (or at least a *sui generis* political configuration replacing the member states as sovereign states). Such preferences regarding the competencies that belong to the European level are closely related to conceptions of territorial identities and their mutual relations. Some see 'Europe' as a post-national project that would easily combine with pre-existing territorial identities, others perceive 'Europe' as an attempt to upscale the territorial state and conceive of the emergence of a 'European' identity as being at the expense of existing national identities.

This paper addresses both dimensions as most debates about the future of the EU concern both its territorial and institutional shape, to use Paasi's vocabulary about the institutionalisation of regions (Paasi 1986, 1991, 1996). The debate about the territorial shape of the EU revolves around successive enlargements. This is the *widening* dimension of political integration. The debate about the institutional shape of the EU revolves around institutional reforms. This is the *deepening* dimension. Two sub-dimensions of deepening are often distinguished: deepening strictly speaking (when institutional reforms strengthen supranational institutions and decision-making mechanisms) and broadening when the scope of the competencies of the EU is expanded to new policy domains. Preferences about widening and deepening express different cultural understandings of what 'Europe' should be. *Widening* taps into the horizontal dynamics of enlargement, the questioning of the 'European-ness' of new member states, and boundary-making between Europe and its neighbours. *Deepening* taps into the vertical dynamics of the formation of European identity and its relations to territorial identities at other scales, especially national identities.

Many authors conceptualise widening and deepening as alternative European political and cultural projects (Miles and Redmond 1993; Vaughan-Whitehead 2003; Cameron 2004), arguing that those preferring an 'EU-lite' – an internal market – will prioritise enlargement over deepening, and that those preferring a far-reaching political union will prioritise deepening over widening (Leggewie 2005). Others have stressed the necessity to reconcile "the 'deepening' ambitions of most EU members with the 'widening' agenda of the present twelve [accession]

candidates" (Van Brabant 2001, p. 113) and also identified diverging visions of Europe in the old and the new member states.

Alternatively the two processes can be seen as complementary: both possible and necessary. The conventional wisdom in Brussels after 1989 was that institutional reforms were necessary to prepare eastward enlargement and that deepening was necessary for widening, hence the development of Agenda 2000 (European Commission 1999), the Nice Treaty, the Convention and the Constitution. Looking back on the history of European integration since 1952, the Commissioner responsible for Enlargement, Olli Rehn, recently stated:

Widening versus deepening is indeed a false dichotomy. The EU has always pursued these two objectives in parallel, and never was the one an obstacle for the other. (Rehn, 2006)

Using data from *Eurobarometer 54*, an opinion poll conducted in November and December 2000 in each of the 15 Member States, Karp and Bowler (2006) concluded that the share of EU citizens supporting both widening and deepening (23%) was much smaller than the large majority among the political elites that have endorsed the successive enlargements (*widening*) and the successive reforms strengthening EU institutions (*deepening*). Both were indeed supported by most major political parties (with the noticeable exception of the UK Conservatives) and wide parliamentary majorities. This begins to highlight the gap between political elites and the public in how they envision the nature of the EU and Europe.

### **Elites, citizens and referenda**

Citizens and elites do not necessarily share the same visions for the future of Europe. The EU project started as a technocratic one, remote from the public. The term 'permissive consensus' has been used to describe the broad but unspecified support for European integration in this earlier phase (Lindberg and Scheingold 1970). Citizens were not consulted about the details of the political arrangements agreed upon and this remained the domain of technocrats and bureaucrats committed to European collaboration. The main political parties agreed on the importance and direction of European integration for the national interest. European arrangements and policies were not issues in national electoral politics.

The Treaty of Maastricht (1992) marked the final end of this permissive consensus (Down and Wilson 2008). Support for the Treaty, which ironically was intended to introduce EU citizenship, was strikingly low in the referenda held in Denmark and France in 1992. In Denmark, the electorate rejected the ratification of the Treaty, while in France the majority approving it was very slim. The contrast with the large parliamentary majorities which were in favour of ratification highlighted

the gap between citizens and political elites. Referenda are therefore key moments to confront the results of elite negotiations with the will of the people and imaginings of what 'Europe' should be are central to such debates. The *European Constitutional Law Review* (2005) recently entitled a series of articles on European referenda "Peoples' vengeance", emphasizing the discrepancy between these imaginings.

There is no procedure for holding EU-wide referenda and national traditions and practices widely differ, with Italy carrying out the most referenda and Germany and the Netherlands the least. Forty national (or sub-national) referenda on European integration were held before 2005 (Kaufmann *et al.* 2003). Twenty were about widening (including 17 accession referenda), 13 were about deepening the EU (including the treaties of Maastricht or Nice) and seven were held in third countries (especially Switzerland) about their relations with the EEC/EU.

The main explanations of the outcome of these referenda help to contextualise the analysis of cultural imaginings of 'Europe' in the 2005 referenda on the European Constitution which is discussed below. Four types of explanations can be distinguished. First, European referenda are said to be second-order votes, in the way that European Parliamentary (EP) elections are often interpreted (Reif and Schmitt 1980; Garry *et al.* 2005). Second-order voting means that it is determined more by responses to national political agendas than by evaluations of institutions and policies at the European level. Contingent developments in the national political arena then play a key role in explaining why the treaty put to a referendum is accepted or rejected. A positive vote is often indicative of support for the current government and its policies, assuming it supports the treaty in question, a negative one may be due to dissatisfaction with the government or a 'protest vote' (e.g., see the outcome of the 2009 EP elections in the UK). This might imply that referenda will tell us little about people's visions of Europe because voting behaviour is mainly guided by their concerns with events at the national scale.

However, three other explanations suggest that referenda are worthy of study for this purpose. Referenda can be influenced by voters' opinions on European integration. Here, individual values, beliefs, and attitudes towards the EU and its institutions explain voting behaviour. A positive orientation towards European integration is sanctioned by a positive vote, a negative vote results from a sceptical attitude towards integration, or 'Euro-scepticism' more generally. These positions are informed by broader visions of what 'Europe' is and should be.

Voting preferences can also be contingent on the European political agenda. The performance of the EU and incidents and events related to specific institutions or representatives are key here. Therefore, voting behaviour is more likely to be explained by satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) with such factors as European policies, the Euro, the net payment to the EU of one's Member State, successive enlargements, the failure of the



European Security and Defence Policy, or the division among European states during the Iraq crisis. Again, (dis)satisfaction is determined by a broader vision of what Europe is and should be.

Finally, referendum campaigns can be explanatory factors in their own right, as public debate about the referendum plays an important role in shaping voters' preferences. Discussing the British referendum on the Constitutional Treaty, Hobolt and Riseborough (2005, p. 248) distinguish three ways in which a referendum campaign shapes voting behaviour: it increases the amount of information about the EU available to citizens; it motivates people to vote; and it frames their preferences by "priming the criteria on which voters base their decisions". In this case, the referendum is actually the catalyst for deliberation about Europe and consequently to the shaping and reshaping of visions of what it should be.

Clearly, explaining the outcome of referenda is a complex task. The first point above reminds us to use caution when using the outcome of referenda to analyse competing visions of Europe, as the results may only be a protest vote relating to national events. However, this paper focuses on how competing and culturally contested imaginings of 'Europe' are produced and reproduced within this political process and how they play a role in the referenda outcomes, and the points above suggest that they are useful parts of the political process to study for this purpose.

### **The Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe (TCE)**

The European Convention adopted a draft Treaty establishing a European Constitution in July 2003 after a year and a half of deliberation and with input from diverse political and civil actors. The document was then amended by the 2004 Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) and the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe (TCE) – or 'the European Constitution' as it is often known – was signed in Rome by representatives of the Member States on 29 October 2004.

The TCE was mainly about *deepening* the Union. It gave constitutional status to existing symbols such as the flag, the anthem and the motto of the EU. The main institutional changes were also highly symbolic, as the institutions that were introduced belong to the iconography and vocabulary of the state, such as a Constitution, a Convention, or a Foreign Minister (for a stimulating discussion of the power of the word and Europe's new constitutional iconography see Weiler 2005). This fits with a vision of 'Europe' in which the EU is modelled after the modern territorial state, and national identity serves as an example for the promotion of a European identity. New provisions included institutional reforms strengthening the EU institutions and simplifying cumbersome procedures. This 'streamlining' also stemmed from a similar vision of Europe

By contrast, *widening* was not an explicit issue in the Treaty. However, post-1989 geographical enlargement was implicitly linked to the need for reform. This is especially true of changes affecting the functioning of key institutions. In addition, the Convention (2002–2003) and the IGC (2004) were contemporaneous with the final negotiations of the 2004 enlargement which brought in 10 new Member States, the negotiations with Bulgaria and Romania for accession in 2007, and debates about the start of the negotiations with Croatia and, above all, Turkey. In that sense, important steps towards widening and deepening were taken at the same time. Institutional reform was directly linked to an inclusive conception of ‘European-ness’ that down-played the contested character of these enlargements.

The procedure to ratify the Constitutional Treaty itself also contributes to the reshaping of ‘Europe’. Some political actors proposed an EU-wide referendum on the Constitution that would match the constitutional ambition of the new Treaty (Kaufmann *et al.* 2003; Nijeboer 2005). Despite this campaign, the procedure for the ratification of the Constitutional Treaty was organised at the national level, as would happen with any international treaty. This underlines the ambiguity of the hegemonic European project: national political elites support European integration but curtail it at the same time to protect their own positions as unavoidable mediators between citizens of the Member States and ‘Brussels.’

Seven Member States scheduled a referendum. A further three combined a parliamentary procedure with an advisory referendum. The remaining 15 relied on the assent of their national parliament. The first referendum, in February 2005 in Spain, had a low turnout (42%) but a large majority voting for ratification (77%) (Table 1). By contrast, the referenda in France in May 2005, and in the Netherlands a few days later, mobilised a much larger proportion of the voters (69% in France, 63% in the Netherlands) but the outcome was in both cases a clear majority

Table 1. Referenda for the ratification of the Constitutional Treaty (2005).

Member State	Type of Referendum	Date	Turnout	Outcome	
Spain	advisory ref	20 Feb 2005	42%	77%	Yes
France	Referendum	29 May 2005	69%	55%	No
Netherlands	advisory ref	1 June 2005	63%	62%	No
Czech Republic	Referendum	cancelled			
Luxembourg	advisory ref	10 July 2005	88%	57%	Yes
Ireland	Referendum	postponed			
Denmark	Referendum	postponed			
Poland	Referendum	postponed			
Portugal	Referendum	postponed			
UK	Referendum	postponed			

against the ratification of the Treaty: 55% against in France and 62% in the Netherlands. As a result, referenda planned in other Member States were postponed, except in Luxembourg, where a majority (57%) approved ratification in July 2005. Nevertheless, at the Brussels EU Summit on 16–17 June 2005 it was decided to suspend the ratification process. Eventually the Member States agreed on a new Treaty in December 2007 in Lisbon to replace the TCE.

In the next sections, the relative importance of deepening and widening issues and contested visions of Europe expressed in the campaigns are explored in the case of the French and Dutch referenda. Each section first presents the background of the referendum and the national context. It then discusses the main issues about Europe articulated in the public debates according to the media, secondary sources and the analysis of opinion polls.

### **The French referendum**

French President Jacques Chirac opted for a referendum to ratify the TCE. Since the establishment of the Fifth Republic in 1958, this was the tenth time a president had called a referendum (only one was lost in 1969), and it was the third on European integration after one on the first enlargement in 1972 and another on Maastricht in 1992. Chirac announced his decision in July 2004 and started – unintentionally? – a long and bitter public debate, even if the official campaign for the referendum only lasted from 16 to 28 May 2005. A large number of books were published by politicians, journalists and observers which were widely consumed by the French public, demonstrating that the shaping of Europe was a topical issue in the French context.

One way of explaining the result of the 2005 referendum was that it was a second-order vote expressing discontent with the French government and France's domestic situation and its relationship to the EU in that context (Ivaldi 2006; Taggart 2006). The national situation did much to determine the outcome of a referendum which was held mid-way between a general election and a presidential election. This is especially true of the unpopularity of President Chirac and Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin. The referendum was a prime opportunity to express discontent with the President. This was aggravated by the fact that in 2002 Chirac was elected with an overwhelming 82% of the votes because the other candidate that had made it to the second round was the extreme right-wing candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen. At the time, leftist voters felt obliged to vote for the right-wing but republican candidate Chirac, but three years later they were reluctant to support him again in the referendum.

Domestic politics provided another influence. Internal rivalries divided the two main parties supporting the Treaty: the right-wing *Union pour un Mouvement Populaire* (UMP) (in the presidential majority) and

the left-wing *Parti Socialiste* (PS) (in opposition). The 'No' camp was very heterogeneous. On the right-wing, it included the conservative *Mouvement pour la France* (MPF) of Philippe de Villiers and the *Rassemblement pour la France* (RPF) of Charles Pasqua who both left the RPR (the predecessor of UMP) in 1992 because of their opposition to the Maastricht Treaty; the extreme right-wing party *Front national* (FN) of Jean-Marie Le Pen; its dissident Bruno Mégret and his *Mouvement national républicain* (MNR); and the single issue party *Chasse, Pêche, Nature, Traditions* (CNPT), an anti-EU party represented in the European Parliament. On the left-wing the 'No' camp included the *Mouvement républicain et citoyen* (MRC) of Jean-Pierre Chevènement who left the PS in 1992 because of his opposition to the Maastricht Treaty; new dissidents from the PS including the former Prime Minister Laurent Fabius; the *Parti radical de gauche* (PRG); the *Parti communiste français* (PCF); and the smaller Trotskyist parties *Ligue communiste révolutionnaire*, *Lutte ouvrière* and *Parti des travailleurs* (LCR, PT, LO). Anti-globalisation activist and leader of the *Confédération Paysanne* José Bové and the activist organisation *Association pour la taxation des transactions financières pour l'aide aux citoyens* (ATTAC) also opposed the Treaty. The 'No' vote clearly had an anti-establishment dimension which was aggravated by French media bias towards approving the Treaty (Aboura 2005). All observers stress the importance of the *de facto* verdict on the President and the Government in the referendum result (for example, Hainsworth 2006).

However, other factors beyond the expression of popular discontent with the right-wing government and popular distrust of the political elite in France played a role. Debates about the nature of 'Europe' were also significant. Forty-five per cent of the 'No' voters were right-wing Euro-sceptics and about a third FN supporters (exit polls quoted in Marthaler 2005; Ivaldi 2006).

The controversial issue of the future accession of Turkey to the EU was important in this campaign. Turkish accession is contentious within the EU for a number of reasons, including Turkey's internal situation, Turkey's external relations with other countries, and perceptions of religious and cultural differences between the 'West' and Turkey. The European Council decided in 2004 to start negotiations with Turkey in October 2005, providing that Turkey signed the protocol amending the Ankara Agreement about the Custom Union between the EU and Turkey to accommodate the 2004 enlargement, which would have implied Turkish recognition of the Cypriot government (since invading Cyprus in 1974 the Turkish government had refused to recognise the Republic of Cyprus which became an EU member in 2004). Turkish accession was the main issue which the Conservative sovereigntist Philippe de Villiers put forward to mobilise voters against the Treaty. The FN also prominently opposed Turkish accession.

Furthermore, the Minister of Interior and leader of the main right-wing party UMP, Nicolas Sarkozy, led a motion at the UMP National Council to support the Treaty but at the same time reject Turkey's accession, promoting a special partnership instead. It was adopted by 91% of the votes in March 2005. The motion also stated explicitly that the referendum was not about Turkey – it was apparently necessary to underline this – and that, if Turkey eventually qualified for EU membership, the last word would be given to the French people through a referendum on Turkish accession. Nevertheless, French President Chirac remained a supporter of Turkish accession, against the majority of his party and the UDF, the other larger party in the presidential majority. Thus, questions about whether Turkey should join the EU and whether it fitted with visions of what is 'European' were highly contested.

Other important elements in the opposition to the Constitution related to social and economic issues within France and how these related to the EU. Here, visions of France's relationship with the EU, and of what the EU and 'Europe' should be, emerged as significant in the discourses surrounding the referendum. Concerns with France's economic and social governance, poor economic performance and high unemployment were causing pessimism and discontent. However, these concerns were also related to the neo-liberal character of the EU's economic agenda and associated fears about social dumping, pressures on the welfare state, the delocalisation of industrial activities (to new Member States), and the loss of public services through imposed privatisation, issues which were important to both right-wing and left-wing opponents of the Treaty. Public debate was centred around the Directive on Services in the Internal Market named after the Dutch Commissioner Bolkestein, a member of the Prodi Commission that stepped down at the end of 2004. The debate was framed as the defence of the French social system against the neoliberal ideology seen as the dominant discourse in Brussels and competition with the new Member States (and other countries with cheap labour), linking these domestic concerns with the issue of EU widening. The figure of *le plombier polonais* (the "Polish plumber") was used by sovereigntist De Villiers and the media to personify the threat of cheap services from the new Member States. On the left and the extreme left, concerns about unemployment and other economic and social issues also demonstrated disenchantment with the notion of a social Europe or a European social model, as articulated by President François Mitterrand at the beginning of the 1990s, and the formulation of a Social Chapter. Fifteen years later, many left-wing voters considered that the EU had failed to deliver and to

satisfy the citizens' fundamental need for protection against the many threats posed to the stability and permanence of the French social model by economic globalisation. (Ivaldi 2006, p. 64)

In these debates the vision of an enlarged and deepened Europe proposed by the Constitutional project was widely disputed. The possibility of the accession of Turkey was questioned through a cultural reading of Europe (a Judeo-Christian Western Europe had to be protected against Islamic influences) while the completed accession of Central and Eastern European countries was criticized from a socio-economic point of view (the domestic labour market and welfare state had to be protected against competition from cheap labour). Issues of European-ness, identity and the reunification of Europe did not feature explicitly with regard to these latter countries, in contrast with the literature which stresses the continued construction of the 'East' as a 'threat.' However, in the referendum debate visions of Europe did vary in relation to different actors' political stance on sovereignty relative to the EU. Sovereignists, nationalists and the extreme right advocated the return of powers to the nation-state, and sought to promote the legitimacy of national identity over a weakly developed sense of 'European-ness.' The left and the extreme left called for more social policies at the EU level, suggesting more of a sense of solidarity with a pan-European identity, although this may also reflect an instrumental approach to using the EU as a lever on national policies on labour and welfare.

Opinion polls also indicate that these were key voting motives. According to exit polls, 14–35% of the respondents stated that Turkey's candidacy was an issue in their voting behaviour. It was mentioned as the first reason for rejecting the Treaty by UMP and FN/MNR voters voting 'No' (56%, IPSOS exit poll survey, quoted in Ivaldi 2006, p. 58). Clearly the possible accession of Turkey was seen as a challenge to constructions of what was held to be 'European'.

The *Flash Eurobarometer* held in France after the referendum shows a slightly different picture, however, with a mix of attitudes towards European integration and European and national contingencies. Interviewers classified spontaneous answers in a series of pre-coded categories.<sup>3</sup> The top five reasons to vote 'No' were:

- (1) "it will have negative effects on employment in France" (31%)
- (2) "the economic situation in France is too weak, there is too much unemployment" (25%)
- (3) "economically speaking, the draft [Treaty] is too liberal" (19%)
- (4) "opposes the President/government/certain political parties" (18%)
- (5) "not enough social Europe" (16%)

Widening issues were less prominent than in the campaign and than the exit polls suggested. The reason "does not want Turkey in the European Union" ranked only 7<sup>th</sup> with 6% and "opposition to further enlargement" 13<sup>th</sup> with 3% (*Flash Eurobarometer 171*, p. 17). National-scale concerns about the performance of France were clearly an issue influencing 'No' voters.

However, visions of a 'social Europe' were also important even for 'No' voters, suggesting that the EU was seen as an institution which should seek to mitigate the impact of neo-liberalism.

In contrast, the top five reasons to vote 'Yes' show that voters were concerned with issues at the European scale and France's relationship to them:

- (1) "essential in order to pursue the European construction" (39%)
- (2) "I've always been in favour of European construction" (16%)
- (3) "strengthens the role of France within the Union/in the world" (12%)
- (4) "strengthens the EU over the US" (11%)
- (5) "for future generations" (11%)

Widening issues were not prominent among the 'Yes' voters: the reason "essential in order to manage the integration of the new member states in the EU" ranked only 13<sup>th</sup> with 4%. (*Flash Eurobarometer 171*, p. 15). However, according to this poll what was clearly important were positive orientations towards advancing the European project (55% of 'Yes' voters).

The turnout for this referendum was high (69%, much higher than for the EP elections, 43% in June 2004). The Treaty was rejected by a majority of 55%. Both the President and the government, and the PS, were weakened by the result. President Chirac did not resign but he appointed a new government with a new Prime Minister. There were fears for the influence of France in Europe. The French-German alliance was weakened, also affected negatively by the fact that Chancellor Gerhard Schröder suffered an electoral defeat in North-Rhine Westphalia and the expected defeat at the general election of September 2005. In the immediate aftermath of the 29 May 2005 referendum, calls to suspend the ratification process were opposed by the President of the European Commission, the President of the European Council and the President of the European Parliament. The Dutch referendum took place a few days later, as scheduled.

### **The Dutch referendum**

The Dutch referendum has a different institutional background. It was the first Dutch national referendum ever, although about 115 referenda have been held at the local level since 1912 (Nijeboer 2005, p. 393). Unlike France, it was organised as an advisory referendum for the Second Chamber of the national parliament. Since 1991, smaller leftist parties had called for referenda on the Maastricht Treaty, the Amsterdam Treaty and the introduction of the Euro currency. Such initiatives were opposed successfully in the Parliament by the major right-wing parties: the *Christen Democratisch Appèl* (Christian Democrat Appeal, CDA) and

the Conservative Liberals of the *Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie* (People's Party for Freedom and Democracy, VVD).

A prominent CDA politician, Hanja Maij-Weggen, an MEP and member of the Convention and a former Minister, supported the European Referendum Campaign to organise a Europe-wide referendum on the Constitution. When it became clear that this initiative could not succeed, national campaigns were carried instead. This was the case in the Netherlands too. In October 2002 Frans Timmermans, a Labour MP and member of the Convention, filed a proposal in Parliament to call for a referendum. A parliamentary bill was finally introduced by the *Partij van de Arbeid* (Labour Party), *Groen Links* (Green Left) and the Liberal Democrats of D66. The original intention was to hold the referendum at the same time as the EP elections of June 2004, but the political process to obtain the support of the conservative liberals of VVD and the legal procedure took too long. The CDA and the two small protestant parties *Christen Unie* (the Christian Union, CU) and *Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij* (Political Reformed Party, SGP) opposed it unsuccessfully and the initiative was eventually adopted by the end of January 2005.

The Dutch campaign about the referendum was very slow to start. The government did not feel committed to a campaign, as the referendum was an initiative of the Parliament. Public debate was limited, especially compared with the French case. "The Netherlands has always had one of the lowest levels of public debate on European integration" (Nijeboer 2005, p. 399). In mid-May 2005, as polls were predicting a rejection, the government decided to make extra funds available for the campaigns (Harmsen 2005). Promotion material was distributed. Debates and public events were held. Newspapers and television increased their coverage and websites were created to promote the Constitution. Several high profile politicians did much harm with blunt statements about the consequences of a 'No' vote that antagonized the wider public: the Minister of Justice, the Christian Democrat Piet Hein Donner, predicted war; the Minister of Economic Affairs, the Liberal Democrat Laurens Jan Brinkhorst, predicted an economic crisis; the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Christian Democrat Ben Bot, stated that those who wanted to vote against for the wrong reasons should stay home. The Liberal Conservatives at the last moment removed images of Auschwitz from an advertisement. On top of that, the French 'No' in the last week of the campaign alleviated the anxiety of those afraid that a 'No' vote would marginalize the Netherlands in Brussels.

Traditionally, all mainstream right-wing and left-wing parties (CDA, VVD, D66 on the right, PvdA and *GroenLinks* on the left) support European integration, while the smaller parties like the Communist Party (CPN until the merger into *GroenLinks*), the *Socialistische Partij* (Socialist Party, SP, since 1994 in Parliament), the small right-wing protestant parties CU and SGP, and the *Lijst Pim Fortuijn* (LPF, in Parliament since



2002) oppose it. This was also the case of the one-man faction Geert Wilders, an MP that left the VVD in December 2004 because he disagreed with the party's position on Turkish accession (his electoral list later obtained nine seats at the subsequent national elections in November 2006). Still, in the campaign, the SP was by far the most active opponent of the Treaty.

As in France, discontent with the government – a coalition government led by Jan Peter Balkenende featuring CDA, VVD and D66 representatives – played a significant role in the negative vote (Taggart 2006). However, this discontent focused mainly on the pro-European policy of the national political elites. It signalled the end of the permissive consensus in the Netherlands, and questioned the benefits of European integration. In the Dutch hegemonic vision, Europe is constructed mainly as an economic project that should be supportive of the open economy of the Netherlands. Doubts were cast about the benefit of European integration. The leftist opposition criticized the dominant vision from an economic point of view, as the expression of a neoliberal project detrimental to the working class in the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe, while the rightist opposition criticized it from a cultural point of view, with Turkish accession and more generally the position of Islam in Europe featuring heavily. Again, competing visions of 'Europe' – social or neoliberal, Christian or multid denominational – played a complex role in debates around the referendum.

The turnout in June 2005 was unexpectedly high (63%) with a large majority rejecting the Treaty (61.5%). Motives mentioned in exit polls were dissatisfaction with the Netherlands net payment to the EU (62%), fear of loss of control (56%), loss of influence in Europe (55%), loss of identity (53%) and loss of autonomy (46%). The information provided to voters was considered to be poor (44%). Indeed, Dutch voters received only a very short summary of the main reforms, while French voters had each received a full copy of the Treaty. In addition, respondents were asked explicitly whether Turkish accession played a role: 22% said yes, 68% no (exit polls by Interview, quoted in Nijeboer 2005, p. 401; yes voters were also included).

The *Flash Eurobarometer* held in the Netherlands after the referendum shows similar results, except regarding Turkish accession. The top five reasons to vote 'No' were:

- (1) "lack of information" (32%)
- (2) "loss of national sovereignty" (19%)
- (3) "opposes the national government/certain political parties" (14%)
- (4) "Europe is too expensive" (13%)
- (5) "I'm against European construction/integration" (8%)

A mixture of reasons included dissatisfaction with the process, national scale issues, but also concern with the further advancement of the

European project. Widening and enlargement issues were not so prominent: “opposition to further enlargement” ranked 10<sup>th</sup> with 6% and “does not want Turkey in the European Union” only 21<sup>st</sup> with 3% (*Flash Eurobarometer 172*, p. 15).

By contrast, the top five reasons to vote ‘Yes’ were very oriented to issues to do with Europe:

- (1) “essential in order to pursue the European construction” (24%)
- (2) “strengthens the feeling of a European identity”(13%)
- (3) “strengthens the role of the Netherlands within the Union/in the world” (13%)
- (4) “essential for the smooth running of the European institutions”(12%)
- (5) “first steps towards/symbols of a political unification of Europe” (10%)

While widening issues were again not prominent (the reason “essential in order to manage the integration of the new member states in the EU” ranked 12<sup>th</sup> with 5%) (*Flash Eurobarometer 172*, p. 13), a more generalised feeling of supporting the further integration of Europe was important, as well as supporting a vision of a ‘European identity’. Political and institutional integration at EU level were highlighted, as was the Netherlands’ relationship to the EU. According to this poll, positive orientations towards European integration and visions of Europe were put forward to justify a positive vote, but such orientations were less often invoked to justify a negative vote.

After rejection of the Treaty, the Dutch Prime Minister concluded that he would defend three points in the EU: the Dutch should pay less; the Dutch should hand over less power; and integration should slow down. As in France, the political elite ruled out the idea of holding a second referendum. Paradoxically, politicians (most of them supporting the Treaty) were positive about the referendum, more positive than before, because it had stimulated widespread debate on European integration. This effect was confirmed in opinion polls: respondents in France and the Netherlands are clearly more knowledgeable about the Constitution than those in other Member States (for example *Eurobarometer 63*).

## Conclusion

In this paper, national-scale referenda to decide about the institutional future of the EU, and Europe more generally, were analysed as potential avenues for revealing contested cultural constructions of ‘Europe’ and their role in the political process. To some extent in the cases analysed in France and the Netherlands the referenda revealed dissatisfaction with national politics rather than debates about the EU and Europe. However, though the situation was not straightforward to interpret, the analysis has

revealed that complex competing visions of 'Europe' were produced and debated during these referenda.

The 2005 referenda were *de jure* about *deepening* the Union (the adoption of the Constitutional Treaty) but arguments about its enlargement and widening (the 2004 Eastern enlargement, the negotiation of accession with Bulgaria and Romania and the prospect of Turkish accession) played an important role in public debates and the motivations of voters. 'No' campaigners took the opportunity to voice their disagreement with the recent and upcoming enlargements. The point they brought to the fore was not so much the problematic relation between deepening and widening, but they showed that it is unconceivable to discuss the institutional framework of the EU without discussing its geographical scope. Opponents in both countries seized the opportunity to voice their discontent with the dominant vision of Europe and the representation of European integration as a smooth process of widening and deepening. These two dimensions show that both the delimitation of European identity against external others (in the 'East') and the delimitation of European identity against other territorial identities (national, regional or local) are widely disputed and that the elite visions embodied by the European Constitution did not gather enough popular support to be sanctioned democratically. The issues that surfaced in the 'No' campaigns about widening concerned fear of competition from cheap labour from and in the new Member States (through either immigration or delocalisation) in the French case; fear related to the increasing complexity of the EU, loss of national influence, and the costs of the EU in the Dutch case; and the opposition to Turkish accession in both cases.

Despite the historical importance of the culmination of European reunification in the 2004 enlargement, fifteen years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, it was not a prominent issue in the two 2005 referenda under study. This was largely irrelevant to the vision of Europe held by Dutch and French voters (as expressed in these opinion polls) in the sense that here they did not contest the 'European-ness' of Central and Eastern European countries, or celebrate it either, which contrasts with other discourses about 'Europe' which either emphasize their 'European-ness' or continue to cast them as the 'East'. The new Member States are mainly perceived in socio-economic terms and their accession is seen as an economic burden. However, 'Eastern' accession was seen as a threat to the nation-state through concern about the protection of jobs against labour migrants from the new Member States, the delocalization of jobs to the new Member States because of lower labour costs, economic costs due to financial support for the new poorer regions through EU structural funds, and the loss of influence in EU institutions. The new Member States were not perceived as former communist countries, but as neoliberal models against which Western European welfare arrangements should be protected. By contrast, the Islamic Other appeared to be a significant

Other to Europe. The possibility of Turkish accession, brought closer to reality with the then upcoming opening of negotiations, clearly reveals diverging conceptions of 'European-ness.'

The implications of the referenda results for 'Europe' were mixed (Sbragia 2006; Stefanova 2006). The deepening process was temporarily stopped by the negative results of the French and Dutch referenda of 2005. This did not apply to the widening process. The enlargement with Romania and Bulgaria proceeded on 1 January 2007. Negotiations with Turkey and Croatia went on less smoothly but that was related to other problems (respectively the International Criminal Court and Cyprus). The Member States eventually agreed on a new reform Treaty in December 2007 in Lisbon, a 'Constitution-lite.' Only one state organized a referendum to ratify this new treaty, Ireland, where referenda are mandatory for amendments to European treaties. The Irish rejected ratification on 12 June 2008 with a turnout of 53% and a 53% 'No' vote. Interestingly, widening issues were not provided as coding categories for reasons to vote 'Yes' or 'No' in the post-referendum opinion poll held in Ireland (*Flash Eurobarometer 245*, p. 19) so it is not known if Irish respondents considered these issues important in 2008, although they did not play a significant role in the Irish campaign (more important issues included security and defense, gay marriage, abortion and euthanasia).

Notwithstanding his activist presidency of the European Council (July-December 2008), current French President Sarkozy was not able to manufacture a solution to proceed with the deepening of the EU before the 2009 EP elections and the nomination of the new Commission. While negotiations to ensure the approval of Irish voters through a new referendum are ongoing and might be successful before this article is printed, the contested nature of Europe will remain a definite feature of the European integration project. A better understanding of the contestation of elite visions is necessary and needs to be contextualized in specific national contexts. Referenda have proved to be intense moments of political contestation in which cultural constructions of 'Europe' are both produced and play a role in the political decision-making process.

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### Notes

1. To monitor public opinion among EU citizens, the European Commission carries out numerous opinion polls called *Eurobarometer*. *Standard Eurobarometers* (held simultaneously in each of the Member States every six months) question people about the EU, its institutions and its policies. There are also

*Special Eurobarometers* addressing various topical issues ranging from climate change to Euro coins.

2. *Flash Eurobarometers* are shorter and timely on topical issues generally limited to one or a number of Member States. *Flash Eurobarometers* were held among the voting population after each referendum. Reports are available at: [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/index_en.htm)
3. Unfortunately, the list of pre-coded categories varies between different *Flash Eurobarometers*. Because the coding is done on the spot, it is also greatly dependent on the interpretation of the interviewer and his/her coding cannot be controlled. Moreover, no information is available about the category 'Others' that can contain a large proportion of responses, sometimes 20–25% of the respondents in the French case.

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