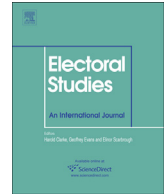




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Public support for referendums in Europe: A cross-national comparison in 21 countries

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ABSTRACT

Previous research is unclear about *who* supports the use of referendums and *why*. One line of research suggests that people with greater cognitive resources are more supportive of referendums. Another line claims that referendums are supported by citizens who feel disconnected from the political process. We integrate both perspectives, include *civic duty* and *political cynicism* as key explanatory variables, and offer a model explaining referendum support across Europe drawing on both individual and contextual factors. Our study is based on a survey conducted in 21 EU member states (N = 22,806). Results show support for both perspectives and for our new indicators, suggesting that referendum support is highest among citizens who are critical of traditional party politics but committed to democratic practices.

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1. Introduction

The use of referendums has become increasingly popular in recent years and public support for direct democracy is generally high. However, previous research has yielded inconclusive results as to *who* supports referendums and *why*. On the one hand, the *cognitive mobilization* perspective claims that people with greater cognitive resources, such as education or knowledge, are more likely to make use of the referendum opportunity since they are more motivated to participate in politics. On the other hand, the *political disaffection* perspective assumes that referendums are supported by those citizens who feel disconnected from traditional party politics and who are particularly critical of the political process. Thus, whereas one perspective assumes that public support for referendums is rooted in a general and active commitment to democratic practices, of which referendums are just one

example, the other suspects that it is frustration with the way politics is run that makes citizens see referendums as a particularly effective tool to have an alternative say and to exert actual influence.

The present study integrates these two perspectives. In addition, we introduce new factors for each of these, i.e. focussing on the role of *political cynicism* and *civic duty* as additional explanations for referendum support. Finally, since we investigate referendum support with regard to European Union (EU) integration issues and across 21 EU member states, we pay special attention to the role of EU-related attitudes and contextual factors in determining support.

In sum, our study builds on, and extends, previous research by investigating the role of new explanations for both perspectives (e.g., civic duty, habitual voting, political cynicism, EU attitudes) and also tests for the influence of contextual factors (e.g., number of past referendums in a country, new vs. old EU member states). We investigate this using a unique cross-nationally comparative study design, namely a survey conducted in 21 EU member states. Results lend support to extant explanations in the literature but

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also emphasize the need to consider new explanations and overall suggest that referendum support is highest among citizens who are critical of the political process as such but feel committed to democratic practices.

2. Public support for referendums

The use of referendums is on the increase (e.g., de Vreese, 2007; de Vreese and Schuck, 2014). This development squares well with citizens' wishes: in general, citizens in Western representative democracies are supportive of referendums as a supplement to a system in which representatives are elected. While a lot of efforts have been devoted to theorizing about the potential threats and benefits of direct democracy (e.g., Barber, 1984; Bowler and Donovan, 2002; Budge, 1996; Christin et al., 2002; Fishkin, 1995; LeDuc, 2003; Resnick, 1997; Sartori, 1987) and support for direct democracy is generally high among the public (e.g., Bowler and Donovan, 1998; Dalton et al., 2001; Mendelsohn and Parkin, 2001), it is also clear that different groups of citizens are more supportive than others. One line of research suggests that the referendum opportunity is more embraced by those who are already more politically interested and involved (e.g., Donovan and Karp, 2006), also dubbed the *cognitive mobilization hypothesis*. 'Persons who are interested in one form of election are also interested in the other; almost all of those who are very or somewhat interested in one type of election are very or somewhat interested in the other [...]' (Magleby, 1989: 99). A second line suggests that referendums are rather supported by citizens at the margins of the political process and those who feel disaffected with traditional party-based politics who see referendums as an effective alternative (e.g., Dalton et al., 2001; Gilljam et al., 1998), also dubbed the *political disaffection hypothesis*.

3. The cognitive mobilization hypothesis – the role of civic duty

The cognitive mobilization hypothesis posits that people with more political interest and higher engagement are more supportive of referendums. They possess greater cognitive resources, such as education or knowledge, and consequently are more inclined to embrace the referendum opportunity because they are more motivated to participate in politics. This perspective is linked to the observation that political skills among citizens have increased over time and, as a result, citizens demand to have more of a say and are less willing to leave political decision-making up to political elites (e.g., Dalton, 1984; Inglehart, 1990). Thus, in this perspective, citizens who are more interested and engaged in politics and possess greater cognitive skills are seen to be the driving force behind public support for referendums because these offer an additional opportunity for political expression (see Schuck and de Vreese, 2011).¹

However, the picture is more nuanced and Anderson and Goodyear-Grant (2010) argue that highly informed citizens are sometimes even *sceptical* of referendums. They note that 'an intriguing tension presents itself in that those citizens who may be best equipped for referendum voting, the highly informed and politically sophisticated, are the least likely to support the use of this tool of direct democracy' (p. 227). This view resonates with the concern that referendums are prone to populist tendencies and influence (e.g., Dalton et al., 2001) which under certain circumstances might create scepticism among those who are most politically engaged and who worry about an 'uninformed' outcome. However, this concern might be more situational and tied to particular referendum contexts, e.g. when these are very polarized and/or on sensitive subjects, and not be of general nature. Returning to the mobilization hypothesis, Rose and Borz (2013) stress the need to see political participation as a socialization process. They suggest that the more inclined one is to participate in politics, the more one favours referendums due to a self-reinforcing socialization process. Empirically, this argument takes the shape of including political interest in their analysis which yields a positive and significant effect on referendum support. In this article, we build on this research and suggest that reinforcing processes of political interest and previous electoral experiences are part of generating what we may refer to as a sense of 'civic duty' (see also Bowler and Donovan, 2013).

A self-perceived sense of civic duty has been shown in previous studies to be a key predictor of turnout (e.g., Blais, 2006; Clarke et al., 2004). Indeed this also applies to the referendum situation. Bowler and Donovan (2013) argue that individuals are socialized to politics differently and this results in a baseline level of 'duty'. For example, those who were socialized to develop an interest in politics also become more engaged and see politics in a more positive light. They also attach a greater sense of duty to the act of voting, more so than those with less political interest, and value political engagement up to the extent of seeing it as an obligation. As Bowler and Donovan (2013) show, civic duty boosted turnout in the 2011 British electoral system referendum. They also took a step further and examined what drives that sense of duty. Here they find that assessments of civic duty are structured by evaluations of politics and politicians. Low interest in politics, low political efficacy, and low regard for politicians correspond with less support for the idea that citizens have a duty to vote on referendums and at other elections. Some of these propositions are also closely connected to the underlying assumptions of the political disaffection perspective discussed below. In the current study, we assume that civic duty is an important predictor not just for political participation (i.e., turnout) but also for referendum support as referendums provide an additional opportunity to have a say and become politically engaged and thus perform citizenship.

Regarding the cognitive mobilization hypothesis we propose civic duty as a new relevant factor explaining referendum support next to other more established indicators (specified in method section below) which have been

¹ In a previous publication (Schuck and de Vreese, 2011) in *West European Politics* we outlined the key perspectives. In this article we build on this while incorporating recent research in these areas.

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