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GETTING TO 'YES' IN EUROPE

By Jeremy Rifkin

BEWARE OF first impressions, especially when it comes to European political debate. Yes, the French and Dutch public have dealt a mighty blow to the prospect of a binding constitution for all of Europe, casting doubt on the future of the European Dream. But the French and Dutch vote on the constitution was complicated, as is usually the case with European politics. Clearly, the far right was successful in mobilizing the anti-immigrant and nationalist sentiment by arguing that a united Europe would mean opening up the floodgates to cheap foreign labor and encourage an unwelcome onslaught of Muslim immigrants. More eurocentrism would also mean a rethinking of French and Dutch sovereignty and influence, both on the continent and in the world. No surprises.

The Socialist vote, on the other hand, was more interesting, especially in France, and suggests the possibility, at least, that the European Dream, far from being dimmed, may be entering a new stage of maturation, with profound implications for the future of Europe. Many French socialists say they voted "no" on the constitution, not because they favored a looser Europe, but rather a more integrated Europe. They feared that the constitution put too much emphasis on the go-it-alone, liberal, winner-take-all Anglo-American market model at the expense of undermining the vision of a cohesive European social-market economy based on the European Dream of inclusivity, cultural diversity, quality of life, maintaining an adequate social net, sustainable development, social and universal human rights, and peace.

While the new constitution would facilitate market reforms, already agreed to by the French and every other EU member state as far back as the signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 nothing new here the treaty makes clear that Europe's commitment to a social-market economy is set in stone and is, indeed, the heart and soul of the European political experiment.

But something far more important occurred last week. The French and Dutch vote marked the beginning of the Europeanization of politics, at the grassroots level. France, especially, became a giant classroom on the future of Europe. Millions of French citizens debated each other across class lines and generations, stretching from the cosmopolitan bowels of Paris to the most remote rural regions.

For nearly 50 years, the European Union has been the exclusive political playing field of the European elite. The public was rarely brought into the discussion. A kind of morbid paternalism marked the political machinations that opened up the vast European continent, establishing the first transnational governing experiment in all of history.

Now, the French and Dutch citizenry have captured the political ball, making European

politics a people's sport.

The critical question now is whether the French enthusiasm, in particular, was just a momentary venting of political frustration, as some analysts suggest, or the first stirrings of a European grassroots political consciousness. Here's the litmus test. Many socialists, trade unionists, and civil society leaders argued before the vote that a "no" vote would open up a great popular conversation across Europe about how best to advance a social-market economy and create a more unified Europe, one befitting the grandeur of the European Dream. If, however, the "no" vote was more about political jockeying and positioning to advance the domestic political agenda of special interest groups and parties, and the personal fortunes of political leaders, then expect the European dialogue to fade.

My own suspicion is that now that the French and Dutch citizenry have jumped head-long into European politics, there may be no turning back. They find themselves in an untenable political vacuum of their own making. Where do they go from here? Do the French and Dutch people really believe that their children's future prosperity and happiness rests in falling back into the stifling confines of the little French and Dutch national containers, or in creating an expansive, open European continent with vast new opportunities to live out the European Dream?

If, however, many French and Dutch parents voted no because they want to ensure that a larger, more integrated, Europe stays true to the principles of a social-market economy, then they are obligated to push forward a European political agenda that can make their hopes a reality. If they fail to own their "no" decision by advancing a stronger vision for Europe, then the real casualty of May 29 will not be the constitution, but rather their children's future.

Finally, lest we prematurely write off the French and Dutch "no" vote as the beginning of the end for a greater European political experiment, remember that it took America nearly 100 years, and a bloody civil war, before our own Constitution was fully accepted by the citizens of very diverse and often differing states. Patience is the name of the game.

Jeremy Rifkin is the author of "The European Dream: How Europe's Vision of the Future is Quietly Eclipsing the American Dream. "

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