



# France and the EU: from opportunity to constraint

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# Introduction: France and the EU: from opportunity to constraint<sup>1</sup>

Emiliano Grossman

France's relationship with European integration is traditionally complex and characterized by regular ups and downs. Since the early days of European integration these relations have been punctuated by regular crises. The rejection of the Constitutional Treaty at the French referendum of 29 May appears to signal the beginning of a new phase. Yet this assertion is not self-evident. France has usually had contradictory and unstable attitudes towards European integration. In France, as elsewhere, European integration was subject to a 'permissive consensus'. European Union (EU) affairs were never central to political debates but neither governing parties nor major interest groups or public opinion were openly hostile to European integration. EU policy-making in France was limited to negotiations among political, economic and bureaucratic élites. Arguably this has changed since the early 1990s, as European integration has become a more salient political issue.

Decrypting the result of the French referendum on the European Constitution is not an easy task. Existing interpretations of the French 'no' present a great variety of factors. While some focus on long-term trends, others stress the importance of more immediate factors. Among those favouring more immediate factors, some have argued that there was no need for a constitution in the first place and that it could only confuse voters. Others, especially *in* France, have seen the 'no' as a vote against the incumbent government. While these latter factors are certainly important, this introduction will privilege more medium and long-term explanations. To some observers, the EU may no longer be perceived to be beneficial to France or to a majority of its population. There are many rationalist accounts in international relations or in electoral analysis that may support this explanation. A more constructivist explanation advances the view that the 'no' is the result of the inadequacy between the political discourse on the EU and political reality. The explanation that will be developed in this introduction combines several factors. The single most important change in relations between the EU and France has been the

sudden awakening of French public opinion to EU issues in the wake of the Maastricht Treaty ratification. The second crucial factor is the incapacity and/or unwillingness of French political leaders to accommodate a changing EU in domestic political discourse. Under these circumstances, the greater sensitivity of public opinion to EU issues has made French EU policy-making increasingly unpredictable. This is, thus, not a new problem but the European Constitution is the most prominent victim of this situation to date.

In the rest of this introduction I ask whether Europe has ceased to be instrumental in achieving French goals. I then explain how the European game has changed through the emergence of public opinion and voters as a fully-fledged actor in French EU policy-making. Finally, I draw some larger lessons from this discussion.

## I. INSTRUMENTAL EUROPE?

Europe has historically been instrumental in a variety of ways to French political élites. It has successively been used to solve domestic conflicts, push through structural reform and as a means of blame avoidance. The instrumentality of Europe has increasingly been challenged by various complementary changes. Successive enlargements have challenged France's central position in European integration. Moreover, the more supranational elements in European integration have clearly been more difficult to accommodate to some of France's institutional and political features than for many other member states.

### 1. French leadership in question

In the run-up to the referendum, several representatives of the 'yes camp' declared that the 'no' victory would lead to a decrease in French influence in EU affairs. This is in fact objectively true as the French share of votes would have significantly increased, thanks to the new treaty (Baldwin and Widgren 2004; Yatanagas and Tsebelis 2005). Indeed, since the EU at 12, i.e. before 1995, France has lost more than one-third of its voting power in the Council. Every enlargement naturally diminishes the relative vote shares of individual member states. The 2004 enlargement has had a devastating effect on French 'power'. The Nice Treaty was supposed to stop the loss of power by large states and anticipate the forthcoming enlargement under the leadership of Germany and France. Yet the final result increased their voting shares only marginally and the latest enlargement to Bulgaria and Romania has already brought shares back to before-Nice levels. The Constitutional Treaty, however, would have brought French votes back to their level after the 1995 enlargement, i.e. 11.6 per cent of votes as compared to 8.7 today (cf. Sauger *et al.* 2007: ch. 4).

Obviously, decision-making practice in the EU and in the Council can hardly be told by simply looking at formal decision-making rules. The question of French leadership in the EU clearly goes beyond simple questions of the relative

vote weightings. Successive enlargements have led to a general questioning of Franco-German leadership in the EU. Indeed, the new member states accept this leadership with difficulty, joining the group of 'small countries' that expressed their dissatisfaction at the Nice European Council in December 2001. The new members appear to have strong disagreements on substantial issues as the debates on the second Iraq War or on the Bolkestein Directive have shown.

Moreover, the Franco-German relationship was strained throughout the 1990s, as both states disagreed on an increasing number of issues, and in particular on the financing of the common agricultural policy (Cole, forthcoming). Yet the Convention has been characterized by a serious attempt to revive the Franco-German alliance. In fact, French officials had decided early on in favour of a 'German strategy', mainly as an alternative to the Nice Treaty negotiations. The result of the latter has come to be considered by most interested parties – the French included – as a failure. The new strategy implied considerable efforts and substantive concessions on formerly non-negotiable issues such as parity of votes with Germany (Jabko 2004: 282–3). The French 'no' may thus also have consequences on this dimension, as such close co-operation had been unheard of ever since the Kohl–Mitterrand period.

Finally, there has always been a particular vision of the 'Grande Europe' or 'Europe puissance' in France, i.e. a vision of Europe as a great power. This vision implies a proactive foreign policy that represents a real challenge to the US. It goes without saying that this foreign policy would and should be led by France. Europe was seen as an opportunity to recover French *grandeur* (Hayward 1996; Balme and Woll 2005). From that point of view the recent divisions on the Iraq War have clearly dealt a blow to this vision of Europe *and* of France in Europe. Negotiations on common foreign and security policy (CFSP) within the European Convention fell short of fulfilling French ambitions. Finally, as both these episodes illustrate, enlargement has clearly increased heterogeneity in the area of CFSP, thereby diminishing the chances for French leadership in this area. Yet foreign policy continues to be part of a rather large consensus in France across most major parties.

Under these circumstances, declining élite support or, at least, greater ambiguity among French political élites towards the EU, is hardly surprising. This may point to a major disappointment with regard to France's historical vision of European integration. This has in turn fuelled existing divisions on Europe within the major political parties on the right, at first, and on the left, more recently.

## 2. Smoothing structural reforms and avoiding blame

Beyond the question of leadership, Europe has been instrumental to France as an external incentive for reform. In particular, successive governments used Europe to impose painful structural reforms, without taking full responsibility.

Support for the single market and economic and monetary union (EMU) has responded to a variety of different and sometimes contradicting goals in French

politics. The restructuring of the French economy has always been central to those goals since the 'turn' in economic policy in 1983 (Hall 1986; Loriaux 1991). Thereafter, European integration has sometimes been presented as 'heroic' policy-making (Cohen 1992). But at least since the end of the 1980s, European integration has regularly been used to impose or accompany measures of liberalization. This has concerned a great variety of sectors ranging from financial services, to transport and most public utilities. EMU forced France to adopt strict financial discipline in the long term and to give up any attempt to steer monetary policy. The Stability and Growth Pact durably institutionalized the criteria of 'good governance' in economic policy set out by the Maastricht Treaty. Of course, as Howarth (2007) shows in this issue, in practice things have been more complicated.

Europe was, in fact, one of the most fundamental instruments of reform. It had and, to a lesser extent, continues to have substantial advantages. First, it is far away and not very well known. Much of its legislation is very technical and largely uncontroversial (Moravcsik 2002), though far from insignificant. Larger and more significant measures have been channelled through single market legislation, such as the liberalization of electricity markets and the opening of other public utilities to competition. As the procedure was never followed closely, this provided a 'European screen' to potentially unpopular measures. Second, even if those measures came to be known and picked up by the opposition, France's partners at the European Council were often ready to grant transitory measures or to accept longer transposition periods, such as on the already quoted liberalization of electricity markets (Eising and Jabko 2001; see also Bauby and Varone 2007). Moreover, changes were often slow enough to allow French firms or former public monopolies to prepare for EU-wide competition (Culpepper 2006).

And this is precisely from where the major problems stem. As the number of actors monitoring EU affairs increased, the signalling of EU issues and the government's ambiguity became more costly. Individual entrepreneurs started revealing hitherto secret or non-public bargaining strategies and package deals. These are becoming increasingly problematic as the life of international institutions becomes more exposed.<sup>2</sup>

## II. PUBLIC OPINION AND THE NEW RULES OF THE EUROPEAN GAME

The major recent change in France, and probably the single most important change in France–EU relations, has been the emergence of public opinion in debates on Europe in France. As has been shown by most in-depth studies, French policy-making with regard to the EU is an élite-dominated process with very little electoral salience (Lequesne 1993; Parsons 2003). Yet ever since the Maastricht Treaty, public and media attention to EU affairs has significantly increased.<sup>3</sup> This has had lasting consequences for EU policy-making in France.

There is an ongoing debate on how the European issue is affecting political cleavages. While some authors argue that the European issue can be absorbed by the party system with little or no effects (Mair 2000; Marks and Wilson 2000), others have argued that Europe does have the potential to profoundly restructure party competition in the member states (van der Eijk and Franklin 2004). In France, as elsewhere, anti-Europeanist parties have emerged since the Maastricht Treaty. Yet those parties have never obtained any significant votes except in European elections. Belot and Cautrès (2004) argue, however, that the EU dimension participates in the restructuring of the French political space, and it seems that the increasing anti-European sentiment has a stronger effect on voting behaviour in France than elsewhere (Andersen and Evans 2003).

In his contribution to this volume, Evans (2007) shows that people's perception of the EU's impact on social protection may be central to understanding attitudes towards European integration. Yet those perceptions are hardly unified and are unlikely, thus far, to generate any coherent political movement. It is precisely this uncertain political weight of the European issue that may explain why French Members of Parliament continue to leave EU policy-making largely to the government, as Grossman and Sauger (2007) show.

Yet Europe is far from absent from the French public sphere. The major consequence is heightened media and interest group attention to the impact of Europe. Given that the EU has had a strong effect on policy areas, organized societal actors of all kinds permanently monitor EU policy-making (Grossman and Saurugger 2004). As Saurugger's (2007) contribution shows, there is a great variety of reactions to European integration among those actors. And it is precisely the actors who are most anti-European who are most likely to use more contentious, and thus more visible, strategies of influence on EU issues. This confirms what happens in the party system, where especially anti-European parties pick up EU issues, while more pro-European parties tend to downplay the issue. This is also confirmed in the case of agriculture. Roederer-Rynning (2007) shows that farm lobbies continue to exert significant influence despite a stronger state and an increasingly hostile political environment. Here too, the persistence of a particular discourse appears to block significant change.

The European game has therefore become much more complicated for French political élites to play. Europe has often been used as a means of blame avoidance by government officials, as we have seen above. This has had lasting consequences for the EU: it has become increasingly difficult to picture it positively. As Schmidt (2007) explains in her contribution (see also Schmidt 2003), no political grouping in France has managed to develop an efficient 'communicative discourse' on Europe. Put differently, there is no legitimizing discourse of European integration adapted to the contemporary reality of the EU.

For the opponents of Europe and, to some extent, the opponents of the government in power, it has become simple to build on increasing anti-European sentiment to mobilize opinion at European elections or referendums. Moreover, different visions of Europe compete in the French political space. It appears that even a significant number of pro-European voters on the left voted against 'this

Europe', i.e. against a Europe considered to be too economic and not social enough (Brouard and Tiberj 2006). Blame avoidance and the use of Europe as a scapegoat have thus led to Europe being charged with all the real or supposed negative consequences of economic adjustment, welfare state reform and globalization.

In any case, it is unlikely that Jacques Chirac or the government of Jean-Pierre Raffarin were completely unaware of this. It is even probable that they would have preferred parliamentary ratification rather than ratification by referendum. However, once the idea of a referendum was made public, it was difficult for the government to stop this dynamic. Once the idea was launched by former president and Convention chair, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, it developed its own dynamic. Very rapidly, indeed, the major opposition leaders, but also members of the majority, publicly supported the idea of a referendum. The choice of the word 'constitution' by the Convention probably gave an in-built impetus in favour of a referendum to the new treaty (Saugeret *et al.* 2007).

Beyond the referendum, the other policy examples examined here present similar problems. Electricity liberalization is clearly caught between contradictory goals and an ambiguous political discourse (Bauby and Varone 2007). The discourse on 'gouvernance économique' suffers from a variety of diverging interpretations, as Howarth (2007) explains. Independent regulatory agencies have been set up in many different areas, but the actual strategies behind their creation differ significantly from those in the UK, as Thatcher (2007) shows. The will to soften the impact of liberalization and protect national champions led politicians to adopt specific strategies. This 'strategic ambiguity' finally remains a characteristic feature of EU policy-making in France, as most authors show.

### III. THE CURRENT MALAISE AND THE FUTURE OF FRANCE–EU RELATIONS

Much of the above analysis is shared by many observers and some political actors. Yet there are some signs that current ambiguities are likely to be resolved in the near future. The current malaise in France–EU relations is here to stay. At best, European integration will participate in a painful learning process. At worst, Europe will reinforce the already very strong 'cultural' cleavage in French politics, weakening at the same time the classical left–right dimension in French politics (Grunberg and Schweissguth 1997; Kriesi *et al.* 2006). In this perspective, European integration may become one of the major indicators of the 'crisis of representation' in France.

The contributions to this volume illustrate the current malaise and share a similar analysis of the current situation. There continues to be a large consensus in the political centre of the partisan system. Governmental, economic and bureaucratic élites continue to support European integration. Yet as EU policy-making becomes more exposed to public opinion, they have to learn to justify their decisions better. For the time being, however, they usually



choose to keep EU-related issues as far away from the political agenda as possible. During the presidential election campaign in March 2007, the EU was conspicuously absent from political debates, despite the 50th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome. The two major candidates, Nicolas Sarkozy and Ségolène Royal, have not made any significant declarations on Europe since October 2006. It is true that Nicolas Sarkozy addressed the EU issue almost immediately after his electoral victory. The idea of a shorter treaty that could be subject to parliamentary approval only has led to a rather positive appreciation in other European capitals. His stance on Turkey is rather softer than expected. At the same time, he has also signalled support to French farmers.

All in all, French contradictions and ambiguities are likely to continue to be a feature of EU policy-making. In the short and medium term, therefore, 'heroic' measures such as adopting a constitution or liberalizing services are likely to generate violent reactions, as they did in 2005. The alternative, which is apparently the path chosen by the new president, is piecemeal change without great salience. This may help France to continue implementing necessary reforms in several areas, without threatening the integration process as a whole. However, we have seen that it is precisely this kind of 'privatized' policy-making that has left politicians unprepared for 'socialized' policy-making, to use Schattschneider's terms (1960). In the long term, domestic politics and EU politics have to correspond better. Much of this, as Schmidt (2007) argues in the opening contribution, has to do with developing an adequate communicative discourse. But it also has to do with individual citizens learning interdependence.

The present volume tries to illustrate precisely those points. Earlier attempts to account for this relationship and its evolution have adopted either a very broad (Drake 2005) or a historical (Guyomarch *et al.* 1998) point of view. This volume deliberately chooses to confront large perspectives such as the discourse of political élites (Schmidt 2007) with detailed case studies on critical policy issues such as agriculture (Roederer-Rynning 2007), the Stability and Growth Pact (Howarth 2007) or the liberalization of electricity markets (Bauby and Varone 2007). It also focuses on more procedural changes related to the EU, such as the introduction of independent regulatory agencies (Thatcher 2007). It finally discusses the role of and the adjustment by specific actors: civil society (Saurugger 2007), public opinion (Evans 2007) and political institutions (Grossman and Sauger 2007). Parsons' (2007) concluding contribution gives a broader view of the Europeanization literature and of how France and the present contributions may feed into ongoing debates.

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## NOTES

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- 2 A similar point is made by Goldstein and Martin concerning negotiations at the WTO (Goldstein and Martin 2000).
- 3 The only previous event that generated comparable public attention was probably the European Defence Community in 1954 (Parsons 2003: 68ff.).

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