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When Who and How Matter: Explaining the Success of Referendums in Europe

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Abstract:

This article aims to identify the institutional factors that make a referendum successful. This comparative analysis seeks to explain the success of top-down referendums organized in Europe between 2001 and 2013. It argues and tests for the main effect of three institutional factors (popularity of the initiator, size of parliamentary majority, and political cues during referendum campaigns) and controls for the type of referendum and voter turnout. The analysis uses data collected from referendums and electoral databases, public opinion surveys, and newspaper articles. Results show that referendums proposed by a large parliamentary majority or with clear messages from political parties during campaign are likely to be successful.

Keywords: referendum, success, initiator, party cues, Europe

Introduction

The modern crisis of representative democracy has several facets: political distrust, general political dissatisfaction of citizens with political institutions and widespread perception that politicians disregard the popular concerns (Dalton 2008; Norris 2011; Geissel and Newton 2012). The discussion about this crisis is not new, it began in the 1960s (Joas 2013) and since then the general opinion has been that 'the cure for democracies' ills is more democracy' (Dalton, Cain, and Scarrow 2003, 251). As a consequence, a variety of direct democratic and deliberative tools were implemented and increasingly used for several decades throughout the world (LeDuc 2003; Kriesi 2012a; Newton 2012; Setala and Schiller 2012). Among these, direct democratic tools allow citizens to participate in the decision-making process and thus complement the representative democracy. Referendums, the most frequently used form of direct democracy, provide inclusive and effective participation, and have a strong legitimizing impact (Setala 2013, 194).

This high importance of referendums in contemporary politics attracted attention about what makes referendums successful (i.e. the adoption of the issue subjected to vote). Existing research provided in-depth analyses of referendums in individual countries, investigated referendums in particular periods (de Vreese and Semetko 2004; Hobolt 2007; Batory 2007), examined the influence of particular factors for the outcome of a referendum (Siune and Svensson 1993; M. Franklin, Marsh, and Wlezien 1994; M. N. Franklin, van der Eijk, and Marsh

1995) or analyzed several determinants for the success of referendums (Hug 2003; Hobolt 2009). This paper follows the tradition initiated by this literature and seeks to reveal the sources of a successful outcome of referendums. In doing so, the analysis empirically tests for the effect of three institutional factors (popularity of the initiator, size of parliamentary majority, and political cues during referendum campaigns) and controls for the type of referendum and voter turnout in all referendums initiated in Europe by the national government or parliament between 2001 and 2013. In total, there are 31 referendums in 15 countries. The analysis uses data collected from referendums and electoral databases, public opinion surveys, and newspaper articles.

The first section of the paper reviews the major institutional explanations on the outcome of referendums and identifies three causal mechanisms that can determine the success of a referendum and formulates testable hypotheses. The following section includes the research design and variable operationalization. The third section is dedicated to the bivariate and multivariate (binary logistic regression) analysis. The conclusions summarize the key findings, discuss the methodological and empirical implications of this analysis and draws attention to avenues for future research.

Institutional sources of successful referendums

According to Luthardt (1994, 166), the definition of success of a referendum depends on the functions and motives of its initiation. Broadly speaking, a referendum is successful if it fulfils the motives for its initiation. This can mean the victory of an initiator in the battle for votes and thus the adoption of a referendum issue. Also, the victory can confirm the popularity of the initiator and serve as a political power measurement, possibly avoiding a split within a party or the isolation of the initiator if that is a public person (e.g. president or prime-minister). Another possibility to define a referendum is to look at the outcomes, as opposed to the motives and functions. In this sense, the success has the result at the ballot as a point of reference and more precisely looking at the majority voting in favour of a proposal (Williams and Hume 2010). Along these lines, Lacy and Niou (2000) consider a referendum to be successful relative to its outcome: adoption (success) vs. rejection (failure). Qvortrup (2005, 73) uses a similar approach and argues that a referendum is successful when a majority of voters accepts the proposed policy. In this article, we follow the dominant approach in the

literature and conceptualize a referendum as successful when a majority of the electorate favoured the proposal subjected to popular vote.

So far, the result of a referendum was often regarded through the lenses of institutions that followed several lines of argumentation. In his analysis of referendums organized between 1975 and 2000 in 39 countries LeDuc (2003, 165) concluded that factors that are usually considered in studies of elections - ideology, parties, partisanship, impact of campaign and the role of media – affect the outcome of a referendum in much the same way. For example, ideology works in a similar manner: if voters can easily locate an issue on a left-right spectrum, they might more effortlessly form their own opinions on the issue. Ideology, like party identification, is an example of Zaller's 'predispositions' (LeDuc 2003, 176). According to Zaller (1992, p.6), 'every opinion is a marriage of information and predisposition'. Predispositions and information do not operate independently from each other, but rather predispositions determine what information or third-party opinion a citizen accepts, since people tend to ignore the information or opinions that do not agree with their prejudices and orientations (Marcinkowski 2007, 95).

Another line of argument pointed out that financing in campaigns may have an effect on the outcome of the referendum. Nevertheless, empirical evidence nuances this argument and illustrates a limited influence of money for the outcome of referendums (Gilland Lutz and Hug 2009). In his study of the Swiss referendums Kriesi (2012b) shows that money make a small difference especially with respect to turnout but do not have an impact on the outcome *per se*. A different strand of research emphasizes the role of diffusion channels in the success of a referendum. These channels function like transmission belts such as shared language, common media sources, and collaborative networks in the form of physical contacts and discussions among campaigners. The key argument is that the way in which a campaign is conducted in one referendum and its results may influence another referendum, happening in a similar setting. One example in this sense is the way in which the campaign in France influenced the Luxembourg referendum campaign about the 2005 EU Constitutional Treaty (Atikcan 2015, 37).

Walker (Walker 2003, 92–93) studied referendums organized in France and Chile in the 1970s and 1980s and in the Soviet Union in the 1990s and showed that executives had better chances to win a referendum than legislatives because people were 'positioned closer to the executives'. The examples in the investigated countries show that in two of them there were strong leaders - Charles de Gaulle and Augusto Pinochet – who tried to increase their power

against other institutions through the use of referendums. In the Soviet Union, during its breakdown, republics used referendums to distribute power from the center, mainly aimed to resolve disputes and serving as a bargaining instrument between elites in different institutional settings (Walker 2003, 3). One possible explanation for the higher chances of executives to win a referendum is that government performance and especially the people's perception about its performance in an important determinant of a referendum's outcome (de Vreese and Semetko 2004). In his analysis of all 43 EU-related referendums since 1972, Qvortrup (2016) shows that governments tend to lose referendums if they have been in office for a long time. At the same time, perceptions play a high role in the voting behaviour since emotive words on the ballot paper appear to favour a high yes vote.

This paper focuses on three variables that capture most of the mechanisms explored in the literature: the initiator's popularity among the citizens (i.e. initiator, government vs. opposition), support within the parliament, and party cues, i.e. reflecting partisanship, ideology, and information shortcuts). We also control for turnout and type of referendum to cover the remaining potential explanations. Citizens' evaluations at individual level were not included in the analysis. While these would have been useful to identify attitudes towards the issue and suitable for a test regarding the second-order theory of voting in referendums, they were left out for both methodological (they reflect a different level of analysis) and empirical reasons (data availability). This section formulates hypotheses for the three main effects and briefly discusses the potential impact of control variables.

The initiator is one of the key factors in the institutional design of a referendum (Setala 2009, 4, 10). This is in line with an earlier statement that a referendum is mostly a product of 'a conscious political decision taken by a party, organization or group (LeDuc 2002, 148). One of the main reasons why referendums are often popular among elites is their ability to take advantage of the referendum process and influence it (Walker 2003, p.120). According to the discourse used by the initiators, there are two main perspectives on the role of the government in a referendum. The first perspective ('issue-voting') suggests that the voting decision of citizens is influenced by the attitudes towards the voted issue. People who are generally positive towards European integration are likely to support a new EU treaty and vote 'Yes'. Contrarily, people who are generally skeptical about the EU project will vote 'No' to further integration (Siune and Svensson 1993; Siune, Svensson, and Tonggaard 1994).

The second perspective ('second-order' voting) indicates that the attitudes towards the

national political parties and the incumbent government decide the vote. Reif and Schmitt (1980) pioneered the idea that elections for the European Parliament are 'second-order national elections', i.e. considerations about national politics ('first-order' elections) determine voting choice. Accordingly, European referendums do not directly concern continental Europe but rather serve as 'second order' elections for voters to express their support or lack of support for their governments (M. Franklin, Marsh, and Wlezien 1994; M. N. Franklin, van der Eijk, and Marsh 1995; M. N. Franklin 2002). Voters who are not satisfied with the performance of the incumbent government may use the opportunity to punish the government by not following its recommendation. Voters who are satisfied with their government vote in line with its wishes. Thus, an EU referendum becomes a second general election (Garry, Marsh, and Sinnott 2005, 204) and the popularity of the government is a decisive factor for the outcome of the referendum: 'While a popular government might expect to see its referendum proposals approved, an unpopular government will often see its proposals turned down' (M. N. Franklin, van der Eijk, and Marsh 1995, 106).

'Issue voting' versus 'second-order voting' has been the dominant debate in the referendum behavior research since the end of the 1970s (Svensson 2007, 163). There is empirical evidence to support both perspectives. For instance, Siune and Svensson (1993) argue that the main explanation for the 1992 failed referendum were the attitudes of the Danish population towards further integration, their fear for the loss of national sovereignty by giving more and more political power to the EU. Franklin et al. (1994, 117–18) investigated the relationship between government approval and support for the Maastricht Treaty in Denmark, France and Ireland where referendums were held in 1992. Their research showed that in all three countries the overwhelming majority of those who supported the government voted 'Yes' to the Maastricht Treaty, while those who were unhappy with the performance of their government - voted 'No'.

According to Franklin et al., the crucial role of government's popularity was confirmed by the approval of the Maastricht Treaty one year later. This was interpreted by Siune and Svensson as a reaction to the obtained concessions in the application of the Treaty to Denmark. However, as the post-referendum poll showed only 17 per cent knew about the Edinburgh concessions and only 2 per cent could name the four opt-out clauses (M. Franklin, Marsh, and Wlezien 1994, 120). The success of the referendum could be explained by the fact that the unpopular government had been replaced by a much more popular government that was able

to translate its support into votes in favor of the Treaty (M. Franklin, Marsh, and Wlezien 1994, 120).

Using the evidence from the two Irish referendums on the Nice Treaty in 2001 and 2002, Garry et al. (2005) found that the issue-voting model outperformed the second-order model in both referendums. In the first referendum in 2001 Irish citizens rejected the treaty, but endorsed it the second time. The satisfaction with the government was significantly lower at Nice 2 than at Nice 1, but the referendum issue passed. The intensity of the campaign though was much higher at Nice 2. These results showed that attitudes towards the issue played a more important role in voters' decision than second-order considerations.

LeDuc (2003, 176) concludes that 'in referendums, as in elections, the messenger often matters as much as the message'. Although there are no candidate names on the ballot, the arguments are delivered by established political parties and their leaders about whom voters already have their opinions. In this sense, President Mitterrand's unpopularity and the widespread discontent with the political class in France contributed to the erosion of public support for the Maastricht Treaty in 1992. Similarly, the personal popularity of Felipe Gonzalez played an important role for the approval of Spain's continued membership in the NATO in 1986 (LeDuc 2003, 176–77). The study of the Danish referendum on the Euro in 2001 showed that if a government is popular, a referendum has better chances for success (de Vreese and Semetko 2004). Research of referendums in 11 European countries and Canada between 1986 and 2006 also supported the importance of the government's popularity for the successful outcome of a referendum (LeDuc 2009). In line with these arguments, we expect that:

H1: The high popularity of the initiator increases the likelihood for a referendum's success.

When the referendum is not initiated by the government but by the parliamentary majority or minority, the coalition built to organize the referendum campaign could play an important role. In their analysis of all referendums and initiatives voted on in Switzerland since 1947 Trechsel and Sciarini (1998, 118–20) conclude that there is a straightforward dependency between the level of consensus that was reached in the parliamentary process and the chances of success at the polls. Accordingly, we expect that the size of the parliamentary majority initiating a referendum will have a positive impact on its success.

H2: A large parliamentary majority increases the likelihood for a referendum's success.

The objective of a political campaign is to influence the outcome of a referendum by shaping public opinion (Schmitt-Beck and Farrell 2002, 3). The campaign is supposed to increase knowledge levels among the citizens and encourage them to vote (de Vreese and Semetko 2004, 45). The more familiar voters become with the topic, the higher the probability of their turnout at the polls (Kriesi 2005; Sager and Buehlmann 2009). Contemporary campaigns are influenced by the relatively new phenomenon of the late deciding voter which can be traced back to partisan dealignment beginning in the 1960s (Lachat and Sciarini 2002; McAllister 2002). This trend fosters a party strategy based on debate and factual information rather than a superficial campaign of slogans and sound bites (McAllister 2002, 39).

The importance of political cues communicated by elites during the referendum campaign, especially for voters with little prior information, was highlighted by Zaller (1992) and supported later by evidence from US studies. A campaign gains in significance when parties are internally divided or when an issue is new or unfamiliar (Lupia 1994). Similarly, LeDuc (2009) concludes that when parties do not have a comprehensive position on an issue, and the topic has not been debated earlier, voters are expected to pay more attention to the campaign discourse. In fact, divisions within a party over an important issue occur often, moreover, this is one of the most frequent reasons for calling a referendum. The referendum itself is a variable, as its context is entangled with a variety of political factors, above and beyond the referendum issue, such as the popularity or unpopularity of the current government. In such a complex reality political cues and the campaign are of high importance (LeDuc 2002, 146–47).

To find their position on complex issues voters use the 'shortcuts' received from the political elite. These 'shortcuts' play an essential role in a final voting decision, which is often reached rather late in the campaign. Public opinion polls commonly find about a quarter, sometimes even a third, of voters still undecided in the final week of referendum campaigns (LeDuc 2009). The longer and more intense the public debates, the simpler it is for voters to make up their minds, as there is a lot of easily available information on the issue (Font and Rodriguez 2009). Regardless of the length and intensity of a campaign, party politics matters. Font and Rodriguez (2009) show that voters supported what their party had recommended and how potential political effects of their votes had been defined. Party cues were less important for those who had more information.

Previous research on voters' behavior and information illustrated that voters can make competent choices even with limited information by relying on elite cues which help them to overcome their information shortfalls. As a survey of California voters showed information shortcuts allowed badly informed voters to emulate the behavior of relatively well informed voters and, thus, make competent choices even with limited information (Lupia 1994, p.63). The lower the level of information among the electorate on an issue, the more determining the political cues for their final decision (LeDuc 2009, p.158). Kriesi (2005, pp.138-139) identified three heuristic strategies (the way of elaborating the voting decision with least efforts, with help of informational shortcuts) that are usually applied by voters: 1) The status-quo heuristic: the strategy of voting 'No', only 2.5 per cent of voters apply this heuristic), 2) The trust heuristic: people follow the advice of speakers whom they find trustworthy and 3) The partisan heuristic: citizens follow the recommendations made by the partisan elites to whom they feel close.

Heuristics help voters to arrive at competent decisions despite their lack of factual knowledge. In particular, party endorsements serve as shortcuts that allow citizens to imply their own position on a ballot issue without detailed information about it (Hobolt 2007, 155). The study of De Vreese and Semetko (2004) confirmed that when parties send mixed or unclear messages to their electorate on their stand over the referendum's issue, they performed poorly even in mobilizing their own voters, not to mention in mobilizing voters without a clear party identification. The degree of consensus or division between and within political parties results in very different campaign modes and affects the decision-making process of the voters. Franklin (M. N. Franklin 2002, 755) explains: 'A party that is split generally has minimal influence on the opinions of its supporters. A united party of government has most influence, along with a united opposition party'. Following these arguments, I expect that:

H3: Clear party cues increase the likelihood for a referendum's success.

Control variables

In addition to these three main effects, we also test for two control variables derived from the literature: turnout and the type of referendum (binding vs. consultative). First, turnout in referendums is generally lower than at elections (Mendez, Mendez, and Triga 2014, 17). However, participation can rise to higher levels if an issue engages voter interest or if there is an intensive campaign (LeDuc 2003). One argument could be that it is easier for a referendum

to be successful when few people vote because only those who are interested participate. At the same time, there is also the argument according to which when more people participate the likelihood of success is higher because that can show a general mobilization of the population. Furthermore, some countries have legal provisions on the minimal level of turnout for a vote to be valid, i.e. participation quorum. Consequently, high turnout may have some explanatory power when it comes to the success of a referendum. In the case of EU-related referendums high turnout was correlated with a vote against European integration (Qvortrup 2016). Second, earlier research showed that when a referendum is binding, the participation is higher (compared to non-binding referendums) (Szczerbiak and Taggart 2004) and the likelihood of success can increase. When people perceive that their voice will make a difference, they may be tempted to cast a vote in favor of the proposal. However, this may also happen with non-binding referendums especially when the difference between the two types is very small in practice.

Research design

The analysis accounts for referendums organized at national level in Europe between 2001 and 2013. This period was chosen to illustrate the recent trends in the referendum process. Furthermore, many Eastern European countries were acknowledged as democracies in this term and their accession to the EU confirmed this aspect. Europe was chosen as area of investigation for two reasons. First, modern direct democracy was invented in New England and France, while Switzerland implemented the first referendum: in the 1830s at sub-national and in 1848 at national level (Williams and Hume 2010). Second, Europe is the continent where the most referendums have been held, namely 62 per cent of all referendums registered worldwide (Marxer et al. 2007, 9).

The data excludes independence referendums since they represent a particular type of referendums with extremely high societal involvement. Besides, most of them were mandatory and this type of referendums¹ as well as referendums initiated by a president or group of citizens are excluded.² Referendums initiated by the president are not analyzed due to the

¹ Mandatory referendums are not included, since they are prescribed by the Constitution and their initiation happens automatically when specific topics are concerned. This paper aims to identify the mechanisms of representatives' influence over the referendum process.

² Referendums initiated by the president are not analyzed due to the conceptual problem of how to differentiate (semi) presidential countries with strong executive power from representative, where the president has no nominal power and is

conceptual problem of how to differentiate (semi) presidential countries with strong executive power from representative, where the president has no nominal power and is appointed by the parliament. Furthermore, there is an empirical dilemma regarding the role of the president in the initiation process. It is quite often unclear whether it is a formal or a real one and in the absence of solid evidence, it is difficult to distinguish between the two. Research about the 'hidden' initiators of a referendum lies outside the scope of this paper and thus we exclude such possibly confusing cases. Liechtenstein was not analyzed since this country is a hereditary monarchy with weak representative mechanisms. The Cyprus referendum on the Annan Plan - the reunification of the island and creation of a federal state after the Swiss model - in 2004 was also excluded from the analysis, since the referendum was triggered by the UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, with support of the United States and Great Britain (Drath 2010). The final country not to be included is Switzerland since it has the longest and most intensive tradition of direct democracy and, thus, being rather an exception than a rule in Europe. Its inclusion would distort the overall picture of European referendums. Out of the 31 cases included in the analysis, only two countries are not members of the EU - Iceland and Moldova. These countries are (number of referendums in brackets): Austria, Iceland (6), Italy (2), Lithuania (2), Luxembourg, Malta (2), Moldova, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia (9), Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom (see Appendix 1).

Variable operationalization and data sources

The dependent variable of this study – success of a referendum – is measured as a dichotomous variable coded as 0 if a referendum fails and 1 if a referendum passes. The popularity of the initiator (H1) is measured as the support of the population for their government or opposition reflected by surveys before the referendum. Furthermore, various sources were used for popularity rates – from online survey portals to Sunday opinion polls and newspaper articles.³ When a governing coalition was the initiator, their opinion polls' results were added up to show

appointed by the parliament. The research on the 'hidden' initiators of a referendum would be out of the possible scope of this paper.

³ (i) In the Maltese referendum on divorce for separated couples in May 2011 opinion polls from an online survey portal were used, URL: <http://www.malta-surveys.com/election-poll-04-11.html> [Accessed on 19.12.2014]

(ii) In the case of the Slovenian referendums – in 2001, 2004, 2005 and 2010 - initiated by the parliamentary minority - the data on support of parliamentary opposition was gathered. The question in the opinion polls was: 'How do you assess the activity of the parliamentary opposition?' The answers 'very good', 'good' and 'average' were added up to calculate the general level of support.

the level of their overall support. The popularity is coded as an ordinal variable where (1) stands for popularity rates lower than 25 and (2) for initiators with popularity between 26 and 45 per cent of public support and (3) for popularity rates higher than 45 per cent.⁴ The cutoff points for the levels of support have both a theoretical and empirical basis. From a theoretical perspective, when less than one quarter of the voting population supports the initiator then we can safely say that it has a low popularity. Empirically, we wanted to differentiate between high (up to 45 per cent) and very high popularity (over 46 per cent) because countries cluster around values in these two categories.

To measure the size of support in parliament for the initiator (H2), the percentage of seats in parliament in accordance with the latest general election was considered.⁵ The variable is coded (1) if the initiator is a parliamentary minority or an extra-parliamentary party, (2) if the initiator has minimal majority (50-54 per cent of the seats), (3) when the initiator possesses a comfortable majority (55-70 per cent of the seats) and (4) when the initiator has oversized majority (more than 70 per cent of the seats). The cutoffs were set according to theories of coalition formation.

The party cues (H3) were coded as mixed when unusual coalitions were formed around the referendum issue⁶, if traditional cleavages (e.g. left-right) were missing from the discourse⁷, or if single members of parties give recommendations in contrast to the overall line of their party. This independent variable is measured on a four-point ordinal scale coded (1) for completely mixed cues - corresponding to all three instances of mixed cues during campaign, (2) for cues including two mixed elements, (3) for cues with one unclear message and (4) for clear cues. The situation where all established political parties support the referendum issue is coded as a clear message, since the voters have no alternative viewpoints as all the parties are campaigning for the same outcome. The control variables are coded as follows: for type of

⁴ In two cases we used proxies for popularity rates. In the Luxembourg referendum on the Constitution of the European Union (2005), the initiators - Christian Social People's Party and the Democratic Party - were coded with 3 (more than 45 per cent of public support) since these are the two big parties out of the three in Luxembourg's political system. In the same line of argumentation, the initiators of the Slovak referendum on EU accession in 2003 were estimated as very popular due to the fact that all political parties were involved.

⁵ In the Luxembourg referendum on the Constitution of the European Union held in July 2005, parliamentary size at the moment of initiation in 2003 was considered, since at the moment of voting the initiators were split into government and opposition.

⁶ For instance, if certain political parties that usually oppose each other in general elections are on the same side in the referendum issue and campaign together.

⁷ If there was more than one referendum on the same issue, only the *current* position of political parties is considered.

referendum (1) if it is advisory and (2) if binding; for turnout (1) when it is lower than 50 per cent, (2) if it is between 50 and 70 per cent and (3) higher than 70 per cent.⁸

Results

Out of the 31 analyzed referendums 18 were successful (58 per cent of the total). From these 18 successful referendums, seven were on issues of European and NATO integration: accession to the European Union in Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia (2003); on NATO membership in Slovenia (2003); and on the Constitution of the European Union in Luxembourg and Spain (2005). During the investigated time period, only two referendums on European integration failed: the Dutch referendum on the Constitution of the European Union in 2005 and the Swedish referendum on the introduction of the Euro in 2003. Thus, integration of Europe is not only the most voted-on issue in the world (De Vreese & Semetko 2004; Mendez et al. 2014), but this type of referendum is also very successful.

Table 1 indicates variation on all variables analyzed in this study. For example, we notice that the majority of the analyzed referendums were initiated either by the parliamentary minority (45 per cent of cases) or by the minimal majority in the parliament (35 per cent of cases). Only five referendums were initiated by a comfortable majority. These referendums were: on the Constitution of the European Union in Luxembourg in 2005 (supported by 56 per cent of the Chamber of Deputies), on accession to the European Union in Poland in 2003 (supported by 56 per cent of Sejm), the two referendums in Slovenia in 2003 - on accession to the European Union and on NATO membership (supported by 64 per cent of the National Assembly); the referendum on Alternative Vote in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in 2011 (with support of 56 per cent of the House of Commons). As one can see, four referendums - all successful - out of five that were initiated by the comfortable parliamentary majority were on the issues of the European integration. This means that these issues enjoyed a solid consensus among the political elite. The Slovenian referendum in 2010 on resolving the border dispute with Croatia was the only popular vote initiated by the oversized majority - backed up by 96 per cent of the National Assembly.

Table 1 also includes the results of the cross-tabulations between each independent and

⁸ Invalid votes are not considered in the data. The only exception is the Swedish referendum on the introduction of the Euro in September 2003, since all the accessible referendum results were calculated with the consideration of blank votes. Several cutoff points for turnout were tried and all provided fairly similar results.

control variable, on the one hand, and the dependent variable, on the other hand. Percentages are calculated within the categories of the independent variable. The bivariate analysis indicates that (quite) popular initiators win more referendums than unpopular ones. Only one out of the four referendums initiated by unpopular government (the Polish referendum on accession to the European Union in 2003) or unpopular opposition (the two Slovenian referendums in 2011 on opening secret service archives and on measures against illicit work and the Lithuanian referendum on construction of a new nuclear power plant in 2012) was successful. In contrast, quite popular initiators won 75 per cent of the initiated referendums. Very popular initiators were paradoxically less successful winning around 57 per cent of popular votes. The positive association coefficient confirms this finding.

Table 1: The Association between the independent variables and success of referendum

Independent variables		Failed (%)	Adopted (%)	N	Coefficient
	Unpopular	75	25	4	
	Quite popular	25	75	12	
	Popular	43	57	14	
	Minority	71	29	14	
	Minimal majority	18	82	11	
	Comfortable majority	20	80	5	
	Oversized majority	0	100	1	
	Mixed	67	33	3	
	Quite mixed	60	40	5	
	Quite clear	29	71	14	
	Clear	44	56	9	
	Non-binding	29	71	17	
	Binding	57	43	14	
	Below 50%	42	58	19	
	50-70%	50	50	8	
	Above 70%	25	75	4	

Note: Reported coefficients are Phi.

** significant at p < 0.05.

The relationship between the size of parliamentary majority and success rates of referendums (H2) finds the strongest empirical support (association coefficient of 0.55, significant at the 0.05 level. Initiators enjoying comfortable or oversized majority in the parliament tend to win referendums on a regular basis, while parliamentary minority wins initiated popular votes only in 29 per cent of cases. The success of initiators with minimal majority in the parliament are fairly similar – at a very high level – with those initiated by a comfortable majority (success rate

of 82 and 80 per cent respectively).

The analysis of party cues shows that mixed or quite mixed cues do not contribute to the success of a referendum (failure rate between 60 and 67 per cent) which is in line with the expectation (H3). Referendums accompanied by quite clear cues (with one confusing element) are more successful than the ones with clear cues (in 71 and 56 per cent of cases respectively). One possible explanation of this difference lies in the number of actors supporting the referendum. When the number of actors in favor of the referendum is small, the cues are more likely to be clear. When this number increases, the cues become less clear but also the likelihood for success increases since each political party chips in with its own supporters.

Binding referendums appear to be less successful than the non-binding ones. Of the non-binding referendums, 71 per cent were adopted, while only 43 per cent of the binding referendums were successful. This concurs with the conclusion that in modern democracies non-binding referendums have the same political power as binding ones (Beramendi et al. 2008, 53). Another possible explanation for this difference is that the requirements for non-binding referendums are more relaxed than those for the binding ones (e.g. quorum of approval, quorum of participation). Furthermore, the topics of non-binding referendums may be more appealing to citizens than those of some binding referendums. In the case of the later, since their outcome will be implemented, the initiators may be more cautious to subject to vote controversial issues. The filtering process may thus diminish the appeal of the topic to the electorate. The analysis of turnout shows that this factor is weakly associated with the success of referendums. There are more successful referendums within the low turnout category compared to the ones with average turnout. However, three out of four referendums with high turnout were successful.

Let us now turn to the multivariate analysis and see how these variables can explain the likelihood of referendum success. Table 2 includes two models of binary logistic regression: the first tests the three formulated hypotheses and the second includes the control variables. The pseudo- R^2 indicates a good fit of the model with a higher value for the one including the control variables. When interpreting the results, we will refer both to statistical significance and to strength of effect (since this is the entire universe of cases and not a representative sample). The results broadly confirm the findings of the bivariate correlations. The popularity of the initiator increases only marginally the likelihood for success in a referendum (OR=1.07). When controlling for type of referendum and turnout (model 2) this likelihood is considerably higher

(OR=2.11) indicating the existence of a strong positive effect. Consequently, there is empirical support for H1 only when including the control variables.

The size of parliamentary majority (H2) finds strong empirical support and initiators with a comfortable majority in the legislature are almost five times (OR=4.94, statistically significant at 0.1) more likely to succeed as compared to the initiators from the parliamentary minority. In the model that includes the control variables the likelihood is even higher (OR=6.39, statistically significant at the 0.05 level). A similar strong effect is visible for the party cues (H3): referendums with clear political cues are 1.61 times more likely to be successful compared to those with mixed cues). The effect is considerably stronger (OR=3.99) and statistically significant at the 0.1 level when controlling for type of referendums and turnout.

Table 2: Binary logistic regression

	Model 1	Model 2
Popularity of the Initiator	1.07 (0.63)	2.11 (0.80)
Size of Parliamentary Majority	4.94* (0.70)	6.39** (0.76)
Party Cues	1.61 (0.51)	3.99* (0.91)
Type of Referendum		0.04** (1.40)
Turnout		1.34 (0.97)
Nagelkerke R ²	0.33	0.56
-2 log likelihood	32.06	24.43
N		30

Note: Reported coefficients are odds-ratios (standard errors in brackets).
 ** significant at p < 0.05; * significant at p < 0.1;

Among the control variables, the analysis shows that the type of referendums have an almost deterministic effect on the success of a referendum. According to the results, binding referendums are approximately 20 times less likely to be successful than the non-binding ones (for OR smaller than 1 we interpret the reciprocal), a finding which contradicts the theory. The result is somewhat surprising given the relatively weak association between type and success of referendums (see Table 1). One explanation for the strong effect is the presence of other variables in the model: for example, many non-binding referendums were initiated by parliamentary majorities or benefit from clear party cues; both factors are likely to augment the statistical effect for types of referendums. Referendums with high turnout have slightly higher chances of success than the ones with low turnout (OR=1.34).

Conclusion

This article explored the effect of institutional factors on the success of top-down referendums organized in Europe between 2001 and 2013. The statistical (bivariate and the binary logistic regression) illustrated that the size of parliamentary majority and the clarity of party cues are influential factors for a referendum success. The popularity of the initiator fails to provide compelling explanatory power. While quite popular initiators are more successful than unpopular initiators, the comparison of the referendums initiated by very popular and quite popular initiators shows that very popular initiators are less successful. This finding suggests that the popularity of the initiator contributes to the outcome of a referendum only to a limited extent.

These findings nuance and complement the picture drawn by previous research on referendums. The article bears broader methodological and empirical implications. It proposed an analytical framework aimed at the identification of a set of institutional factors and their potential impact on the success of referendums Europe-wide. It put together several variables derived from the literature and used in previous research to expand the scope of existing dimensions. The framework is not country specific and is applicable to a wide range of referendums, thus providing a relevant reference point for further research in or outside Europe. We also suggested a measurement for successful referendums and advanced the idea of standard measurement for initiator's popularity and party cues. This allows for comparative studies (medium and large N) that can move beyond single-case studies where the measurement of such variables often follows a qualitative or context-sensitive path.

Empirically, this is the first comparative study focusing on the institutional components of referendums' success in Europe in the 21st century. This paper serves as a significant endeavor promoting the thorough understanding of how referendums function and how they can be won. In this sense, our findings build a bridge between academics and policy-makers: insights over success enhancing/hindering factors for a referendum are crucial for initiators, their political rivals and decision-makers in general. The identification of causes behind the success of a referendum provides a practical competitive advantage to the campaigners as it encompasses the referendum experience and successful strategies in several countries.

Some inherent limitations occurred and they can be overcome by further research. First, the reasons and the subsequent results of the initiation were not explored. In cases where the initiators were against the referendum issue and the referendum failed, they turned out,

actually, to win and not to lose the referendum. These issues were not considered in this study and no differentiation between unsuccessful referendums is made. Second, due to access and language barriers media coverage and campaign financing issues could not be addressed. Future studies may enlarge the scope of analysis either by including these issues or by adding new types of referendums to the picture. More precisely, one could compare the ways in which institutional factors play a role in top-down as opposed to bottom-up referendums.

Appendix 1: List of countries with referendums between 2001 and 2013

COUNTRY	DATE	TOPIC	OUTCOME
Austria	2013	Professional army/ Conscription	Failed
Italy	2001	Regionalization	Adopted
Italy	2006	Constitutional reform (new powers to the prime minister and the regions)	Failed
Iceland	2012	Constitutional Amendment 1: Whether Constitution Council's proposals should form its basis?	Adopted
Iceland	2012	Constitutional Amendment 2: Whether natural resources should be declared national property?	Adopted
Iceland	2012	Constitutional Amendment 3: Whether it should include provisions on an established (national) church in Iceland?	Adopted
Iceland	2012	Constitutional Amendment 4: Whether it should include a provision on authorizing the election of particular individuals to the Althingi more than is the case at present?	Adopted
Iceland	2012	Constitutional Amendment 5: Whether it should include a provision on giving equal weight to votes cast in all parts of the country?	Adopted
Iceland	2012	Constitutional Amendment 6. Whether it should include a provision stating that a certain proportion of the electorate is able to demand that issues are put to a referendum?	Adopted
Lithuania	2008	Prolonged operation of the Ignalina nuclear power plant	Failed (low turnout)
Lithuania	2012	Construction of a new nuclear power plant	Failed
Luxembourg	2005	Constitution of the European Union	Adopted
Malta	2003	European Union Membership	Adopted
Malta	2011	Divorce for separated couples	Adopted
Moldova	2010	Popular election of the President	Failed (low turnout)
Netherlands	2005	Constitution of the European Union	Failed
Poland	2003	European Union Membership	Adopted
Portugal	2007	Legalizing abortion	Adopted
Slovakia	2003	European Union Membership	Adopted
Slovenia	2001	Fertility treatment for unmarried women	Failed
Slovenia	2003	European Union Membership	Adopted
Slovenia	2003	NATO Membership	Adopted
Slovenia	2004	Minority rights	Failed
Slovenia	2005	Political control on the country's public broadcaster (RTVS)	Adopted
Slovenia	2010	Border dispute agreement with Croatia	Adopted
Slovenia	2010	Public broadcaster law	Failed
Slovenia	2011	Opening secret service archives	Failed
Slovenia	2011	Measures against illicit work	Failed
Spain	2005	Constitution of the European Union	Adopted
Sweden	2003	Introduction of the Euro	Failed
The United Kingdom	2011	Use of Alternative Vote	Failed

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