

French voters overwhelmingly rejected the European Union's proposed constitution in a key referendum in May of this year. Whatever the mixture of reasons, the French "Non" means that, for the first time, a large founder member has directly opposed the current process of European integration.

But how many of us living the ex-pat life style even understand what the vote was about?

In an attempt to understand the discussion, we've laid out some of the key areas with a brief explanation, where one could be found.

WHAT THE EU CONSTITUTION SAYS

A constitution for the European Union was agreed in Brussels on 18 June, 2004. The constitution brings together for the first time the many treaties and agreements on which the EU is based. It defines the powers of the EU, stating where it can and act and where the member states retain their right of veto. It also defines the role of the EU institutions.

POWERS OF THE EU

What the constitution says:

The Union is said to be subsidiary to member states and can act only in those areas where "the objectives of the intended action cannot be sufficiently achieved by the member states but can rather... be better achieved at Union level." The principle is established that the Union derives its powers from the member states.

What it means:

The idea is to stop the Union from encroaching on the rights of member states other than in areas where the members have given them away. Critics say that the EU can act in so many areas that this clause does not mean much but supporters say it will act as a brake and is an important constitutional principle.

DIVISION OF RESPONSIBILITIES

What the constitution says:

The EU already has rights to legislate over external trade and customs policy, the internal market, the monetary policy of countries in the eurozone, agriculture and fisheries and many areas of domestic law including the environment and health and safety at work.

The constitution will extend its rights into some new areas, perhaps most importantly into justice policy, especially asylum and immigration. It does away with the old structure of pillars under which some policies came under the EU and some under "inter-governmental" arrangements.

What it means:

It means a greater role for the EU in more aspects of life. In some areas, the EU will have exclusive competence, in others a shared competence and in yet more, only supporting role.

DECISION MAKING

What the constitution says:

The principle of voting by qualified majority will be generally applied. It is felt that otherwise getting the agreement of all 25 members would be a recipe for inaction. There will however be a veto for members in foreign policy, defence and taxation. And there is to be what's called an "emergency brake" in which a country outvoted on an issue can take its case to the European Council, though it can still be outvoted there. The European Parliament will have an equal say on decisions requiring majority voting.

QUALIFIED MAJORITY VOTING (QMV)

What the constitution says:

"A qualified majority shall be defined as at least 55% of the members of the Council, comprising at least 15 of them and representing Member States comprising at least 65% of the population of the Union."

What it means:

This system replaces the old one under which countries got specific numbers of votes. There were objections that Spain and Poland had too many votes and this methods is felt to represent a fairer balance between large and small countries. The new one will still lead to complicated permutations of voting but the final results of the "double majority" should command more general respect.

An amendment does away with a proposed procedure under which the European Council could have changed an area of policy to QMV. Now such a proposal will have to go before national parliaments and if one objects the measure fails.

PRESIDENT

What the constitution says:

The European Council, that is the heads of state or government of the member states, "shall elect its President, by qualified majority, for a term of two and a half years, renewable once." The candidate will then have to be approved by the European Parliament. The President will "chair (the Council) and drive its work forward and ensure, at his level, the external representation of the Union."

What it means:

This is a new post. At the moment, the Council presidency rotates through the member states every six months, so continuity is lost. The new President will therefore be a permanent figure with much greater influence and symbolism. But since he or she will be subject to the Council, the powers of the post are limited.

