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**A World Waits as France Weighs Vote:
Sunday's decision on EU's new charter could ripple through Europe and
be felt here in the United States**

by Michael Mandelbaum

The most important vote in Europe this year, and perhaps in many years, will take place Sunday, when the French public will decide whether to ratify a new constitution for the European Union.

The constitution changes several of the EU's governing procedures to make it easier to operate with the 25 members it now has, enhances the power of the EU parliament and creates an EU foreign minister. Polls show that despite the almost unanimous support of the country's political establishment and business community, the French people are evenly divided on the issue.

All 25 EU members must ratify the constitution, so a defeat Sunday would prevent it from taking effect. But a no vote could have far wider consequences than that, and for Americans as well as Europeans. What happens in Europe is important to Americans in the 21st century, as it was in the 20th.

The constitution's French opponents do not object to any of its specific provisions: Indeed, few have actually read the 60,000-word document. Instead, those who reject it have a variety of other reasons for doing so.

Some want to punish the government of President Jacques Chirac, which presides over a slow-growing economy with high unemployment. Others hope that a vote of no will prevent the successful completion of the negotiations that the EU has begun with Turkey to admit that country as a full member. Still others fear that ratification would pave the way for the reduction of the social-welfare benefits and social and economic regulations, and the strengthening of free-market policies, in the countries of the EU, including France.

Curiously, the constitution is unpopular in Great Britain for the opposite reason - the widespread belief that it gives too much encouragement to the imposition of regulations and high taxes in Europe. Prime Minister Tony Blair has promised to hold a referendum on the constitution next year. The Netherlands votes on it on June 1, three days after the French. But France is different. It is larger than the Netherlands and far more important for the EU than Great Britain, which has always had mixed feelings about its membership. By contrast, France has been the driving force behind the process of European

economic and political unification, which began immediately after World War II and ultimately created the EU and which the EU constitution is designed to further.

A French no vote on Sunday would therefore be widely interpreted not merely as a rejection of this particular document, but as a vote of no confidence in the EU itself and in the process of European unity that it embodies. A no vote would not only bring that process to at least a temporary halt, it could also send it into reverse, jeopardizing the economic and political ties that have brought the once-hostile countries of Europe closer together in political and economic terms than ever before.

The French foreign minister has said that rejecting the constitution would lead to a "political breakdown" in the EU. The former president of the EU's main administrative body, the European Commission, has said that a no vote would provoke "the fall of Europe."

The United States has no influence on the French vote, but it does have a stake in its outcome. To the extent that the constitution, if ratified, will fulfill the goal of some Europeans to create a European superstate that can act as an international rival to the United States, its rejection would not be a loss for Americans. Chirac, in fact, has claimed that the American government fears the constitution because its ratification would create a stronger Europe.

In fact, a vote against ratification would not necessarily serve the interests of the United States, to which the decades-long process of European unification has brought major benefits. That process has helped to establish peace and prosperity on the European continent. The EU has served as a vehicle for extending free markets to the formerly communist countries of central and eastern Europe.

A Europe in disarray would risk losing some of these achievements, and that would not benefit the United States. So if the French do reject the constitution, the American interest is for the EU to find some way to regroup and avoid the undoing of the 60-year work of bringing the countries of Europe closer economically and politically, which has served both Europe and the United States so well.

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