



**European Parties Elections  
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## **REFERENDUM BRIEFING PAPER NO 13**

### **THE DUTCH REFERENDUM ON THE RATIFICATION OF THE EUROPEAN CONSTITUTIONAL TREATY**

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#### **Key Points**

- The Dutch electorate voted massively to reject the European Constitutional Treaty (61.5% 'No'; 39.5% 'Yes')
- The 'Yes' camp, which included both the government and much of the opposition, failed to mount a convincing campaign. Supporters of the Treaty did not establish a clear agenda and further committed multiple gaffes during the campaign.
- A highly diverse 'No' camp, conversely, proved effective at exploiting the distinctive dynamics of a referendum campaign. A diffuse sense of European integration having gone 'too far, too fast' and the rejection of a European 'superstate' found an unexpected resonance with Dutch voters.
- The referendum will likely mark a significant turning point in Dutch European policy, while more sharply articulated Eurosceptic tendencies are also likely to find clearer expression in the national political arena.

#### **Introduction**

On 1 June 2005, the Dutch electorate voted massively to reject the European Union Constitutional Treaty in a national consultative referendum. The 'No' vote attained 61.5%, on a 63.3% turn-out. The Netherlands thus became, after France, the second EU founding member state to vote down the Treaty in a matter of days. The Dutch also appeared to have sounded a death knell for the Treaty itself, at least in the sense

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that a return to the electorate with the same text, after so decisive a rejection, would seem excluded.<sup>1</sup>

The massive rejection came in the face of almost unanimous establishment support for the European Constitution. The three parties in the current governmental coalition (the Christian Democrats, the Liberals and Democrats '66) all supported the Treaty, as did two of the main opposition parties (the Labour Party and GreenLeft). Together, the parties in favour of the Treaty represented 85% of the seats in the lower house of the Dutch parliament. The Treaty further enjoyed the backing of the major trade unions and employers' organisations.

The overwhelming 'No' vote also came despite the maintenance of comparatively high levels of support for the wider project of European integration in national public opinion. Eurobarometer survey data reports that 76% of Dutch respondents view the European Union as a 'good thing' (the third highest score across the 25 member states), while 59% of Dutch respondents see their country as having 'benefited' from EU membership (tenth highest).<sup>2</sup>

At first glance, there is consequently something of a puzzle as to why the Dutch rejected the Constitutional Treaty in such a decisive fashion. As detailed below, the immediate reasons for this rejection are to be found in the dynamics of the campaign itself. Finding themselves on the unfamiliar terrain of a referendum campaign, the major actors in the 'Yes' camp initially failed to set the terms of debate and, subsequently, sought to redress the situation in a manner which appeared only to increase the alienation of an electorate already inclined towards a protest vote. The issues raised and the dynamics displayed in the immediate context of the campaign must, nonetheless, also be situated relative to longer-term trends in national politics and to the emergence of wider Eurosceptic tendencies in the Netherlands over the course of the past decade. This broader contextualisation is briefly provided in the conclusion, after having first surveyed the contours of the referendum campaign itself.

### **The Institutional Framework**

The referendum of 1 June 2005, the first such consultation in modern Dutch political history, was the product of a parliamentary initiative. The first proposal for a national consultative referendum on the eventual outcome of the European constitutional process was made by the Labour Party MP Frans Timmermans in November 2002. The initial Timmermans motion, which followed closely on the heels of a highly charged parliamentary debate on EU enlargement, was unsuccessful. Yet, support continued to grow for a European referendum in the Netherlands. The idea was again taken up after the January 2003 parliamentary election. A new motion for the holding of a consultative referendum was put forward in May 2003 by MPs from three parties: Farah Karimi of GreenLeft, Niesco Dubbelboer of the Labour Party (PvdA), and Boris van der Ham of the Democrats '66. The grouping in support of the referendum thus brought together two of the main opposition parties (GreenLeft and Labour) with the smallest of the parties in the newly formed governmental coalition (Democrats '66). The express intention of the three MPs was that of stimulating a higher profile

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<sup>1</sup> The Dutch government has withdrawn the bill which would be necessary for ratification of the Treaty and indicated that it will not bring it back before parliament.

<sup>2</sup> Eurobarometer 62, December 2004. Available at: [http://europa.eu.int/comm/public\\_opinion/archives/eb/eb62/eb62first\\_en.pdf](http://europa.eu.int/comm/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb62/eb62first_en.pdf)

national debate on European issues and, through an anticipated positive result, enhancing the legitimacy of the European project.

The tripartite proposal for a referendum was not guaranteed of securing a parliamentary majority. Among the remaining opposition parties, the motion had support from both the left-wing Socialist Party (SP) and the small remnant of the Pim Fortuyn List (LPF), but was opposed by the two small Christian parties (the Christian Union and the Political Reformed Party). As regards the remaining governmental parties, the Christian Democrats (CDA) were resolutely opposed to the holding of a consultation, while the Liberals (VVD) initially appeared markedly divided. It was consequently the Liberal Party which held the key to the parliamentary equation – and which, under the influence of party leader Jozias van Aartsen, ultimately lent decisive support to the referendum proposal. It is noteworthy, however, that the Liberal group in the upper house of the Dutch parliament continued to express misgivings about the process until a very late stage in the debate. As a consequence, the final approval for the referendum legislation was given by the Dutch Senate only on 25 January 2005.

The legislation, which created a ‘one-off’ framework for the holding of the vote, was principally concerned with the establishment of an Independent Referendum Commission. The Referendum Commission was charged with three tasks. In consultation with the relevant minister (the Minister for Administrative Reform in the Ministry of the Interior), it was to set the date for the vote. It was also to prepare a summary of the Constitutional Treaty for distribution to all voters and to distribute subsidies totalling one million euros to campaigning groups (to both proponents and opponents of the Treaty, as well as to those seeking to provide ‘neutral’ information). The Commission’s five members were appointed by parliament on 8 February, and the date for the Dutch vote was fixed towards the end of that month. The Commission itself appeared to have a clear preference for a relatively late date – with 29 June having been reported in the national press. Nonetheless, under pressure from the Interior Ministry, an earlier date was ultimately chosen, and the referendum was announced for 1 June.

As is already apparent from this brief account of events, the establishment of the institutional framework for the referendum was very much a matter of ‘learning by doing’, in which the exact contours of the process only gradually became clear. The process as a whole also took place within a relatively compressed calendar, there being a span of only four months between the definitive adoption of the necessary legislation and the holding of the vote. The creation of this wholly novel form of consultation on the Dutch political landscape thus demanded a rapid process of adaptation on the part of the nation’s principal political actors – an adaptation which in many instances was significantly not forthcoming.

The inexperience of the national political elite with referendums proved to be a significant shaping factor of the dynamics of the campaign. The referendum was read – wrongly – through the prism of parliamentary election campaigns. The assumption appears to have been made by the government, and by the main pro-Treaty parties, that the campaign would be won or lost in its final stage – essentially its final two weeks. Yet, while this ‘final push’ corresponds to a certain logic in the case of legislative elections, where voters are confronted with a familiar range of parties and choices, it does not readily translate to the different context of a referendum

campaign. The government and the main parties clearly underestimated the extent of the investment required to give structure to this very different political space, in which voters would not necessarily respond to traditional cues. They also did not adequately account for the potentially polarising effects of a referendum campaign; the logic of a stark, binary choice between only a ‘Yes’ or a ‘No’ stands in sharp contrast to the more complex dynamics of a long-established multiparty electoral marketplace.

Beyond the dynamics arising from a general unfamiliarity with referendums, the distribution of institutional roles further appears to have been a source of difficulty. The government, at least until the final stages of the campaign, never fully assumed ownership of the referendum process. Here, it is apparent that the origin of the referendum, as a parliamentary initiative adopted over the opposition of the largest governmental party, played a role. The government showed a marked reluctance to assume the leading role in the campaign which one would normally have expected, given that it had already, quite literally, signed up to the agreement concerned. While the State Secretary for European Affairs, Atzo Nicolaï, early on took a leading role in the ‘Yes’ campaign, efforts to bring together a broader and higher profile government campaign for ratification repeatedly – and, on occasion, quite publicly – failed to come to fruition. As a consequence, a clear, coherent government message did not emerge. This general co-ordination problem seems, moreover, to have been further aggravated by an ultimately unsuccessful division of responsibilities between the Foreign and the Interior Ministries for the running of the campaign (the former spearheading the government’s ‘Yes’ campaign, while the latter was to concentrate on turn-out).

Finally, in dealing with the institutional framework, the ‘consultative’ character of the referendum must also be briefly mentioned. Formally, as there is no provision in Dutch constitutional law that would allow for the holding of a binding referendum, the vote could only provide ‘advice’ to the national parliament. In practice, however, a consensus progressively emerged amongst almost all of the main political parties that the result would be respected, provided in some cases that particular thresholds of support/opposition or turn-out were crossed. As they went to the polls on 1 June, Dutch voters could thus reasonably presume that their verdict would have politically binding consequences, even if this did not correspond to the strict legal form of the consultation.

### **The Campaign**

The initial stages of the campaign were characterised by an extended ‘phoney war’. From the formal decision to proceed with the vote at the end of January until mid-April, the Dutch referendum, in sharp contrast to the parallel, high-profile debate in France, generated little political or media interest. By the middle of April, commentators both in the Netherlands and abroad had, indeed, begun to focus on the ‘non-debate’ itself as an issue. Yet, it was also at this time that polls began to indicate the serious possibility of a ‘No’ vote, prompting a more active engagement with the issue by national political elites. The last two weeks of April saw the emergence of a somewhat higher-profile campaign on the part of the government, symbolically joined on May Day by the opposition Labour Party. This renewed effort, however, then subsided for a two-week period, which coincided with Queen Beatrix’s silver jubilee and a mid-session parliamentary recess. The ‘Yes’ campaign picked up again only during the final two weeks leading up to the 1 June poll.

The failure by the ‘Yes’ campaign to engage with the issue at an early stage and on a sustained basis proved very costly. The terms of the debate which emerged were largely set by the Treaty’s opponents, who had moved relatively quickly to fill the political space which the main establishment parties had created through accepting the referendum, but then effectively left vacant. In consequence, when the ‘Yes’ campaign finally mobilised, it had to do so principally by way of a refutation of the arguments against the Constitutional Treaty which had already begun take hold in national public opinion. This general problem was further compounded by a series of miscues and misstatements, as Treaty supporters appeared to resort to a (resolutely counterproductive) strategy of delegitimising a ‘No’ vote by (over)dramatising its consequences. Reflecting this dynamic, the analysis below first looks at the different strands of the ‘No’ campaign, before turning to the ultimately failed response mounted by the government and the main establishment parties.

### *The ‘No’ Campaign*

The ‘No’ camp was something of a ‘patchwork of protest’, encompassing a wide range of differing and often contradictory objections to the Constitutional Treaty. The three main strands in the campaign were represented by a ‘populist left’, a ‘populist right’, and the small, traditional Protestant parties. As such, they formed a relatively typical coalition of Eurosceptic forces, drawing together the parties on the relative margins of the party system, for whom an opposition to European integration forms part of a more general opposition to (or at least distance from) the political establishment in general. Beyond this general dynamic of protest, the variety of oppositions to the Constitutional Treaty also proved compatible (if not consistent) on more narrowly defined grounds. In effect, all the major players in the ‘No’ campaign stressed the need for more tightly defined limits to be placed on the European integration project, portrayed as posing an increasing threat to core elements of both national interest and national identity. In the present context, it effectively mattered little that the parties concerned often had radically different understandings of what those interests or identities might be. The overall message could readily, if rather superficially cohere as one that Europe had gone ‘too far, too fast’ – and that a ‘No’ vote would restrain the (further) development of a European ‘superstate’.

The campaign on the left was led by the Socialist Party. The Socialists, in part, returned to fairly traditional themes in their opposition to the Constitutional Treaty. They continued to mark their opposition to the market-driven and ‘asocial’ character of the European integration process, as well as warning against moves towards the creation of a ‘hard core’ European army. Yet, the party appeared on this occasion to place rather more emphasis on a ‘nationalist’ discourse. In part, this focused on the protection of distinctive Dutch social policy choices. For the Socialists, the ‘crown jewels’ of a distinctive and progressive Dutch national identity – gay marriage, soft drugs policy, and euthanasia – were potentially placed under threat by growing European intervention. The Socialist Party further appealed to broader concerns about the possible loss of Dutch national identity in an enlarging Europe, evoking the threat that the Netherlands would be reduced to a ‘province’ of a European ‘superstate’. In probably the most effective media image of the campaign, a party poster showed a map of Europe which extended well beyond the present eastern boundaries of the European Union, but from which the Netherlands had, quite literally, disappeared into the ocean. The poster, under the slogan ‘The Netherlands

off the Map' (*Nederland van de kaart*), graphically captured a diffuse sense of anxiety in terms which struck a chord well beyond the party's own natural constituency.

A different set of oppositions were to be found on the right of the political spectrum, though here too the theme of the Netherlands being reduced to a 'province' of a European 'superstate' was strongly canvassed. Opponents of the Constitutional Treaty on the right included the Pim Fortuyn List and the Geert Wilders Group, as well as the conservative Edmund Burke Foundation<sup>3</sup> and the newsweekly *Elsevier*.<sup>4</sup> Within this constellation, it was Geert Wilders who assumed the most prominent role, despite having to campaign under heavy security. Wilders, who had left the Liberal Party in September 2004 to found his own political movement,<sup>5</sup> sketched out his European agenda as part of his February 2005 personal manifesto (*Onafhankelijkheidsverklaring*). In this document, he argued that the Netherlands should adopt a 'semi-detached' position within the Union, securing both a swathe of policy opt-outs and a dramatic reduction in the national contribution to the EU budget. Wilders further marked his virulent opposition to Turkish EU membership, encapsulated in the stark affirmation: 'Turkey in, the Netherlands out'. Wilders' campaign against the Constitutional Treaty echoed the same themes. His campaign literature highlighted the voting weight which the Treaty would potentially give to an 'Asiatic, Islamicist' Turkey within the EU, while also arguing that with the adoption of the text the Netherlands would lose control over its immigration policy. The Wilders campaign thus contributed to a more general climate of concern over the preservation of a distinctive Dutch identity and Dutch sovereignty – in this variant summarised by the slogan 'The Netherlands must remain!' (*Nederland moet blijven!*).

The final major strand in the 'No' campaign was made up of the two small Protestant parties. Both the Christian Union (CU) and the Political Reformed Party (SGP), though opposing referendums on principle, nevertheless actively engaged in the campaign against the Constitutional Treaty. The objections of both parties to the Treaty reflected, in part, a specifically confessional dimension. They were sharply critical of the Treaty's failure to give explicit recognition to Europe's 'Judeo-Christian heritage', in contrast to the reference which it makes to the humanist traditions of the Enlightenment. More generally, the two Protestant parties opposed the Treaty on the basis that it marked a further erosion of the space within which distinctive national policy choices could be made (even, apparently, where they might oppose the choices actually made in the domestic arena). In the particular case of the Christian Union, this opposition assumed a notably moderate tone, with the party campaigning under the slogan 'Europe, OK; this Constitution, No'. The Christian

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<sup>3</sup> The Burke Foundation was responsible for putting together one of the rare books on the Constitutional Treaty to appear during the Dutch referendum campaign. See Bart Jan Spruyt (ed.), *Samen zwak: pleidooien tegen de Europese Grondwet* (Amsterdam: Polpam, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> The magazine resolutely nailed its colours to the mast in its 16 April 2005 issue, which featured a cover story on 'Why No is better than Yes'. The accompanying story placed particular emphasis on the immigration issue, arguing that the adoption of the Constitutional Treaty would lead to a further loss of control by the national government in this sensitive policy area.

<sup>5</sup> The immediate reason for Wilders' break with the Liberal Party was a disagreement over the question of support for Turkish EU membership. Wilders' departure, however, also followed a more general growth of tensions arising from his attempts to impart a more 'rightward course' on Dutch liberalism.

Union did not, however, fail to evoke the spectre of the ‘superstate’, in specific connection with the continued development of an EU foreign policy.

### *The ‘Yes’ Campaign*

The ‘Yes’ campaign, as previously indicated, was significantly shaped as a response to the ‘No’. In particular, proponents of the Treaty felt the need to invest substantial energy in dealing with the theme of the ‘superstate’ and the more general sense of a European integration process which was proceeding ‘too far, too fast’. The case was insistently made that the Constitutional Treaty, rather than marking a further or decisive advance in the process of Europe integration, could instead be seen as placing significant, new limits on the powers of EU institutions.

The sensitivity of this issue for the ‘Yes’ camp was perhaps most interestingly revealed through a dispute which surfaced not between the ‘Yes’ and the ‘No’ sides, but rather between the government and the Independent Referendum Commission. The official summary of the Constitutional Treaty produced by the Referendum Commission contained the (unqualified) statement that one of the innovations introduced by the Treaty was the principle that ‘EU law takes precedence over the law of the member states’.<sup>6</sup> Legally, this affirmation is contestable, as the provision largely serves to codify a long-established jurisprudential principle. Politically, however, it immediately rang alarm bells, as the government feared that it might further stoke public anxieties over the erosion of national sovereignty. A relatively sharp, public exchange took place between the European State Secretary, Atzo Nicolai and the Chairman of the Referendum Commission, Professor C.A.J.M. Kortmann. It also became known, shortly after the conclusion of the campaign, that considerable pressure had been (unsuccessfully) applied within the Interior Ministry to scrap the official summary altogether, so as not to have to deal with the offending passage.

In the wider campaign, prominent figures in the ‘Yes’ camp repeatedly refuted the argument that the Treaty would mark a further expansion of EU powers. For example, Prime Minister Balkenende, in one of his first major interventions of the campaign, explicitly took to task the ‘superstate argument’, labelling it as ‘crazy’. The Prime Minister emphasised, on the contrary, that ‘This Treaty is the first European treaty which, precisely, offers the possibility of lessening the degree of interference (*bemoeienis*) from Brussels’.<sup>7</sup> Later in the campaign, Balkenende again returned to the theme, seeking to reassure his compatriots that nothing in the Treaty posed a threat to the distinctive characteristics of Dutch society: ‘Our national feeling (*Oranjevoel*) remains, as does our national identity’.<sup>8</sup>

Much the same terms were also used in defence of the Treaty by Labour leader Wouter Bos. Bos, like Balkenende, stressed the various ways in which the Treaty could be seen as limiting European-level interference in national life. He was further particularly concerned to refute the ‘left nationalist’ arguments of the Socialist Party – stressing that distinctive Dutch policy choices in the areas highlighted by the Socialists would not be put under threat by the adoption of the text. As Bos put it:

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<sup>6</sup> The full text of the Referendum Commission Summary is available via the site below:

<http://www.referendumeuropesegrondwet.nl/contents/pages/42500/samenvattingreferendmcommissie.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Interview with the *NRC Handelsblad*, 28 April 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with the *Algemeen Dagblad*, 28 May 2005.

‘Europe will not become a superstate, it [the Treaty] is not a dictate from the larger countries. On the contrary, this Treaty, for the first time, sets out the areas over which the EU has no say. We will continue to decide ourselves on abortion, euthanasia, and gay marriage’.<sup>9</sup>

Beyond the assumption of a largely defensive posture relative to the arguments established by the Treaty’s opponents, the ‘Yes’ camp further came to be defined in the public mind by a series of high-profile gaffes. Supporters of the Treaty appeared particularly inclined to (over) dramatise the stakes of the referendum – suggesting, in terms which had little intrinsic credibility with the majority of voters, that a ‘No’ vote would directly compromise the peace and prosperity of the post-war period. The first major public statement of this type was made in mid-April by the Christian Democrat Justice Minister, Piet Hein Donner. Donner expressed his fears that a rejection of the Treaty could lead Europe as a whole down the path of a violent disintegration, akin to that experienced by Yugoslavia. At this time, other members of the government, notably Foreign Minister Ben Bot, tried to dampen such talk of a possible ‘crisis’. Nevertheless, as the polls began decisively to turn towards a ‘No’ in the final stage of the campaign, the possible ‘threats’ supposedly entailed by a ‘No’ vote were invoked with increasing frequency by the pro-Treaty camp. Economic Affairs Minister Laurens Jan Brinkhorst commented that a ‘No’ vote would see ‘the lights go out in the Netherlands’. In a slightly different vein, Foreign Minister Bot himself publicly speculated that a ‘No’ vote would directly produce an ‘economic dip’, as the Netherlands would appear a less creditable investment destination. Prime Minister Balkenende made – a heavily criticised - use of memorial events surrounding the Liberation to make the case for a ‘Yes’. It was, nonetheless, perhaps the Dutch Liberal Party (VVD) delegation in the European Parliament which went the furthest in this direction, releasing – and then withdrawing within a matter of hours – a video which made the case for the dangers of a ‘No’ vote against the background of scenes depicting the Holocaust, Srebrenica, and the 2004 Madrid bombings.

The overall impact of these interventions was unmistakably negative; they gave the impression of a political establishment which had panicked and was now seeking merely to delegitimize a ‘No’ vote in the face of an unexpected degree of opposition. This impression was, moreover, reinforced by a series of still further unfortunate remarks in which various prominent supporters of the Treaty appeared to cast into doubt the legitimacy of the referendum process itself. Economic Affairs Minister Brinkhorst publicly suggested that holding a referendum on this issue was a ‘bad idea’, citing low levels of public knowledge about the Treaty. Labour leader Wouter Bos commented that a second referendum would perhaps be necessary, if the first one did not produce a positive result. Foreign Minister Bot was reported as encouraging voters who had doubts to ‘stay at home’. Clearly, too much may easily be made of such comments, which were frequently reported without full contextualisation by the media. Nevertheless, the cumulative impact of this litany of miscues and misstatements was little short of devastating. The government and the main establishment parties, having first failed to set the agenda, then further contributed to the growth of a negative climate of opinion by appearing simultaneously to over dramatise the vote and to under value the opinions of the electorate.

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with the *Algemeen Dagblad*, 24 May 2005.



## **The Results**

The magnitude of the ‘No’, at 61.5%, was such that it carried a majority across virtually all major segments of Dutch society. Geographically, the ‘No’ was in the majority in all 12 Dutch provinces, and in every major city except Utrecht (where the ‘Yes’ won 51.1% of the vote). Sociologically, the ‘No’ won a majority across all educational and income categories, as well as across all age cohorts except the oldest (those over 65, where the ‘Yes’ scored 52%).<sup>10</sup> Predictable variations do, nonetheless, appear in the scale of the ‘No’ vote. Educational level continues to be perhaps the most reliable indicator of attitudes towards European integration; there was a clear gradation in the proportion of ‘No’ voters, running from 51% of those with a high formal educational level up to 82% among those with a low educational level. Similarly, income and European attitudes showed a largely consistent correlation, with only 51% of the highest income group voting ‘No’, in contrast to 68% of those in the lowest income category.

A stronger differentiation of the ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ electorates becomes apparent when one looks at the clusters of issues cited by voters, as well as in relation to party identification. These two factors are examined in detail below.

### *Salient Issues*

The impact of the campaign clearly emerges when examining the clusters of issues cited by ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ supporters as respectively determining their votes. As listed in Table 1 below, the motivations cited by ‘No’ voters prioritise broad concerns over national identity and national sovereignty, as well as more specific national grievances. The Netherlands’ status as the highest net per capita contributor to the EU budget was most frequently cited by anti-Treaty voters, reflecting a high public awareness of the issue which had – paradoxically – been created by the strong, repeated demands of successive Dutch governments to reduce the amount. Yet, beyond the immediate issue of the budget contribution, the four next most frequently cited reasons for voting against ratification all deal with more generalised concerns about the potential loss of national influence and national identity. The theme of the ‘superstate’ unmistakably resonated with ‘No’ voters, who expressed a corresponding concern about the diminished place of their country in a much enlarged Union. The persisting salience of the euro as a political issue is also noteworthy among the reasons cited by ‘No’ voters. This issue was given a comparatively high profile in the present campaign by the rekindling of a debate surrounding the ‘undervaluation’ of the guilder at the time of the transition to the single currency.

The cluster of issues cited by ‘Yes’ voters reflects broad support for the longer-term development of European integration, as well as a more specific assessment of the relative advantages of the Constitutional Treaty itself. Yet, though the Treaty figures more prominently in the reasons cited by ‘Yes’ voters, it is striking that this for the most part does not attach itself to particular issues or provisions. Rather, these results suggest that pro-Treaty voters tended to view the adoption of the present text principally as a continuation of wider processes of integration and co-operation deemed to be desirable in themselves. More specifically, the retention of the argument that the Treaty would allow Europe to be a stronger ‘counterweight’ to the

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<sup>10</sup> The polling data presently used are those published by Maurice de Hond / [www.peil.nl](http://www.peil.nl) on 2 June 2005, unless otherwise noted.

America is also worthy of mention. This marks a specific opposition influence on the ‘Yes’ campaign, as the position had been distinctively highlighted by Labour and GreenLeft.

**Table 1**  
**Principal Reasons for ‘No’ and ‘Yes’ Votes**  
**(multiple responses in %)**

**Reasons cited by ‘No’ Voters**

1. The Netherlands pays too much to the EU	62
2. The Netherlands will have less control over its own affairs	56
3. Too little influence in comparison with other countries	55
4. The Netherlands will lose its own identity	53
5. The Netherlands is becoming too dependent on the EU	46
6. The provision of information was poor	44
7. Because of increasing bureaucracy	38
8. Because of the negative effect of the euro	37
9. Loss of jobs to foreigners	33
10. The EU has more disadvantages than advantages	31

**Reasons cited by ‘Yes’ Voters**

1. Europe tackles cross-border problems	58
2. The advancement of co-operation between member states	56
2. The EU has more advantages than disadvantages	56
4. More efficient decision-making in Europe	51
5. More efficient, less bureaucracy	43
6. The new Constitution is an improvement	40
6. The Constitution fits with further integration	40
8. A greater counterweight relative to the USA	38
9. I have faith in Europe	36
10. The Constitution guarantees security and peace	33

Source: Interview-NSS in association with the ANP and the NOS <sup>11</sup>

Two contrasting profiles thus emerge, in which the ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ electorates appear largely defined by their attitudes towards the overall direction of the European integration process. This interpretation of the results, moreover, finds further confirmation in the separate exit polling conducted by Maurice de Hond. Asking voters whether their choice was predominately determined by ‘the contents of the Constitution itself’, ‘my feeling as regards the development of the EU’, or ‘the domestic political situation’, de Hond found that clear majorities of both ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ voters were principally motivated by their feelings as regards the longer-term development of European integration. This was true of 62% of ‘Yes’ voters, as well as 58% of ‘No’ voters. The only significant difference between the two electorates in this regard was that of the relative weight which they accorded to domestic political

<sup>11</sup> A summary overview of the results of this exit poll, commissioned jointly by the main Dutch print media (ANP) and broadcast (NOS) news agencies, may be accessed via the NOS site at: [http://www.nos.nl/nosjournaal/dossiers/europesegrondwet/020605\\_tabel\\_redenen.html](http://www.nos.nl/nosjournaal/dossiers/europesegrondwet/020605_tabel_redenen.html)

considerations – with 11% of ‘No’ voters giving this as their primary motivation, in contrast to only 4% of ‘Yes’ voters.

The de Hond polling did, however, point to an interesting difference as regards the self-definition of the two electorates. Asked about the relative balance of ‘rational’ and ‘emotional’ elements in the determination of their vote, a decisive majority of ‘Yes’ voters (69%) responded that they had voted on ‘rational’ grounds (relative to 25% who cited both and 4% who cited ‘emotional’ grounds alone). Conversely, in the case of ‘No’ voters, only 43% described themselves as having voted principally on ‘rational’ grounds, while 49% said that their vote had been determined by a mixture of ‘rational’ and ‘emotional’ factors (with 6% citing ‘emotional’ grounds alone). This would appear to reflect the success of the ‘No’ campaign in tapping a vein of doubt or anxiety about the direction of European integration, which mixed both specifically articulated objections and more diffuse affective elements.

#### *Party Identification*

Analysing the profiles of the ‘Yes’ and the ‘No’ electorates on the basis of party identification, a clear division is readily apparent between the ‘centre’ and the ‘periphery’ of Dutch politics. Supporters of smaller parties characterised by a strong ‘populist’ or ‘protest’ element voted overwhelmingly to reject the Treaty – crossing the 90% threshold as regards the electorates of the Socialist Party, the Wilders Group, and the Pim Fortuyn List. Beyond this broad distinction, the portrait which emerges differs significantly depending on whether one looks at current voting intentions or at voting preferences at the time of the most recent Dutch legislative elections in January 2003.

As shown in Table 2 below, there was a marked split between government and opposition supporters when defined on the basis of current voting intentions. Current supporters of all 3 government coalition parties voted in the majority to support the Treaty. The electorates of both the Christian Democrats and Democrats ’66 did so by a 3 to 1 margin. While Liberal supporters were more divided, a 57-43 majority nonetheless still backed the party’s official pro-Treaty stance. By way of contrast, a comparable majority of Labour Party supporters opted not to follow the party line, with a 58-42 split in favour of the ‘No’. This likely reflects the particular difficulties experienced by the Labour leadership during the campaign, as they sought to define a distinctive basis for supporting the Treaty while maintaining their distance from an unpopular government. This difficulty appears, nonetheless, to have had a lesser impact in the case of GreenLeft, who were able to retain the support of a majority of their current electorate (55-45).

**Table 2**  
**‘No’ and ‘Yes’ Voters distributed by Current Voting Intentions**

<b>Party</b>	<b>% ‘No’ Voters</b>	<b>% Yes Voters</b>
<i>Christian Democrats (CDA)</i>	<b>24</b>	<b>76</b>
<i>Democrats ’66</i>	<b>24</b>	<b>76</b>
<i>Liberals (VVD)</i>	<b>43</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>GreenLeft</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>55</b>
<b>Labour (PvdA)</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>Christian Union</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Pim Fortuyn List (LPF)</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>06</b>
<b>Wilders Group</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>05</b>
<b>Socialist Party</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>04</b>

Source: Maurice de Hond / [www.peil.nl](http://www.peil.nl)  
*Government parties in italics*

A very different picture emerges if one looks at the 2003 voting preferences of the electorate. As shown in Table 3 below, there is evidence of a more generalised inability on the part of virtually all the mainstream Dutch parties to carry their electorates. As regards the government parties, a pro-Treaty majority emerges only in the case of the small, historically pro-federalist Democrats ’66. Even the Christian Democrats, relative to their 2003 electorate, were unable to muster a majority in favour of the Treaty – with the ‘No’ winning over 52% of their supporters. Yet, it was the Liberals who assumed by far the heaviest losses amongst the coalition parties, as fully 62% of VVD supporters opted for a ‘No’ vote. Turning to the opposition, a similarly decisive 62-38 split for the ‘No’ appeared among Labour Party supporters, while GreenLeft also failed, though on a 46-54 result, to win over a majority of its 2003 supporters.

**Table 3**  
**‘No’ and ‘Yes’ Voters distributed by 2003 Voting Preferences**

<b>Party</b>	<b>% ‘No’ Voters</b>	<b>% Yes Voters</b>
<i>Democrats ’66</i>	<b>40</b>	<b>60</b>
<i>Christian Democrats (CDA)</i>	<b>52</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>GreenLeft</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>46</b>
<i>Liberals (VVD)</i>	<b>62</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>Labour (PvdA)</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>Christian Union</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Socialist Party</b>	<b>92</b>	<b>08</b>
<b>Pim Fortuyn List (LPF)</b>	<b>92</b>	<b>08</b>
<b>Wilders Group</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>NA</b>

Source: Maurice de Hond / [www.peil.nl](http://www.peil.nl)  
*Government Parties in Italics*

Significantly divergent readings of the referendum result are thus possible. The first set of figures paints the portrait of a relatively classic ‘protest vote’ against the government, in which the main opposition party was unable to convince its supporters to back a policy initiative associated with the government in a ‘second-order’ contest. The second set of figures, however, points to a more generalised anti-establishment vote, in which the electorate expressed an across the board disaffection with all of the mainstream Dutch political parties, whether currently in government or in opposition. While both readings have merit, it is nonetheless probably the latter which is the more convincing, as the strong degree of disaffection shown by 2003 government supporters cannot be ignored. Indeed, the scale of the ‘No’, in purely numerical terms, could not be explained without reference to the defection of a substantial component of the traditional centre-right electorate.

### **Conclusion**

The immediate explanation for the result of the Dutch referendum inescapably lies in the failings of the ‘Yes’ campaign.<sup>12</sup> The widely based pro-Treaty coalition, including both the government and the main establishment parties, lost what should have been an eminently winnable contest. There was a clear failure to adapt to the novel political circumstances created by the holding of the first referendum in the country’s modern political history. The ‘No’ camp was largely allowed to set the agenda on its own terms, placing the Treaty’s supporters on the back foot. This was further compounded by an exceptional number of political gaffes, which served to fuel an undercurrent of anti-establishment protest voting.

Yet, the specific dynamics of the campaign must be contextualised relative to longer-term trends. In terms of the domestic political context, the 2005 vote represented the second major shock to the nation’s political establishment within a relatively short space of time. The 2005 result was widely seen by Dutch political commentators as an expression of the same underlying discontent which had first come to the surface in the tumultuous 2002 parliamentary election, marked by the sudden rise to prominence of Pim Fortuyn.<sup>13</sup> There is a sense of a growing ‘gap’ (*kloof*) between the political establishment and Dutch society, for which the main political parties have thus far proved unable to find an effective remedy. The massive ‘No’ vote in this referendum fits within this wider trend of disconnection and electoral volatility, a form of ‘democratic deficit’ in The Hague being called into question by Dutch voters at least as much as that in Brussels or Strasbourg.

Beyond the general domestic political context, the referendum result must also be situated with reference to the more specific evolution of Dutch European debate over the past decade. Eurosceptic themes had increasingly permeated Dutch political discourse, particularly reflecting concerns over the size of the national budget

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<sup>12</sup> An internal study, commissioned by the cabinet and made public under freedom of information legislation, pointedly came to the same conclusion. The study highlighted a series of failures as regards both the individual performance of senior government figures and the overall campaign strategy. See ‘Kabinet self schuldig aan nee tegen EU’, *de Volkskrant*, 5 July 2005.

<sup>13</sup> See further Robert Harmsen, ‘Europe and the Dutch Parliamentary Election of May 2002’, RIIA/OERN Election Briefing no. 3, at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/paper3dutch.pdf>

contribution and, latterly, enlargement.<sup>14</sup> These Euroscepticisms had, by the time of the 2004 European Parliament election, given rise to a broadly defined discourse concerning the ‘limits of Europe’ – in which both the ultimate geographical boundaries of the Union and the boundaries of its desirable policy competence had become subjects of critical political discussion.<sup>15</sup> It was this ‘limits of Europe’ debate which was given a sharper focus and a higher political profile by the specific dynamics of the referendum campaign.

The referendum will likely mark a significant turning point in Dutch European policy. The government, in the parliamentary debate which immediately followed the vote, already signalled its intention to adopt a ‘new course’ in Europe. This new path will be broadly defined by an attitude of ‘restraint’ as regards the further development of European integration, as well as by the adoption of a ‘harder line’ in the defence of national interests. Most obviously, it can be expected that the Dutch government will pursue the reduction of the net national contribution to the EU budget with a redoubled vigour. It is also likely that the concerns which emerged during the campaign over EU enlargement will find expression in a strong Dutch insistence on the strict respect of accession criteria by new member states.

The political context created by the referendum may further lend itself to European issues assuming a higher profile in the terms of domestic electoral competition. This impact must be carefully gauged; there is little likelihood that Dutch politics will be ‘redefined’ on a European axis. Nevertheless, given their success in mobilising a broad electorate around the European issue, it would seem unlikely that the main parties in the ‘No’ camp would not seek in some way to use the issue in the next national parliamentary election, due in 2007. Developments of this type would, moreover, create a potentially interesting set of dynamics as regards the responses of the mainstream national parties. Incentives may arise for mainstream parties – perhaps most obviously for the Liberals – to adopt a more ‘Eurosceptic’ or ‘Eurocritical’ discourse as a means of forestalling the use of European issues as an instrument of electoral mobilisation on their flanks. Equally, Europe may emerge (or be used) as a key differentiating issue. The Labour leadership has, in this vein, already highlighted the Socialist Party’s Euroscepticism as an impediment to the formation of a possible governmental coalition of the left.

Overall, mainstream Dutch parties, having long consigned the discussion of European integration to the relative margins of national political debate, will now have to engage more fully with such issues. If they do not do so, they risk further deepening a ‘crisis of representation’ which concerns both the national political model and emerging supranational structures of governance. This situation is, of course, by no means unique to the Netherlands. It may, however, be that the problems posed for traditional structures of political representation by the emergence of complex and novel forms of multi-level governance are set to acquire a particular resonance in the

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<sup>14</sup> See Robert Harmsen, ‘Euroscepticism in the Netherlands: Stirrings of Dissent’, in Robert Harmsen and Menno Spiering (eds.), *Euroscepticism: Party Politics, National Identity and European Integration* (Amsterdam/New York: Editions Rodopi, 2004), *European Studies* no. 20, pp. 99-126.

<sup>15</sup> See Robert Harmsen, ‘The European Parliament Election in the Netherlands, 10 June 2004’, EPERN 2004 European Parliament Election Briefing No. 17, at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/epern-2004-netherlands.pdf>

Dutch case. Further shocks to the body politic, departing from a quiescent ‘politics of accommodation’, certainly cannot be excluded.

*This is the latest in a series of election and referendum briefings produced by the European Parties Elections and Referendums Network (EPERN). Based in the Sussex European Institute, EPERN is an international network of scholars that was originally established as the Opposing Europe Research Network (OERN) in June 2000 to chart the divisions over Europe that exist within party systems. In August 2003 it was re-launched as EPERN to reflect a widening of its objectives to consider the broader impact of the European issue on the domestic politics of EU member and candidate states. The Network retains an independent stance on the issues under consideration. For more information and copies of all our publications visit our website at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/1-4-2.html>.*