

FRANCE AFTER MAASTRICHT

By Michel Brulé

To understand the shock introduced into French politics by the September 20 referendum on ratification of the Maastricht Treaty, we need to recall a few central background facts.

- 1) Among the twelve E.E.C. countries, France is one of those where opinion most favors the principle of European unification: 70% to 75% of the French want to see the political unity of western Europe advanced.
- 2) By an overwhelming margin the political elites of France came together in urging a "Yes" vote. The last two presidents of the Republic, the last eight prime ministers, the heads of large businesses, writers, artists, the best known newspaper, radio, and television commentators, all favored ratification.
- 3) The amendments to the French constitution, required before the Maastricht Treaty could be adopted last spring, received the backing of 90% of the members of Parliament who voted.

A "No" vote was recommended only by the two parties whose vocation it is to protest—the Communists at one end of the political spectrum, and the National Front at the other (getting between them only a little over 20% of votes)—and by individuals in opposition to their own circle, such as Charles Pasqua and Philippe Seguin in the Gaullist family, Jacques Calvet, president of Peugeot Citroen, and the former Socialist minister Jean-Pierre Chevènement.

How could such a paradoxical situation arise then? Ratification at the start appeared to be a popular cause. But at the finish, France was split right down the middle.

Who Said No To Maastricht?

First of all, who are those French people who nearly capsized the Maastricht Treaty, after the warning shot fired by the Danes last June? Those who voted "No" are disproportionately farmers and workers, whereas managers, the professions, teachers, and businessmen were heavily in favor of Maastricht (Table 1). Those with the highest levels of formal educa-

tion also gave strong backing. Two-thirds of those who pursued their studies beyond the age of 21 said "Yes" to the treaty.

In terms of party ties, the "No" side got 90% of the votes of the Communists, and 90% of the extreme right. At the other pole, 80% of Socialists went with Mitterand in favor of Maastricht. Among supporters of the two major opposition parties, things were more muddled. However, a majority of the U.D.F.—led by Valéry Giscard D'Estaing—backed the treaty, while a majority of the R.P.R.—the Gaullist alliance—opposed it, even though the party's leader, Jacques Chirac, backed it (Table 2).

A Psychological Dividing Line

But the real dividing lines seem to have been psychological rather than political or sociological. The true boundary between the France which said "Yes" and the one which said "No" runs between those who look to their future with confidence, and those who are fearful about it. Given this, it becomes easier to understand why the outcome was so close. For those French people who live in anxiety, the coming together in favor of a "Yes" to Maastricht of the major parties of the left

TABLE 1
VOTE ON THE MAASTRICHT REFERENDUM BY OCCUPATION

	YES	NO
Farmer	38%	62%
Farm worker	30	70
Manual workers, non-farm	40	60
Lower white collar	47	53
Craft, small business	48	52
Big business, management	65	35
Liberal professions	66	34
Professor, scientist	71	29
Engineer, other technical occupations	67	33
Teacher	76	24
Health and social work	60	40
Not in labor force	54	46

Source: B.V.A. exit poll, September 20, 1992.

TABLE 2
VOTE BY PARTY PREFERENCE

	Yes	No
Extreme left	30%	70%
P.C.F. (Communist)	19	81
P.S. (Socialist)	78	22
Generation Ecologie	61	39
Verts (Greens)	57	43
U.D.F. (Union Democratique Française)	61	39
R.P.R. (Gaullists)	41	59
F.N. (National Front)	8	92
No Party	45	55

Source: B.V.A. exit poll, September 20, 1992.

and right, who have governed France for 20 years, altered the vote's meaning. The question was no longer whether one approved the text of the treaty (obscure enough to discourage the best efforts at understanding it), but whether one trusted the established leadership.

Public anxieties are growing. Twenty years ago, the unemployed in France numbered 300,000; today they are officially 3 million, not counting those benefiting from the so-called "social treatment of unemployment," for instance, early retirement. Knowing that among the tasks they have assigned to their government the French give the highest priority to improving the employment situation, one sees how difficult it will be to make them satisfied with the way the country is run. Other expectations are scarcely being better met. Purchasing power is stagnant, for example, and fear of crime has increased in both the cities and suburbs.

Rejection of The Established Leadership

We can thus understand how a cause as popular on paper as European unity could come to divide the country into equal halves—in spite or perhaps because of the near-unanimous support it obtained from the political elites. For some years now, the rift has been widening between the French people and their political rulers. Its symptoms include the increase of nonvoting, and the rise of the protest par-

ties. During the 1980s the traditional parties—Communists and Socialists on the left, Gaullists and U.D.F. on the right, have seen their "market share" go down from 90% of the vote to 60%. The ecologists and Le Pen's National Front have benefited from their decline.

The failure to bring new blood into the leadership of the major parties, and the substantial removal of most differences in ideas and programs among them—since the Socialists were converted to the market economy—are the most frequently advanced explanations of why the established major parties are in retreat.

But this time, the no confidence vote of September 20 was not addressed only to the political leaders. The whole establishment had joined the political leaders in trying to sell the French on the merits of the Maastricht Treaty.

The way the European Community's bureaucracy works in Brussels also contributed to the opposition to the treaty. The leading voices in France in favor of the European cause— Jacques Delors, president of the Brussels Commission, and Simone Veil, ex-president of the European Parliament—were so amazed by attacks on their conception of Europe during the campaign that their irritation bordered on intolerance. They might have been better advised to blame the opacity of the Community's institutions, where everything is discussed in expert commit-

tees, from whose debates little ever filters out. On a subject as crucial as common agricultural policy, the public never was informed of the reasons and circumstances which led to changing a policy which had proved too burdensome for the Community's finances. Those technocratic methods have exasperated farmers.

We should also ask about the role of the European Parliament, a "trompe l'oeil" parliament, without the power either to propose or vote laws, to vote the budget of the Community, or to control the actions of the de facto executive, the Brussels Commission.

With a few weeks' hindsight, it's now hard to understand how the Maastricht debate could have given rise to so much passion. The prime objective of the Treaty was the creation of a single currency, a symbol of advancing political unity. Today, the European monetary system, with its more modest ambitions, has been shattered, with deep changes in exchange rates for the pound, the lira, and the peseta. The Brussels Commission, whose voice had been getting louder and louder since 1985, is now trying to appear more discreet—and be forgotten. Germany, the economic locomotive of Europe, is reproached by all her partners for interest rates which doom them to deflation. The lack of sufficient popular control over the institutions of the European Community is deplored by all.

At the national political level, were there any victors in the Maastricht vote? The president of the Republic has seen his popularity rise a little, but his goal of durably dividing the right-wing opposition has not been achieved. The opposition will go to the March 1993 legislative elections in a position of strength.

The Gaullist leader, Jacques Chirac, saw his recommendation of a "Yes" vote rejected by a majority of Gaullist voters. Still, he managed after the vote to bring back into the fold his party's chief dissi-

dents, Charles Pasqua and Philippe Seguin. And his support of the "Yes" side safeguards his chances with the center voters, who count for so much in a presidential election run-off ballot.

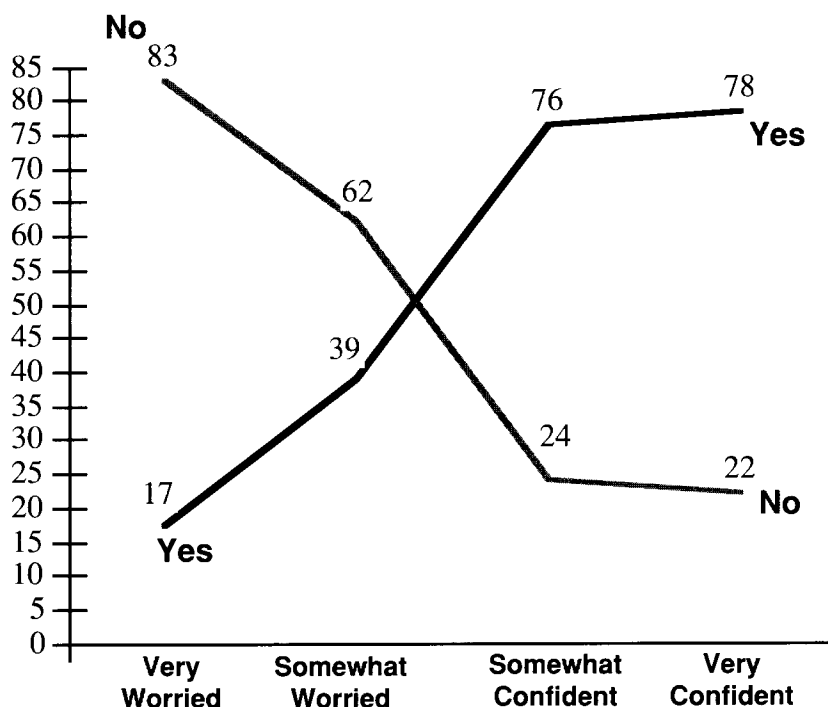
The People Win

The great merit of the intense political debate instigated in France by the referendum of September 20 is that it has brought out in the open all the imperfections of the European construction. It has reminded the political leadership that a

great project of this nature cannot be elaborated successfully without the informed consent of the people. Given this, the true victor in this vote may perhaps be said to be Charles de Gaulle. He banked on a recourse to referendum to maintain contact between government and governed, thus avoiding any drift towards bureaucratic or technocratic rule.

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THE VOTE AND CONFIDENCE IN THE FUTURE



Question: Thinking about your situation, personal and professional, in the future, are you very worried, somewhat worried, somewhat confident, or very confident?

Source: B.V.A. exit poll, September 20, 1992.