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REASONING

## **COMBINING MULTIPLE CONSIDERATIONS**

VOTERS' USES OF CAMPAIGN CUES, SCHEMATIC KNOWLEDGE, AND HEURISTIC REASONING  
IN THE DUTCH EU CONSTITUTIONAL REFERENDUM

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## Abstract

This article investigates how people used campaign cues to make sense of the Dutch EU constitutional referendum. Following their lines of heuristic reasoning, it examines how they integrated multiple cues into a coherent account. Based on a series of focus group interviews, the study traces the connections people drew between concepts in their own accounts, modelling considerations as paths across a semantic network. Analyzing the argument structures, the study identifies the schemata underlying people's understandings, as well as the inferences relating these to the vote choice. It finds that people distilled little concrete information, but several general cues from the campaign. These were sufficient to render applicable various schemata, mainly in people's prior understandings of European integration. People interpreted this knowledge in light of the referendum proposal, relying on various heuristics simultaneously. Framing the same information in different ways, they forged their considerations into a coherent narrative.

Researchers have long been puzzled by how people manage forming opinions in European elections. Given extremely low levels of political knowledge, lacking awareness of institutions and policies, and widespread disinterest among the electorate, few voters can be expected to actually understand the choices they are facing. Rather, people are believed to take their bearings based on heuristic reasoning and cues gathered during the election campaign. There, governments, parties, media and others provide their advice, endorse or reject specific aspects of the referendum proposal, and inform the electorate about its issue content. Different actors offer their narratives to make sense of the issues at stake, guiding voters in drawing connections to their pre-existing beliefs and attitudes. Instead of thorough and systematic information searches, voters thus base their choices on a general understanding constructed by heuristic reasoning.

However, there are three major objections to this view. First, if election campaigns tend to be rather superficial and uninformative, it is doubtful whether they provide sufficient bases for heuristic reasoning to start from (Kuklinski & Quirk, 2000). Do voters merely follow blunt general cues such as domestic actors' endorsements (van der Eijk, Franklin, & Marsh, 1996), or does the campaign also convey more specific issue-cues (Hobolt, 2007)? We do not know how many, and what kind of cues people can actually distill from the chatter. Thus, one question that needs asking is what campaign information voters actually use in their considerations.

Second, heuristic reasoning requires that voters possess stable and well-organized belief- and attitude-systems. These stored attitudes provide the evaluative loads which, if activated by cues, are mapped onto the decision task at hand (Hobolt, 2007; Lutz, 2003). However, low knowledge levels have long led to the suspicion that people hardly hold any stable attitudes in European politics at all (Franklin, 2002). Although there is some indication that complex belief systems can exist without much need for concrete knowledge (Scheuer, 2005), it remains unclear how well people's uninformed European attitudes can support heuristic reasoning. Thus, we need to ask which attitudes are tapped by received cues, and how their evaluative loads contribute to the decision making process.

A final objection stems from the problem that heuristic inferences based on hardly integrated or peripheral attitudes are liable to informing biased, unstable, and potentially contradictory conclusions. While the questionable decision quality is more of a normative, not a theoretical concern, problems arise whenever different biases occur within the same reasoning process: If considerations triggered by multiple cues suggest contrary decisions, these need to be reconciled lest the overall judgment be deeply ambiguous (Popkin, 1991). People need to somehow decide which of the available heuristics they follow, and how they weight and integrate the drawn inferences into some coherent picture.

Thus, as de Vreese and Semetko lament, “the ways in which the contents and uses of campaign information serve to crystallize opinion” (2004a, p. 704) remain very much in the dark. Research has largely focused on accounting for heuristically informed decisions while eclipsing the cognitive processes leading up to these.<sup>1</sup> While some valuable inroads have been made using survey data (XXX), tracing individual inferences and contradictions is difficult without looking at the reasoning process itself. A more qualitative account is needed.

This paper tries to understand how exactly people used heuristic reasoning in the Dutch EU constitutional referendum: What cues, and what beliefs did people use to inform their vote choices? What heuristic strategies did they employ to draw inferences from these cues? And, finally, how did they integrate their considerations to arrive at one coherent judgment?

This study relies on voters’ own accounts, looking at what reasons and considerations people raise themselves, and what connections they make. It starts from an ethnomethodological stance of inductive analysis, and avoids imposing deducted expectations, constraints or evaluations on people’s reasoning. It makes assumptions only with regard to the formal properties of reasoning, which have been scrutinized empirically in Baden (2008; see also below). This approach has a number of advantages for understanding people’s opinion formation. First, it avoids survey research’s dependency on having selected the “right” scales to measure heuristic reasoning. Organizing people’s thoughts into heuristics based on their own accounts, this analysis promises

a more valid picture of people's reasoning. Second, this approach is less likely to systematically miss considerations not anticipated by the researcher. Third, people's own accounts offer an important check on the causal inferences usually drawn from correlation data. Since different theories often imply similar expectations, and the same observations can be accounted for in multiple ways (Hix & Marsh, 2007), qualitative analysis provides an avenue to understand the logic underlying people's choices (Miller, Wattenberg, & Malanchuk, 1986).

## THEORY

### *Campaign information & people's knowledge*

Among the many studies investigating campaign messages' impacts on people's factual knowledge and vote choices, there is surprisingly little reference to what of these messages is actually *understood* by the electorate. As a few authors note, the same message may lead to very different knowledge gains depending on voters' interests, prior knowledge, and predispositions (Lodge, Steenbergen, & Brau, 1995; Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992). What meaning people derive from a campaign is not any simple function of exposure or attention to what they were told (Iyengar & Simon, 2000; Popkin, 1991; Zaller, 1992). Cues may have been learned from messages, inferred from observations, reconstructed from a juxtaposition of new and old beliefs, or (most likely) gathered from a combination of all these. People filter, interpret, synthesize, bend and misunderstand information already upon perception (Brewer & Gross, 2005; Graber, 1988). Disentangling how certain information thus came to form a specific belief is far beyond the scope of this study. Instead, I start from people's perceptions of the referendum campaign and the information they distilled from it.

All this is not to say that the messages disseminated in a campaign are unimportant. Voters use the easily encountered campaign contents to distill new information, to update old beliefs, and – most crucially – to draw connections between their knowledge and the issue at hand (Graber, 1988; de Vreese, 2006). How voters integrate newly formed opinions into their prior political understandings depends on how they learn issues to be related to the proposal. To them,

campaigns often constitute the most important, if not the only available information source to organize their knowledge. This is particularly true for the European constitutional referendum (Hobolt, 2007).

During a referendum campaign, parties, the media, and other actors issue endorsements, provide accounts of the most salient aspects, and inform voters about the (real or believed) content of the proposal (Hobolt, 2007). Societal discourse marks specific themes as central to its understanding, and offers various, often contrasting narratives to organize the manifold cues (Druckman, 2001; Graber, 1988). To be sure, voters cannot possibly keep track of, let alone follow all these cues. Offered interpretations, even claimed facts may be contradictory, ambiguous or unclear to the observer. Voters are left to decide which claims they believe, which cues they find relevant, and which narratives they adopt as convincing. Based on these resources, people forge an overall understanding of the vote choice they are facing. How exactly they do so is the object of this study.

### *Schemata & frames in sense making*

Understanding how people generally organize their knowledge is key to detecting the more subtle patterns engaged to forge multiple relevant considerations into coherent judgments. Ample research in cognition holds that knowledge should not be thought of as discrete units, but rather as a network of semantic relations and associations (Brewer & Gross, 2005; van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983; Popkin, 1991; Raaijmakers & Shiffrin, 1992). Stored information derives its meaning from the contexts it is embedded in. The same beliefs, retrieved in relation to different subsets of the surrounding knowledge network, may imply different conclusions. This effect is commonly known in communication research as “framing” (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987; de Vreese & Semetko, 2004b).

People construct understandings by relating new information to their knowledge network, establishing enduring links to various other concepts. Information that cannot be related to existing beliefs is likely to be rejected (Graber, 1988). People draw connections selectively,

following only few out of the possible range of consideration (Brewer & Gross, 2005). They thus organize information into schematic structures, which group considerations thought of as closely related (Kuklinski, Luskin, & Bolland, 1992). People's understandings thus form complex networks showing both densely integrated areas and rather isolated, hardly connected ideas.

Which of the possible connections people make is informed by both frames in communication and schematic cognition. As all existing knowledge has been constructed before in precisely the same way, cognitive schemata and communicative frames function in largely similar ways. They provide cues as to which contexts new information can or should be seen in (Brewer & Gross, 2005; van Gorp, 2007; Neuman *et al.*, 1992; Shah, Kwak, Schmierbach, & Zubric, 2004), guiding people to discover relevant contexts. Each integration cycle thus further enriches existing schemata. Mostly, schemata are informed by frames received from communication at some time, but they may develop a life of their own. They enable people to identify related considerations also if they are not rendered salient; for instance, many Europeans could associate open borders with the EU. As a result, people's understandings are delicate, complex and historically path dependent networks.

From every node in a person's understanding, a wide range of potentially relevant schemata can be reached, allowing the use of multiple cues at a time (Conover & Feldman, 1984). This is particularly important when the issue at stake has no fixed, unambiguous meaning, as is mostly the case in political discourse. Trying to estimate likely consequences of the proposed European draft constitutional treaty, people command various schemata that might help filling in some blanks (Conover & Feldman, 1984; Hobolt, 2007; Popkin, 1991). Over the dynamic process of opinion formation, they follow various cues, rendering applicable a range of potentially relevant considerations (Neuman *et al.*, 1992; Shu, 2003; Sapiro & Soss, 1999). People judge the plausibility of these considerations based on how well these fit with what they already knew about the subject matter (Hobolt, 2006; Iyengar & Simon, 2000). Albeit biased and selective, people thus build increasingly sophisticated, coherent understandings.

*Social representations & attitude structures*

Previous research has demonstrated that certain heuristics are more likely than others to inform people's vote choices. People have learned to think of political issues in specific ways, relying on similar information and drawing similar connections; for instance, many believe that open borders entail security risks. Such patterns of thought are popularized through campaigns and other widely accessible media, including "popular wisdom" – generalized beliefs about the world, which are abstracted from concrete messages and disseminated via socialization (Gamson, 1992). They form social representations, i.e., sets of frames familiar to most individuals within a culture and sustained via public discourse (Brewer & Gross, 2005; van Gorp, 2007; Moscovici, 1961). Experiential knowledge, by contrast, allows for more idiosyncratic patterns of construction (Gamson, 1992). People possess information and make connections due to their specific interests and experiences (e.g., people in border regions associating open borders with cheap shopping possibilities). Beyond this, people weigh or evaluate shared knowledge differently due to their personal concerns, preferably adopting frames matching their interests. Within diverse discourses offering multiple frames, as is commonly the case in political communication, people retain considerable discretion over which interpretations they follow (Druckman, 2001). People's use of heuristics is thus both idiosyncratic and socially shared. Frames sustained in social representations provide crucial resources structuring people's reasoning. At the same time, people apply these frames selectively, and enrich them creatively with their own experiences. To what degree people regard the same heuristics as most persuasive is an entirely empirical question.

This is precisely the starting point for research in attitude structures and belief systems. Searching for recurrent, consistent patterns in people's beliefs and attitudes, studies reveal common images and stereotypes in a society. Abstracting from idiosyncrasy in people's understandings, they chart the shared knowledge and social representations pertaining to an issue (Conover & Feldman, 1984; Doise, Clemence & Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1993; Gabel & Anderson, 2002). Identifying and organizing widely shared beliefs and frames, this approach allows investigating what were the

core heuristics to inform people's choices. This study thus focuses on people's shared considerations about the EU constitutional referendum and investigates their schematic structure.

### *Understandings of the European Union*

Few studies have to date contributed to a sketchy but informative picture of people's belief systems about Europe. Several imageries are remarkably consistently turned up in different kinds of studies, both in people's accounts and media reporting (Hewstone, 1986; Medrano, 2003). The most salient lay stereotypes about European politics concern bureaucratic (over-)regulation, threats to national sovereignty and identity, the common market, and the disappearance of borders. Medrano (2003) describes these themes in great detail, stressing the different roles and weights they assume in different countries' discourses. Other less saliently recurring imageries refer to abstract ideals such as modernity and democracy, as well as to concrete policies such as agricultural, security, defense and labor market policies. Another recurring theme perceives European integration as response to the legacy of World War II, European fascism, authoritarianism and the division of the continent. Finally, people's accounts tend to reflect the strong role of states in European politics. Together, these stereotypes account for most themes people link to the EU. In an effort to determine an underlying structure beneath these themes, Scheuer (2005) found EU-attitudes to be organized into four dimensions: One dimension refers to the degree to which people showed interest in the EU. The other three more content-oriented dimensions relate to attitudes towards integration, political unification, and the perceived quality of democratic representation. According to Scheuer, attitudes towards EU integration are strongly driven by perceptions of the common currency. Regarding political unification, the core dimension relates to individual voting rights and citizens' influence in EU politics. Similarly, evaluations of EU democracy stress the responsiveness and reliability of European institutions, aside the national governments' trustworthiness in safeguarding citizens' interests. Despite their low knowledge levels people thus seem to command a well-organized set of beliefs about the EU.

### *Heuristics & sense making*

Both prior knowledge and campaign information, while offering rich resources for opinion formation, remain difficult to link to the voting task people face. Several heuristic patterns have been suggested regarding European voting, including cues from the national and European arenas. In view of the so called second-order national election perspective, voters resort to easily retrievable cues from the familiar domestic political arena whenever they lack more specific information (Hix & Marsh, 2007). Popular governments, a flourishing economy and unambiguous endorsements by the domestic parties are regarded as main drivers of European support. Relying on voters' low motivation to collect issue-relevant information, this interpretation is strongest if the salience of the poll is low (van der Eijk *et al.*, 1996; Franklin, 2002). The opposite (or complementary) view assumes that European politics is sufficiently salient to motivate voters to retrieve and consider their attitudes towards EU integration (Svensson, 2002, Hobolt, 2007). People may rely on general attitudes (e.g., towards bureaucratism or market unification), or evaluate specific issue domains (e.g., democratic accountability, or current policy innovations). Alternatively, they may rely on their attitudes towards distinct issues such as immigration (de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2005). Thus, while it does not specify which EU-related attitudes matter, this view insists that domestic considerations do not colonize European voting (Garry, Marsh, & Sinnott, 2005; Svensson, 2002).

From each cue, people may use different kinds of reasoning, calculating personal, national or European-level cost-benefit balances (Gabel, 1998; Shu, 2003), or relying on ideological or emotional appeal. They may scrutinize cues systematically or follow the first satisfying view that accounts for the information marked as crucial by the campaign. People are likely to try and combine various cues and heuristic strategies, drawing upon publicized frames and narratives to integrate available information (Milner, 2006; Sapiro & Soss, 1999; Shu, 2003; de Vreese & Semetko, 2004b). One mechanism proposed to integrate attitudes involves averaging the balance of positive and negative beliefs (e.g., Zaller, 1992). Nelson and Oxley (1999) argued that people weight considerations, discounting disconfirming beliefs in order to install coherence (see also

Tourangeau & Rasinski, 1988). The most sophisticated integration rule suggests that people try integrating contradictory cues into coherent narratives by means of re-interpretation (Pennington & Hastie, 1988). In the highly controversial political discourse surrounding the Dutch EU constitutional referendum, there were bound to be multiple, conflicting ways to put the picture together. Opinion formation necessarily involves deciding between different considerations and interpretations (Garry et al., 2005): Which perspectives are most plausible, which cues are important, and what considerations are peripheral (Garry et al., 2005)? Torn between different cues, people's accounts of why they ended up voting one way and not the other thus offer valuable insights into how they selected, applied, and reconciled those heuristics they used.

## METHOD

### Approach

Tracing people's thoughts, this paper makes use of the existing knowledge about how people construct meaning. Applying a connectionist network model of meaning and memory (Read *et al.*, 1997), it derives data about people's belief systems by transforming interview accounts into semantic networks. Based on the information explicitly advanced in qualitative interviews, this approach determines which connections participants see between beliefs. From this, it identifies the underlying schematic structures and assesses to what degree these were shared between participants (Doise *et al.*, 1933; Kuklinski *et al.*, 1992; Schaap, 2006). This approach is purely formal in that it does not require any preconceptions about the contents of people's thoughts. It performs a qualitative analysis, based on highly formalized representations of the data. Avoiding biases stemming from the analyst's preconceptions, it leaves the emergence of patterns to the rule-bound mapping procedure. It allows analyzing all references made to a concept at once, retaining the contexts of statements as adjacent regions in the network structure. Thus, the pursued approach allows a more systematic analysis than classic qualitative and ethnographic strategies (see also Höijer, 1990).

### Setup

A series of four focus groups of six persons each have been conducted in May 2006 at the premises of TNS/Nipo Veldkamp, Amsterdam.<sup>2</sup> Each group comprised three Yes- and three No-voters. Each was kept heterogeneous with respect to gender, political interest, and media use habits, but homogeneous with respect to social status (Kitzinger, 1994; Lunt & Livingstone, 1996). Participants were told the discussion would be about media use, so they were not primed about the investigated issue matter. All interviews lasted about 90 minutes. The interviews were conducted by a professional moderator, and observed by the researcher. The design of the questions was inspired by sense making methodology as introduced by Dervin (1991/2001), and combined with techniques from mainstream focus group interviewing. Over the course of the interviews, questions became increasingly focused and pre-structured, involving both recall, explanation, inference and projection tasks (Höijer, 1990; Kitzinger, 1994; Lunt & Livingstone, 1996; Neuman *et al.*, 1992). The complete moderators' guidelines, as well as the pre-test questionnaire can be obtained from the author.

## **Data Preparation**

All interviews were transcribed, taking into account all verbal interactions. Nonverbal communication was ignored for the present study.<sup>3</sup> Actual statements were stripped from all filler utterances (e.g., "you know", "I mean", "actually", etc.), redundancies, and expressions not made relevant<sup>4</sup> to the subject matter, following Grice (1975) and Kintsch (1998). Statements containing indirect speech and irony were rephrased to capture the semantic meaning of the participant's statement. Holyoak and Thagard's (1995) studies were used to identify and treat statements that used figurative and other paraphrasing speech.

All statements made by the participants were coded with respect to the semantic concepts raised (Collins & Loftus, 1975). Concepts could be concrete entities (actors, objects, etc.), qualities and attributes (characteristics, goals, etc.) or abstract ideas (e.g., values, principles). The codes were derived by grouping descriptions that were used interchangeably (Spradley, 1979). If it was not entirely clear whether participants saw concepts as equivalent, separate codes were created. By the

same token, the same word could be coded differently if participants used it in distinct ways, depending on the semantic focus (Kintsch, 1998; for instance, “constitution” referred to different concepts.<sup>5</sup>) Also word groups were considered as one concept if they could not be separated without affecting the semantic content of either component (Spradley, 1979);<sup>6</sup> for instance, “big countries” were sometimes treated as one type of actors, while in other instances some countries were merely qualified as “big”.

For mapping in a propositional network<sup>7</sup>, every statement was parsed into the contained propositions of the format [concept]–relation–[concept],<sup>8</sup> following a procedure introduced by van Dijk and Kintsch (1983; see also Kintsch, 1998; Schaap, 2006). Omitted referred-to concepts from preceding statements were filled in where required (Kintsch, 1998; Schaap, Konig, Renckstorf, & Wester, 2005).<sup>9</sup> However, this was only sparingly done to complete propositions with explicitly referenced concepts. Relationships between raised concepts were coded at the level of these dyads, discriminating between 14 generic relationship types synthesized from the work of Spradley (1979) and Schaap, Renckstorf, and Wester (2005; see also Collins & Loftus, 1975). Most of these types are directed relations (e.g., “discontent caused the outcome” is different from “the outcome caused discontent”).<sup>10</sup> Some other types are mutual, indicating that both participating concepts affect each other (e.g., “opposition between national identities and a European superstate” implies that one is detrimental to the other, and vice versa).<sup>11</sup> A final kind is undirected, or lacks definition (e.g., “currencies are associated with national identities”). Hierarchical relations (e.g., “The Netherlands are an EU member state”),<sup>12</sup> as well as modifiers (quality, time, location) are treated as directed relations.

## Analysis

Based on the discussion questions and assigned codes, all statements concerning individual voting decisions and explanations of the referendum outcome were identified.<sup>13</sup> Applying the mapping procedure to these discussions, a thematic map emerged capturing all connections made between raised concepts. To reduce complexity, coded concepts were collapsed based on the

functions performed in made arguments. Aside semantic similarity, collapsible concepts needed to be reliably related to the same third concepts in the same way, or used interchangeably by participants in a specific discussion passage (Spradley, 1979). For instance, the information-quality codes “unclear”, “little” and “bad” were collapsed if the point made referred to inadequate information provision; they were kept separate, however, when the discussion discriminated between “good but insufficient”, and “bad and plenty” information. Within the reduced map, thematic clusters were identified based on interconnection density. For instance, the concept “Arrogance” was linked to various governmental actors and actions, most of which were also interconnected amongst each other; a cluster labeled “government arrogance” emerged. From the range of participants referring to a cluster, it was assessed to what degree information was shared, allowing a focus on those considerations crucial to most participants accounts. In a second, more analytic step, the patterns in which participants drew connections between the emerging clusters were organized into larger narratives. From these, the three research questions could be addressed, focusing on what information fed the use of which heuristic considerations, and how these were integrated into a coherent account.

## RESULTS

Mapping the considerations people provided to account for their vote choices, a well-structured network emerges. Areas of dense interconnectedness tend to group thematically related propositions, carrying similar valence. Clusters thus exhibit those properties expected from schematic structures (Baden, 2008; Hewstone, 1986; Medrano, 2003). All schemata contain statements by at least several participants from different groups. Only few considerations fall entirely outside of those structures. Three areas can be distinguished: At the outer rim, several themes are raised sporadically by only a few participants. These are typically weakly integrated with anything except vote choice, and are henceforth ignored here. Second, several clusters are shared widely, but used only in some participants’ accounts. Others acknowledged their understanding of these considerations – e.g., when discussing others’ (believed) reasons for

voting – but eclipsed them in their own explanations. Finally, four clusters emerge as the stable core of almost everybody’s account, as is shown in figure 1: campaign information, personal knowledge, government behavior, and the European common currency (Euro).

#### **FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE**

##### *Shared cues & considerations*

The first common theme discussed the ambiguity of information disseminated in the (consensually disapproved-of) campaign. Provided information was criticized for being devoid of arguments, biased, controversial, unreliable, scarce, too late, or plainly “bad”. This was only infrequently elaborated, mostly by citing examples of confusing claims, or matters about which information was lacking. Starting from bad information, participants tended to move next to a neighboring cluster concerning people’s uncertainty and lacking knowledge about the referendum proposal. No participant qualified herself as sufficiently informed, although some claimed to know a few details about the treaty at least. From their confessions of ignorance, participants resorted to different forms of heuristic reasoning for guidance. Out of the range of strategies used, the other two core schemata appeared in virtually everyone’s accounts.

One of these heuristics criticized the government for its handling of the whole EU constitution issue and the referendum campaign. Typically, accounts blamed the government for the superficiality of the campaign, concluding that the politicians did not take people seriously as competent voters. Based on both concrete observations from the campaign, and more general attitudes towards incumbents and parties, participants arrived almost consensually at a strongly negative judgment. The government was portrayed as arrogant and irresponsible, and drew heavy criticism for raising exaggerated threats looming in case of a No-vote. Also, individual politicians were accused of failing to defend Dutch interests vis-à-vis their European counterparts. Further examples of similar behavior were retrieved, and the judgment was generalized. In all cases, incumbent evaluations gave a strongly negative cue. Even those who claimed to trust some political figures’ (positive) evaluations underscored that they voted Yes *in spite of* the government.

Next to these considerations, the European common currency provided the other main heuristic. The central line of argumentation saw the Euro as a symbol of EU-imposed harmonization sweeping away dear national peculiarities. In this view, the currency epitomizes the European threat to national identities, and thereby to personal feelings of belonging. Moreover, even Yes-voters agreed that the Euro had not delivered the promised economic benefits, certainly not to individual people. The constitution was seen as another EU policy imposed to supplant the next cornerstone of national identity, unlikely to bring much gain in return. Both projects represented a common European policy style marked by irresponsiveness and inconsiderate risky experiments. The (mostly strongly negative) evaluations of the Euro were transferred to the constitution. As before, participants argued, the government denied every possibility of adverse effects, while experiences with the Euro served to forecast that also the constitution would be full of bad surprises. The overpositive, shallow campaign only reflected the government's thoughtlessness, or worse, their deceptive intent. However, this time the constitutional referendum offered a chance to stop the experiment before harm was done. Additionally, it presented a welcome, if belated opportunity to file one's protest against the Euro as well.

Mostly, people who voted No did not make many distinctions between the Euro and the constitution, leaving the impression that both were largely two faces of the same thing. Conversely, most Yes-voters stressed that the Euro – admittedly relevant for many – was in fact unrelated to the constitution, and thus an invalid cue. Still, there were only very few positive references to the Euro even in Yes-voters' accounts. While many acknowledged the amenity of simplified traveling thanks to the Euro and other EU achievements, this consideration was hardly ever linked to vote choice. Other deviant uses of the theme lamented (usually British) non-participation in the Euro, or took the coin in other ways as a metaphor for desirable full integration. These individual endorsements notwithstanding, however, people generally agreed on the negative connotations of the Euro.

Interestingly, none of the four main themes concerns campaign information about the proposal. Rather, all core cues are, to different degrees, derived from observations about the campaign as such. The information environment, government behavior, and people's own knowledge provided little guidance as for the contents of the treaty, yet they sufficed to draw some crucial conclusions. People's observations of the government (as responsible for the campaign and co-author of the treaty) allowed inferences about the regard paid to public concerns in the whole referendum. The uninformative campaign suggested that there were few good arguments available on either side. People's own ignorance, finally, led people to retrieve those attitudes they held towards a similar issue – the Euro. All these cues refer to experiences shared – to different degrees – by all Dutch voters, explaining the high agreement between participants. People raised the same important facts, drew similar links between them, and shared even the evaluations. Arriving at rather similar conclusions, the only difference lay in whether they considered these heuristics as persuasive.

#### *Partly shared cues & considerations*

Outside the core schemata, agreement was clearly reduced. Participants disagreed widely about how additional cues related to the referendum proposal, and indeed which further aspects deserved consideration. Claims required more elaboration, and often participants drew different conclusions from the same observations. At the same time, evaluations of most facts remained consensual, and schemata revolved around commonly accepted beliefs. Outside the core schemata, participants were much more ready to tolerate claims they did not consider valid or important. For instance, Yes-voters acknowledged that identity fears existed, merely insisting that this did not apply to themselves. Mostly, participants simply ignored such references.

People resorted to three kinds of considerations for additional cues about the referendum proposal. First, cues from national parties were cited occasionally, usually supporting arguments about the information campaign. Second, feelings and intuitions played an important role for many, particularly the No-voters. Finally, participants introduced a variety of themes from

European politics, usually revolving around some salient EU-stereotypes. Out of these three kinds, the EU-stereotypes provided the richest resource by far, followed by the hardly elaborated or discussed, but highly consequential intuitions. Party cues were clearly least salient.

Despite their disregard for the campaign and the government, participants were able to distill some cues from the overall constellation of political actors. They repeatedly cited conflicting party cues to stress that apparently even the politicians could not make heads or tails of the referendum. Consequently, all information had to be distrusted, deepening but also legitimizing the initial confusion. Alternatively, the centrist parties' broad endorsement suggested that, despite contradictory information and arrogant politicians, the proposal must be advantageous. Others, however, took the same observation as proof for the persuasive intent behind the campaign, and cited the fringe parties' unisonous rejection as cue towards a No-vote. Notably, cues were only taken from party constellations. Single party endorsements were hardly mentioned.

Personal gut feelings, the second kind of additional cues, were usually expressed rather frankly and in direct response to the confession of insufficient knowledge. In most cases, these were negative connotations linked to general dislikes of European governance or dissatisfaction with the government and politicians all together. Aside this, people expressed doubts in the reliability of information ("if you don't know, vote no"), the consequentiality of the referendum vote ("our votes don't count anyway"), and the feasibility of the whole constitutional project. Those few raised positive intuitions were usually linked to European integration.

References to European politics, however, more commonly appeared as concrete claims about the referendum proposal, or beliefs closely based on common EU-stereotypes. Contributions mostly speculated about the constitution's impact on salient features of EU governance. Several participants expected the treaty to cut EU bureaucratism, increase efficiency and reduce costs. Another frequent hope was that the constitution would help unite Europe as a heavyweight power, standing up to the globalized economic competition and US hegemony. The treaty was seen as instrumental to harmonizing practices and strengthening the greater community. As a

third theme, participants expected the constitution to increase accountability and transparency, strengthening the Parliament and thus people's say in European politics. Aside that, several participants held that the treaty would enhance co-operation, most saliently in environmental, human rights, and security policies. This latter, most diffuse hope for better cooperation was clearly the most common expectation amongst the Yes-voters. By contrast, hopes for more democracy, while less common, were the clearly the strongest argument.

However, other participants raised more worrisome expectations, occasionally starting from the very same observations. For instance, several participants feared a deteriorating security situation, stressing not enhanced cooperation, but reduced border controls and increased migration. In close relation to this, a common theme focused on increased labor migration. Cheap (always Polish) workers were expected to take away hard-working Dutchmen's jobs. The Dutch were expected to pay the price for growing wealth in Europe's poorer countries. Although some felt sympathetic to sharing some of the Dutch wealth, most opposed this as disadvantageous for the Netherlands, as well as their personal well-being. Regarding the constitution's unifying power, No-voters tended not to associate global competition, but threatened national identities in a European superstate. Many feared that the constitution would further accelerate harmonization in Europe, stripping the Netherlands from everything "Dutch". Common images raised were anonymous Eurocrats and big countries dictating which laws could be passed in The Hague, as well as a silent decay of Dutch identity caused by mixing cultures. Most saliently, participants feared for Dutch legislation on abortion, euthanasia, gay rights and soft drugs, epitomes of Dutch self-perceived liberality. Participants were clearly most concerned about cultural losses. Reduced political influence played a minor role only, concerns about Dutch sovereignty being entirely unrelated to vote choice. Economic fears were somewhat more ambiguous, but quite common.

#### *Integration of considerations into narratives*

All recurring themes referring to European politics, including the Euro, focus on common Euro-stereotypes. Yet, interestingly, the implications drawn from these lie on two somewhat different

levels. As far as people expected benefits from the constitution, these refer to rather direct effects of the constitutional treaty. Even the abstract hopes for an EU trade bloc, or enhanced cooperation were typically made concrete by pointing to specific longed-for improvements. The treaty appeared as a minor, technical, but imperative step to achieve these gains. Consequently, Yes-voters were most concerned with the draft treaty itself, even occasionally citing its (believed) provisions. Often, they insisted that discussed themes were unrelated to the referendum proposal, limiting the range of relevant claims to the immediate consequences of the treaty. By contrast, most worries related to general aspects of EU integration. Links to the treaty remained vague – e.g., “I think it will become worse then”. To No-voters, the treaty symbolized the cementation of well-familiar long-term trends in EU integration, legitimizing the use of prior knowledge and experience. They hardly bothered to seek out, consider or cite the content of the treaty. While Yes-voters highlighted concrete, desirable changes, No-voters stressed the unnerving continuities in European integration.

Consequently, although participants relied to a large degree on the same information cues and core heuristics, they spun quite different narratives to integrate these cues and considerations. Within the core schemata, this was reflected in several subtle differences. Yes- and No-voters linked the same observations – little, low-quality information, a feeling of ignorance, an arrogant government and the imposed, resented Euro – in different ways to the vote choice at hand. Opponents of the treaty focused on the confusion resulting from the bad information, failing to find guidance for their vote choices. Based on the belief that the referendum had to be seen in the context of European integration at large, they resorted to their general knowledge about European policy. They likened the constitution to the Euro, and retrieved their concerns about threatened national identities, which were closely associated with the Euro. The related economic beliefs cued borderless trade, labor migration and personal economic disadvantages. Likewise, the monetary union reminded them of unwanted harmonization and legal imposition. The government’s shared responsibility for Euro and constitution demonstrated irresponsiveness to

popular concerns. Seen that light, the bad campaign reflected the government's disregard for the electorate. Negative feelings about EU integration and the government became legitimate cues to judge the referendum proposal.

The Yes-voters also started from confusing campaign information, but – identifying the treaty itself as the object of evaluation – focused more on those few details they had learned about the proposal. They underscored mismatches between the themes raised in the campaign and the treaty, qualifying the campaign not so much as uninformative, but *misleading*. Most themes salient in public discussion were rejected as beside the point. Acknowledging the importance of the Euro as a cue for many, Yes-voters nevertheless insisted that this argument was unrelated to the proposal, and thus invalid. Their specific knowledge – however defective still – enabled them to “realize” that the constitution was merely badly promoted, but worthy of support nevertheless. The government was seen as incompetent, but peripheral to the issue matter. Instead, Yes-voters inferred the likely effects of the referendum proposal from the few identified contents of the treaty. They accepted the claims that the treaty tried to summarize existing EU legislation, raising transparency, improving efficiency, and enabling further integration. Thus, they gave a crucial twist to their use of the (mostly negative) EU-stereotypes: Sharing the diagnosis that the EU is notoriously unaccountable, bureaucratic and cost-inefficient, Yes-voters saw in the constitution a cure for these ills. Rejecting, thus, negative experiences as valid cues, they opted for a Yes-vote.

## DISCUSSION

### *Use of campaign cues*

Despite their entirely opposing conclusions, people's accounts started from very much the same shared beliefs and experiences about European politics and the referendum campaign. People agreed on the contents and evaluations of almost all involved schemata, even drawing the same connections within the core themes. Although they learned little directly from the campaign, people's accounts were based for most part on their shared campaign experiences, as well as common knowledge cued as related in the campaign. People's information bases are thus both

surprisingly broad (especially given the uninformative campaign), and surprisingly consistent. Participants used their observations from the campaign to define the situation they were in. Some discounted the specific claims made in the campaign about the treaty as untrustworthy, deciding that only their general understandings of EU politics were available to guide their vote choice (see also de Vreese, 2006). Others trusted the information about the treaty, thus referring to their prior EU knowledge henceforth not as a template, but as a backdrop to grasp the significance of the treaty. Thus, while the former sought for continuities, the latter focused more on the changes promised by the treaty. Following the same themes cued in the campaign to retrieve a very similar range of EU-related attitudes, people thus regarded somewhat different subsets as most informative. However, people did not necessarily select information as appropriate because it bore valence matching their predispositions; rather, they retrieved their knowledge that referred to those cues they regarded as central. Those focusing on continuities referred mostly to long term trends with direct implications for their personal well-being – most notably, identity threats, labor migration, economic disadvantages, and political irresponsiveness. Those interested in possible changes, by contrast, juxtaposed the salient promises of enhanced efficiency, democracy, unity and cooperation with what they knew about the defective status quo.

Despite the preference for different subsets of their EU knowledge, participants typically acknowledged their familiarity with the full range of raised stereotypes. Bureaucratism and elitism, the single market and the global trading power, border-free traveling and cheap labor migration, intransparency, incomprehensibility and the democratic deficit, threatened identities, nivellating harmonization and eternal incremental progress – all EU-related clusters link rather closely to schemata outlined also in previous studies into people's European beliefs and attitudes (Hewstone, 1986; Medrano, 2003). These observations nurture the suspicion that people's EU-related attitudes share a relatively stable structure. Juxtaposition of the above results with Scheuer's (2005) quantitative analysis supports this view: Aside confirming the Euro's leading role in forming attitudes towards EU integration (see also de Vreese, 2004), her study likewise

echoes people's heightened concern for the representation of citizen interests in Europe.<sup>14</sup> In the above analysis, all main themes – government, information provision, and the monetary union – drew heavy criticism for excluding and inhibiting citizen participation. Whether voters saw the constitution as a chance to strengthen public influence in Europe provided a powerful cue for their voting decisions. Thus, it seems that people's heuristics in European politics are chiefly driven by only a handful of stable attitudes (see also Hobolt, 2006; Miller *et al.*, 1986).

### *Heuristic reasoning*

The kinds of inferences people made from these cues resemble, on the surface, the heuristics expected from the literature in European voting. People estimated the likeability of the proposal by resorting to their general EU (and Euro-) attitudes (Svensson, 2002), judged the treaty based on their evaluation of the government (Franklin, 2002), and drew in more specific beliefs and preferences about expected developments (Hobolt, 2007). Xenophobic and utilitarian reasoning surfaced occasionally in the discussions, as well (de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2005; Gabel, 1998). However, unlike the expectations held in most heuristic theory, people did not simply transfer valences from their attitudes towards cued issues to the vote choice (e.g., Franklin, 2002). Rather, people used the same evaluations differently. The inferences drawn from cued information were contingent upon how exactly they saw retrieved attitudes and beliefs as relevant to their decision. People's heuristics thus involved constructing a qualitative relationship which informed how attitudes towards the cue bore on the target (Shah *et al.*, 2004). Using the Euro as a template to understand the constitution, No-voters largely followed the literature predictions, translating negative attitudes into a rejection at the ballot box. Yes-voters, however, contextualized this cue, admitting that the Euro and several other things in the EU were in need of change, but concluding that the constitution posed an opportunity for improvement. Speaking with Nelson and Oxley, "this is framing par excellence: to concede to your opponents' factual claims, but to assert that, under the proper framing, those facts aren't important" (1999, p. 1058).

Thus, liking or disliking of the cued concept alone was rather inconsequential for vote choice. In fact, people agreed far more on the valences attributed to the themes raised than on the quality of their relatedness to the referendum proposal. Both Yes- and No-voters mostly relied on negative attitudes, Yes-voters turning them into positive cues by stressing the possibility of change. References to aspects of EU governance that were seen as already in a good shape (e.g., simplified traveling, the Single Market, see also Medrano, 2003) were clearly not central to people's decisions. Thus, the heuristics relied not so much on the valences of people's attitudes, but on how the referendum proposal was framed (de Vreese & Semetko, 2004b; see also Sapiro & Soss, 1999; Siune, Svensson, & Tonsgaard, 1994).

#### *Interaction of heuristics*

Frames were also crucial for people's strategies to integrate the various cues and heuristics towards a coherent vote choice. People did not simply select, average or weight contrary evidence (Brewer & Gross, 2005; Popkin, 1991). Different considerations did not compete, but rather informed each other in interactive ways (Shu, 2003). Trying to decide which heuristics dominated or tipped the balance thus bears little promise. Rather, people tried to fit those cues found relevant into a narrative that accounts for them (Pennington & Hastie, 1988). Heuristics could be combined only in a limited number of ways (Conover & Feldman, 1984; Graber, 1988). Once voters decided that the specific implications of the treaty were at the heart of the issue, they were no longer free to accept government disapproval as a valid cue. Whenever the core heuristics were discussed, controversy focused on what combinations of cues were tenable, and participants rejected major deviations they did not see as appropriate. However, outside the shared core participants relaxed this rigidity, tolerating or simply re-interpreting unfitting themes. Thus, the integration of heuristic reasoning apparently could not easily accommodate contradictions among those cues considered indispensable to account for. The context for interpretation was very much determined by the overarching understanding of what the vote choice was all about. These structuring beliefs carried rigid implications for the interpretation of the common knowledge, but

allowed various frames to be applied to more peripheral beliefs. There, cues could be legitimately ignored or re-interpreted, maintaining consistency with the core narrative. People's readings of the common knowledge thus structured their use of partly-shared themes – those themes that are likely to reflect participants' personal concerns (Brewer & Gross, 2005). This does not, however, mean that people's rejection or acceptance of cues in the core causally preceded, and thus limited their interpretation of all other beliefs. Whether people had been able to switch between different core narratives to accommodate beliefs they held dear cannot be answered from this data.

In summary, although people distilled little information directly from the campaign, they derived sufficient cues from it to retrieve and make relevant their schematic knowledge of European politics. Relying both on observations from the national referendum campaign and past experiences with European integration, people constructed rich links between used cues and the referendum proposal. Interpreting cues in light of these links, integrating various heuristics into coherent narratives, and applying different criteria to judge the validity of considerations, people arrived at vastly different conclusions (Milner, 2006; Shu, 2003; see also Siune *et al.*, 1994). They constructed complex, yet well-organized accounts of their vote choices, structured by their understandings of the government's role, the Euro, and the scope of the decision to be made. Relying on only a few familiar heuristics, people nevertheless made highly creative, rich and thoughtful use of the little information they retrieved through the campaign.

### *Limitations*

This study obviously suffers from several limitations. First of all, while literature recommends adding focus groups until contributions become redundant, the observed sample fell short of this requirement. Also, more confidence could be gained from comparing sense making in different information environments – juxtaposing, for instance, the French referendum – and at different time points – notably, also during people's opinion forming process. Given different social representations and higher politicization elsewhere or at different times (Milner, 2006), people might use different heuristics, or use the same heuristics differently. Also, people might try out

various accounts before settling for one. Based on the present data, one cannot say which considerations were actually decisive for opinion formation, and which were adopted merely to support a decision already made. Finally, this reconstruction of people's reasoning, while adding valuable insights beyond the reach of survey-based research, needs to stop where lacking theory does not warrant further inferences. A more interactive theoretical conceptualization of heuristic reasoning is needed.

### *Conclusion*

The present study has argued that people do not mechanically apply, weight and add up those cues available to them. Rather, they consciously select, carefully interpret and creatively integrate those heuristics they consider helpful. The breadth of simultaneously employed considerations speaks of a badly informed, yet highly reasonable electorate, using the little knowledge it holds to achieve the best vote choice possible. Their reliance on campaign cues is far from arbitrary, and involves thoughtful links being spun to explain government evaluations' or the Euro's relevance to the referendum proposal. Integrating these various heuristics into coherent narratives, voters gave their own meaning to the referendum choice. Deriving valuable cues from the campaign despite its superficiality; drawing upon their rich schematic understanding despite their lack of knowledge; and artfully forging the various inferences into a coherent account, people finally arrived at highly reasonable vote choices.

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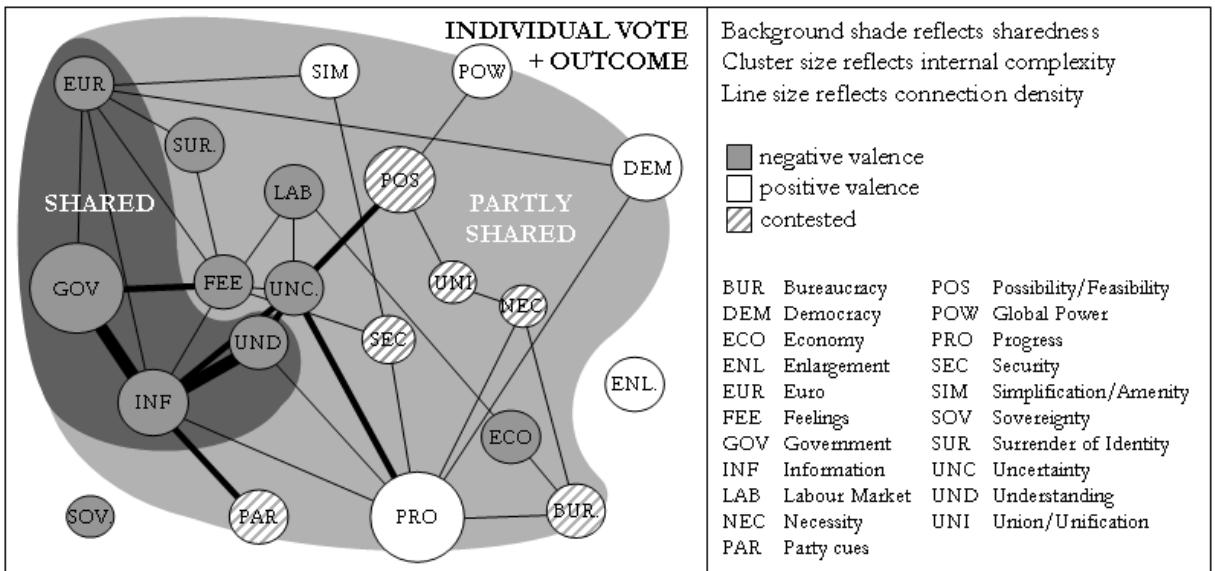
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Figure 1.

*Shared consideration in people's accounts of their individual vote choices and the referendum outcome.*



<sup>1</sup> These (often binary) decisions are heavily overdetermined. Concluding, as some studies do, from a mere match between actual and heuristically predicted decision that the implied reasoning must have taken place, is not convincing. People may coincidentally vote in line with their favourite party for entirely unrelated reasons. (XXX)

<sup>2</sup> The delayed setup was chosen to allow for campaign priming effects to subside. It tries to reconstruct voters' full information bases addressing the vote choice they faced; It reveals underlying implicit assumptions, contingencies and incoherences usually not accessible from top-of-the-head responses.

<sup>3</sup> Nonverbal communication is mostly non-propositional. Since the mapping approach relies on propositional networks, non-propositional data cannot be treated adequately here.

<sup>4</sup> Statements were regarded as relevant if they were explicitly (but not necessarily elaborately) related to the discussed subject matter, or raised in direct response to the moderator's questions (Grice, 1975; see also Mishler, 1986).

<sup>5</sup> a) *the* draft EU constitution, b) *a* constitution for the EU, c) a kind of legal document, d) an (unspecified) actual national constitution, or e) a specified one. For details see the code book in the appendix.

<sup>6</sup> See also Mishler, 1986 for a similar test.

<sup>7</sup> Specifically, this network type involves named, directed links and treats concepts, not propositions as nodes (for reviews see Kintsch, 1998; Raaijmakers & Shiffrin, 1992). Propositions are represented as dyads of linked concepts, or longer paths across the net. Links can be associative or dissociative (Read, Vanman, & Miller, 1997, see below).

<sup>8</sup> All complex statements can be split into such dyadic micropropositions (Kintsch, 1998); e.g., "The constitution is a bad compromise" can be notated as [Constitution]—is a—[Compromise] and [Compromise]—quality—[bad]. Such propositions, rather than concepts, are the minimal unit of sense making (Holyoak & Thagard, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> Mostly references to preceding thoughts. When referred-to actors were unspecified, this was coded accordingly (e.g., We, They). Irresolvable references other than actors are rare as such sentences would be incomprehensible.

<sup>10</sup> action, causality, conduciveness, desire/goal, possibility/capability

<sup>11</sup> opposition, comparison

<sup>12</sup> object relation, category relation, possession/attribute relation

<sup>13</sup> codes retrieved: Vote Yes, Vote No, Result, and the question sections 2.2 and 3.1

<sup>14</sup> Scheuer's (2005) other two main factors discriminate people with specific or more general interest and knowledge about Europe, and those viewing Europe in terms of confederated national polities, or a federal, unified polity; both of these themes also played important roles in the accounts.