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REASONING VOTERS IN A FIRST-AND-A-HALF ORDER ELECTION

ELITE CUES AND AUTONOMOUS CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING

IN THE DUTCH EU CONSTITUTIONAL REFERENDUM

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Acknowledgement: Data collection for this study was funded by the Amsterdam School of Communications Research (ASCoR), and Professor Claes H. de Vreese.

Abstract

This article investigates how voters combined elite cues with judgments based on their own EU-related attitudes in the Dutch EU constitutional referendum. Reconstructing the considerations underlying their vote choices, this study asks how much autonomy uninformed voters retain vis-à-vis a European public discourse dominated by domestic elites. It traces the connections people drew in their own accounts in a series of focus group interviews, modelling considerations as paths across a semantic network. Analyzing the argument structures, the study identifies what knowledge and which cues informed what kinds of heuristic inferences. It finds that people's accounts relied both strongly on perceptions of domestic politics ("second-order national election heuristic") *and* their own attitudes towards Europe, and the Euro in particular ("EU-attitudes heuristic"). People interpreted cues in light of their related considerations, framing the same information differently and thus deliberately re-interpreting elite cues. Despite being constrained to the ingredients offered in public discourse, they retained considerable autonomy.

Most Europeans do not possess well-reasoned, closely held opinions about European politics (Franklin, Marsh, & Wlezien, 1994; Hobolt, 2007). Knowledge about Europe is low, and few care enough to seek and acquire specific information even if high-salience events put European issues onto the public agenda. Most voters, therefore, are reliant on elite-provided cues to make up their minds about European politics (Conover & Feldman, 1984; Karp, Bowler, & Garland, 2005).

As a consequence, elites potentially hold considerable power about people's vote choices. One dominant view thus understands European polls as "second-order national elections" (Reif & Schmitt, 1980), colonized by domestic political discourse and guided largely by perceptions of national political actors (Crum, 2007; Franklin *et al.*, 1994; Ivaldi, 2006). Lacking strong bases for opinion formation and disregarding alternative means of information, voters make up their minds evaluating domestic events, following domestically oriented media frames (Peter & de Vreese, 2004). Individual vote choices are uninformed, liable to elite persuasion, and directed at the wrong political arena. Elections are decided at the upper end of the vertical power divide (Voltmer & Brants, Conference framework).

Another, more optimistic view holds that, despite their ignorance, people may possess differentiated, well-structured belief systems capable of supporting European vote choices (Karp *et al.*, 2005; Scheuer, 2005; Svensson, 2002). Hobolt (2007) produces evidence that, particularly in highly salient referenda, people's genuine EU-related beliefs become important bases for their decisions (see also Garry, Marsh, & Sinnott, 2005). Provided with the appropriate cues, people might thus be able to identify which vote choice best fits their own interests. On the one hand, this implies that people remain at least indirectly dependent on elite discourse, to the degree that they still follow elite cues to identify their relevant EU-attitudes (Hobolt, 2007). On the other hand, however, European voting might reflect uninformed, but at least meaningful, reasoned choices about EU politics. Power moves down towards the electorate (Voltmer & Brants).

Scholars from both perspectives agree that voter independence is likely to increase as salience of a poll rises (Franklin, 2002; Hobolt, 2007). In most cases, the most plausible expectation is that

voters will simultaneously rely, to differing degrees, on both elite-provided cues and own judgments. Moving down along a continuum from elite domination to full autonomy, voters may focus on domestic politics, apply specific EU-related attitudes highlighted by domestic elites, or rely predominantly on their own general judgments about Europe.

This study investigates to what degree Dutch voters' choices in the EU constitutional referendum were driven and constrained by, or independent of the discourse of domestic elites: What considerations played a role for people's vote choices? What cues – and whose cues – did people follow? And, finally, how did they reconcile different considerations into one coherent vote choice? The study relies on voter's own accounts, looking at what reasons and considerations people raised themselves, and what connections they made. It thus starts from an ethnomethodological stance of inductive analysis, and avoids imposing deducted expectations or logical constraints on people's reasoning. It makes assumptions only with regard to the formal properties of reasoning, which have been scrutinized empirically in Baden and de Vreese (forthcoming; 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 is less likely to systematically miss other considerations not anticipated by the researcher. Second, 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

This study draws upon theory in two main ways. On the one hand, literature from cognitive and social psychology is utilized in order to develop a methodology capable of distilling people's

strategies in sense making from their accounts. On the other hand, this study links to the substantive literature about elite cues and heuristics in European voting, and people's understandings of the European Union.

Schemata, heuristics & frames in sense making

Understanding how people generally organize their knowledge is key to detecting how voters link their judgments to various relevant considerations. 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; Raaijmakers & Shiffrin, 1992; van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983). Stored information derives its meaning from the contexts it is embedded in. Concepts commonly seen as related form schematic structures (Kuklinski, Luskin, & Bolland, 1992). These can be conceptualized as densely integrated areas within complex cognitive networks. Such schemata have been thought of as the bricks of meaning construction, grouping closely related beliefs, carrying emotional valence, and capable of acting as wholes (van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983). All information within a cognitive network is interpreted with against the context of those subsets of the surrounding knowledge that are seen as related. The same beliefs, retrieved in relation to different schemata, carrying different valence, may thus imply different conclusions. In communication research, this effect is commonly known as "framing" (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987; de Vreese & Semetko, 2004).

People draw connections selectively, following only few out of the possible range of considerations. Which connections people make is informed by both frames in communication the organization of schematic knowledge, suggesting which contexts information can or should be seen in (Brewer & Gross, 2005; Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992; Shah, Kwak, Schmierbach & Zubric, 2004; van Gorp, 2007). Retrieving stored valence from these activated schemata, people re-construct their attitudes towards information. Connections established in schematic knowledge enable people to identify related considerations also if they are not cued in discourse; for instance, many Europeans could associate open borders in Europe with facilitated traveling.

Following cued or learned considerations, people gather a range of relevant attitudes to inform their judgments. Whenever an issue is connected to a variety of potentially relevant schemata, this means that it has no fixed, unambiguous meaning, as is mostly the case in political discourse. Trying to estimate likely consequences of the proposed draft constitutional treaty, people may simultaneously follow multiple cues to identify informative schemata (Conover & Feldman, 1984; Hobolt, 2007). Over the dynamic process of opinion formation, people thus render applicable a wide range of potentially relevant attitudes to inform their vote choices (Neuman *et al.*, 1992; Shu, 2003; Sapiro & Soss, 1999).

Political discourse, elite cues & idiosyncratic judgment

Since most schemata are formed reflecting of frames received from communication, the resources available for people's opinion formation are strongly affected by public discourse. Gamson (1992) names three main sources of people's beliefs: media discourse, popular wisdom, and experiential knowledge. Both discourse and popular wisdom influence people's cognitions in a largely uniform way, proliferating elite-created frames and accepted beliefs. Feeding their particular readings into the public debate, political actors compete for the prerogative of interpretations of current political issues (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Propagated frames may define, for instance, open borders in Europe as a security risk, or as freedom of travel. Views that are commonly accepted are reiterated in media and private communications and, over time, evolve into popular wisdom. Such sets of frames sustained in political discourse form social representations, i.e., interpretations familiar to most individuals within a public sphere (Brewer & Gross, 2005; Moscovici, 1961; van Gorp, 2007). People learn to think of political issues in similar ways, relying on similar information and drawing similar connections.

People's 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 their shared knowledge from

political discourse differently due to their personal concerns, preferably adopting frames matching their interests. Within diverse discourses containing multiple competing elite frames, as is commonly the case in political communication, people retain considerable discretion over which interpretations they follow (Druckman, 2001). The more diverse the frames in political and media discourse, the easier can people defend their independent judgments against the swaying influence of elite cues. People's use of heuristics is thus both idiosyncratic and socially shared. Frames sustained in public discourse provide crucial resources structuring and constraining 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.

Seen from this perspective, the initial research questions can be reformulated: First, do those schemata that underfeed people's vote choices predominantly refer to domestic politics, or to European issues? Second, to what degree do people's retrieved attitudes reflect interpretations taken over from elite discourse, as opposed to their personal conclusions? And third, within the range of potentially relevant schemata, how much freedom do people retain over which attitudes they base their judgments upon?

Heuristics in European voting

When constructing an understanding, people do not randomly draw upon any information they encounter. Rather, they employ specific strategies – heuristics – that inform what kinds of cues are regarded as informative when searching for relevant attitudes. Previous research has demonstrated that two heuristics are more likely than others to underlie people's European vote choices: the second-order national election perspective and the European attitudes perspective. Other approaches to heuristic voting – e.g., cognitive mobilization, utilitarian benefits calculations, xenophobic voting (de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2005) – all concern specific explanations for people's EU-attitudes, and can be considered as differentiations within the European perspective.

Domestic party cues and government evaluations form the bedrock foundation of the second-order national election perspective (Reif & Schmitt, 1980). Voters follow these easily retrievable evaluations from the familiar domestic political discourse whenever they lack more specific information, and the motivation to get it (Hix & Marsh, 2007). People are likely to support referenda to the degree that the government is seen as competent and economically successful, and their preferred party endorses the proposal (Carrubba & Timpone, 2005, Franklin, 2002; Franklin, van der Eijk & Marsh, 1995; Pierce, Valen & Listhaug, 1983). Opinion formation about the referendum is effectively substituted by a judgment about the trustworthiness or likeability of domestic cue givers: “European elections are really directed towards the national arena” (van der Eijk, Franklin, & Marsh, 1996, p. 158). Strategic communications by domestic politicians as well as domestically oriented coverage in the national media effectively determine the vote. What voters think about Europe does not play a role at all.

Building upon voters’ perception of low stakes, this explanation is strongest if, and to the degree that, salience of a poll is low (van der Eijk *et al.*, 1996; Franklin *et al.*, 1994). However, judging from high turnout and media attention, this is clearly not the case for many European referenda, including the Dutch referendum in 2005. (Franklin, 2002; Garry *et al.*, 2005; Hobolt, 2007; Ivaldi, 2006; de Vreese & Semetko, 2004). Particularly for highly salient European referenda, some evidence points towards people’s own EU-related attitudes being important foundations for their vote choices (Garry *et al.*, 2005; Hobolt, 2007; Svensson, 2002). The second main heuristic thus considers European polls to be “first order elections” fought over and decided by European issues (Crum, 2007; Garry *et al.*, 2005). Which kinds of issues and attitudes matter, however, is not entirely clear. People may rely on general attitudes (e.g., towards bureaucratism or market unification) or retrospectively evaluate the state of affairs in specific issue domains (e.g., democratic accountability, or current policy innovations); they may be forward-looking and calculate personal, national or European-level cost-benefit balances (Gabel, 1998; Ivaldi, 2006; Karp *et al.*, 2005; Ray, 2003; Shu, 2003); or they may rely on their ideological attachment or

xenophobic resentment for guidance (de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2005). Thus, even if European attitudes underlie people's European vote choices, this leaves plenty of space for national elites to influence which kinds of attitudes voters draw upon. Due to their low knowledge levels and scant awareness of European politics, voters' uncued stances towards the referendum issue are expected to be highly contingent and time-inconsistent (e.g., Franklin, 2002; Franklin *et al.*, 1994). By selectively highlighting certain kinds of considerations, journalists and political strategists may still lead the electorate to largely follow their predefined cleavages. People should be able to resist such elite framing only to the degree that they possess well-developed schematic understandings of how issues are related. Although evidence exists that this is generally possible (e.g., Graber, 1988), how much autonomy voters can derive from their schematic understandings is unknown.

Understandings of the European Union

There is to date no measure to assess the degree of organization in Europeans' understandings of EU politics. However, several imageries are remarkably consistently turned up in different kinds of studies, both in people's accounts and media reporting (e.g., 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). 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 depicts European integration as response to the legacy of World War II, European fascism, authoritarianism and the division of the continent. Finally, accounts tend to reflect the strong role of states in European politics. Together, these stereotypes account for most themes linked to the EU, both in public discourse and in people's understandings.

Since most of these themes come with particular feelings and connotations attached, elites may try and foster certain interpretations by selectively highlighting these themes. For instance, identity concerns and threats to the labor market were among the favorite themes raised by the

No camp (CU, 2005; SP, 2005); the legacy of European conflicts and the common market played salient roles in the liberal party's pro-referendum campaign (VVD, 2005); and combating overregulation and increasing EU efficiency loomed large in the official government addresses endorsing the treaty (Aarts & van der Kolk, 2005; Politiek-Digitaal, 2005).

At the same time, those stereotypes referred to by elites form the ingredients of people's European schematic knowledge. Scheuer (2005) found people's 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. The named stereotypes can thus be seen as parts of a well-structured belief system. To the degree that voters can independently link their beliefs to these underlying general concerns, they might therefore be able to construct EU-related judgments independently from elite guidance.

Sense making

Both domestic and European heuristics offer rich resources for opinion formation. It is thus likely that people will, to a certain extent, use both to found their judgments (Ray, 2003). However, to the degree that people rely upon multiple attitudes simultaneously, this introduces the probability of considerations pointing in different directions. People may be aware of both arguments in favor and against the referendum issue, or may even have different ideas of how a retrieved attitude maps onto the decision task at hand. The implications of disliking, for instance, European bureaucracy for voting one way or another are not necessarily self-explanatory. Some cues may be easy to follow – e.g., sympathy for extreme nationalist parties is likely to cue people

towards voting no. Integrating multiple and ambiguous cues, however, there are bound to be various, conflicting ways to put the picture together. People may simply average valences of retrieved attitudes (e.g., Zaller, 1992), weigh considerations differently (Nelson & Oxley, 1999), discount disconfirming beliefs (Tourangeau & Rasinski, 1988) or re-frame conflicting information within greater narratives (Pennington & Hastie, 1988). Regardless of the rule people apply, opinion formation necessarily involves deciding between different considerations and interpretations (Garry *et al.*, 2005). This need to choose is crucial, because it allows forming personal discretionary preferences even when utilizing considerations pre-fabricated by elite communication. Integrating multiple cues, people necessarily possess some freedom in deciding which cues they give priority to, and which they discount, counterargue, or reframe. Torn between different cues, people's accounts of why they ended up voting one way and not the other thus offer valuable insights into their relative dependence on discourse-provided cues.

METHOD

Approach

Applying a connectionist network model of meaning and memory (Read, Vanman, & Miller, 1997), this paper derives data about people's belief systems by transforming interview accounts into semantic networks. It determines which connections participants see between beliefs based on explicitly provided information. Mapping the emerging patterns, it identifies underlying schematic structures and assesses to what degree these were shared between participants (Doise, Clemence, & Lorenzi-Cioldi, 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. 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, this approach allows a more systematic analysis than other 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. This delayed setup was deliberately chosen to allow for campaign priming effects to subside. Reconstructing voters' full information bases addressing the vote choice they faced, it reveals underlying implicit assumptions, contingencies and incoherences, which are usually not accessible from top-of-the-head responses. Despite the difficulty of causally linking accounts to voting decisions, I believe that this approach reflects the meaning constructed over the period of the campaign more validly than primed responses gathered from within the campaign context. Public discourse abandoned the issue right after the referendum¹ so I feel safe that people's understandings have changed little in the meantime.

Each interview group comprised three Yes- and three No-voters and was kept heterogeneous with respect to gender, political interest, and media use habits. Social group membership (students, white- and blue-collar workers, senior citizens) was kept homogeneous within groups to facilitate discussion (Kitzinger, 1994; Lunt & Livingstone, 1996), and varied between groups to avoid capturing only one particular kind of views. 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. Voicing disagreement and confusion was explicitly encouraged and probed for, and special care was taken not to let specific views or groups dominate the discussion. Starting from an entirely open explanation task ("How would you explain to a complete stranger what the EU constitutional referendum was all about?"), questions became increasingly focused and pre-structured over the course of the interviews. Later questions involved both recall, explanation, inference and projection tasks (Höijer, 1990; Kitzinger, 1994;

Lunt & Livingstone, 1996; Neuman *et al.*, 1992). The complete moderators' guidelines 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.² Actual statements were stripped from all filler utterances (e.g., “you know”, “I mean”, “actually”, etc.), redundancies, and expressions not made relevant³ 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).⁴ Also word groups were considered as one concept if they could not be separated without affecting the semantic content of either component (Spradley, 1979);⁵ 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,⁶ every statement was parsed into the contained propositions of the format [concept]–relation–[concept],⁷ 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, König, Renckstorf, & Wester, 2005).⁸ 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, Rencksdorf, 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”).⁹ Some other types are mutual, indicating that both participating concepts affect each other (e.g., “opposition between national identities and a European superstate” implies “national identities challenge a European superstate” and “a European superstate challenges national identities”).¹⁰ 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”),¹¹ as well as modifiers (quality, time, location) are treated as directed relations. Most relationship types can occur as either associative or dissociative relations (Collins & Loftus, 1975; Read *et al.*, 1997). For instance, in the sentence “I had worries about our identity” ([Self]—(possess)—>[Worries]—(object)—>[Identity]), either associative relationship can become dissociative by negation: “I was not worried about our identity” ([Self]—(not possess)—>[Worries]—(object)—>[Identity]), or “My worries were not about our identity” ([Self]—(possess)—>[Worries]—(not object)—>[Identity]).

Analysis

Based on the discussion questions and assigned codes, all statements concerning individual voting decisions and explanations of the referendum outcome were identified.¹² 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 groups were identified based on interconnection density. A “cluster” was defined as a subset of concepts where the neighbors of one concept were either directly connected themselves, or were connected through one more intermediary concept. 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 underlying the accounts was shared. In a second 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 & de Vreese, forthcoming; Hewstone, 1986; Medrano, 2003). All schemata contain statements from least three different groups. Only few considerations fall entirely outside of those structures. Three areas can be distinguished: At the outer rim, a few themes are raised sporadically, typically weakly integrated with anything except vote choice. Second, most 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

As is visible from the figure, by far most clusters refer to European topics. Discussions of EU-related issues make up for 52% of all 3068 codes applied to the text, and 55% of the 236 coded concepts. Domestic politics mainly forms two clusters, referring to government and party cues. With 6% of codes and 10% of concepts, this theme takes in far less space in people's discussions. However, within the core of shared considerations, both European and domestic politics cover roughly similar shares around 25%. Most considerations within the core refer to experiential knowledge and observations from the campaign, notably, the perceived lack of information, resulting uncertainty, and dissatisfaction. Across the whole map, however, this theme covers only 17% of concepts and 18% of codes. Thus, while amongst the core considerations all three themes were present with sizeable shares, thoughts going beyond the core were by far most likely to refer to European issues.

Schematic bases of considerations

Out of those schemata common to all participants' accounts, the first 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 considerations used, the other two core schemata appeared in virtually everyone's accounts.

One of these heuristics relied on a cluster criticizing the government for its handling of the whole EU Constitution issue. 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. Also the Euro raised strongly negative evaluations amongst almost all participants. The currency was seen as economic failure, causing prices to rise while not delivering the promised benefits. Furthermore, it symbolized a specific perception of European politics characterized by indiscriminate imposed harmonization, sweeping away dear national peculiarities, debasing personal feelings of belonging. Although the coin and its immediate implications formed the heart of the cluster, various linked considerations extended its relevance towards the broader political background of European Monetary Union, and European governance at large.

Outside the core, people resorted to three kinds of schemata for additional cues about the referendum proposal. First, cues from national parties were cited occasionally, usually supporting arguments about the information campaign. Rather than citing specific party positions, these usually referred to fringe parties' unisonous refutation, or centrist parties' consensual endorsement of the referendum. Second, (mostly negative) feelings and intuitions played an important role for many, particularly the No-voters. Usually expressed rather frankly after admitting one's lack of knowledge, these mostly referred to general dislikes of European governance or dissatisfaction with 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.

Finally, participants introduced a variety of themes from European politics, usually revolving around salient Euro-stereotypes. This type of schemata covered more than three quarters of all considerations raised outside of the core, showing roughly equal shares of positively and negatively valenced clusters. Among the negative ones, two could be considered close extensions of the (negative) schematic core: First, elaborating the link between the Euro and negative feelings, one cluster discussed fears about surrendering national identity and (far less importantly) influence. A second cluster linked to negative feelings and uncertainty contained considerations about cheap labor migration, fear of unemployment and economic losses. A related negative cluster referred to overregulation as well as the economic costs of EU integration and transfers within the EU. Finally, a largely disconnected cluster groups concerns about national sovereignty. Among the positively valenced clusters, the most important one discussed the nature and known contents of the Draft Constitutional Treaty, as well as its believed immediate effects on improved co-operation. Another cluster contained considerations about longed-for, yet unachieved European democracy and transparency. A third positive cluster contained all kinds of beliefs about simplified trade and traveling in Europe; this cluster was closely linked to the Euro, but not made relevant towards anything else, including vote choice. The last two positive clusters discuss Europe’s potential as a global political and economic power, and the export of stability and legal standards associated with EU enlargement, respectively.

Aside these, there are five clusters carrying ambiguous valence. The largest one considers whether the hoped-for aims of the Draft constitution are actually attainable, keeping regional and national diversities in mind; next to this, another cluster discusses whether a unified Europe is actually desirable, and another small cluster ponders whether the Draft constitution was necessary to achieve valued ends. The last two clusters, discussing security and bureaucracy, change in valence depending on the context they occur in; thought of individually, open borders raise fears about

security, and inefficient bureaucratic procedures are seen as characteristic for European politics; seen in relation to hoped-for improvements in the European political process, both turn positive as people imagine enhanced security cooperation and streamlined administration.

Use of cues and heuristics

While people agreed on the contents and evaluations of most schemata they used, there were various ways of linking these beliefs, employing different frames. Participants disagreed widely about how cues related to the referendum proposal, and indeed which further aspects deserved consideration. This took quite different forms within and outside the common core of shared beliefs. Within the core, the main discussion concerned to what degrees retrieved attitudes constituted valid cues for voting.

A typical case of a within-core controversy concerns the relevance of the Euro as a cue for voting no. Mostly, people who voted No did not make many distinctions between the Euro and the Constitution, as both were seen as two faces of the underlying European agenda. Both examples represented a common European policy style marked by irresponsiveness and inconsiderate risky experiments. The Constitution appeared as another EU policy imposed to supplant the next cornerstone of national identity, unlikely to bring much gain in return. The (mostly strongly negative) evaluations of the Euro were transferred to the Constitution. Conversely, most Yes-voters stressed that the Euro – admittedly relevant for many – was in fact unrelated to the Constitution, and thus an invalid cue. For them, while sharing the criticism launched against the Euro and the European policy style in general, the Constitution represented something distinct; transferring one's rejection of the Euro towards the Constitution was not acceptable. Likewise, Yes-voters also rejected the idea of utilizing one's referendum vote for a plebiscite against the, as they agreed, highly unpopular government. They thus considered and explicitly rejected the propositions suggested by the second-order election heuristic. No voters, by contrast, accepted government evaluations as relevant cue, as they held the government responsible for their role in European politics in general and the referendum campaign in particular.

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. Instead, the discussion focused on what contexts something should be seen in, and what conclusions could be drawn from these beliefs. Only in one case did participants also contest the valence of the beliefs themselves: The vision of a European superstate aroused fear amongst some, and hopes amongst other participants. In all other cases, schemata revolved around commonly accepted beliefs and evaluations remained consensual; instead, how these beliefs related to the vote, as well as amongst each other was heavily contested.

For instance, participants 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. For others, however, 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. Similarly, inefficient European bureaucracy implied a justification for voting No for some, but a need to support the Constitution for others, hoping that the treaty would curb the worst problems. Controversies thus almost always referred to how commonly acknowledged beliefs were related.

Integration of considerations into narratives

Interestingly, the implications drawn from the broad range of utilized schemata 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 treaty's immediate consequences. By contrast, most worries referred to EU integration in general. 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 future 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. 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 closely associated concerns about threatened national identities. Economic beliefs attached to the Euro 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; the 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 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 advanced by the No camp – notably, the Euro and labor migration – 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

Attitudinal and schematic bases

The above results provide ample evidence supporting the heuristic voting literature. People found themselves insufficiently informed, resorting to the most salient cues instead for guidance. These cues can be roughly grouped into domestic and European oriented attitudes, as well as experiences and observations from the referendum campaign. The range of cues people relied on was remarkably stable. The content of cited beliefs roughly matches predictions from the second order election and the EU-attitudes literatures, respectively: Concerning domestic politics, government evaluations were clearly most influential, supplemented by party cues and a few comments about the economic situation (Crum, 2007; Franklin *et al.*, 1995; Pierce *et al.*, 1983). European attitudes were led by the Euro as most salient (de Vreese, 2004), and comprised evaluations of most common EU-stereotypes such as bureaucratism, labor migration, market unification and defective democracy (Hewstone, 1986; Medrano, 2003; Scheuer, 2005). Thus, people relied heavily on those kinds of cues associated with the two main heuristics in EU voting. From the narratives spun by most participants, it appears that personal campaign experiences, as well as basic understandings of the decision task at hand, marked the starting point of sense

making; as initial heuristics, both government evaluations and attitudes towards the Euro presented about equally important resources for construction. As considerations became more complex and drew upon additional information, however, European stereotypes clearly dominated most accounts.

There are some departures from the expectations, however: Other than general government evaluations (e.g., Franklin, 2002; Svensson, 2002), people judged the government's performance quite specifically with regard to their role in European politics and the referendum campaign (see also de Vreese, 2004). They did not merely use domestic politics as the most easily accessible cue, but they explicitly elaborated and justified the cue's relevance. This conscious use of the second-order election heuristic also includes the possibility to find the cue irrelevant, and reject it in due course (Druckman, 2001).

Likewise, also within the European-attitudes heuristic, people relied on a variety of well-specified EU-related stereotypes; only amongst the No-voters, a relevant proportion of statements referred to general attitudes towards Europe as a whole. Mostly, however, people evaluated different aspects of EU governance differently, sketching mixed attitudes towards Europe in general (Scheuer, 2001). Still, they did not derive ambiguous vote choices from these mixed attitudes. Instead of linearly transferring abstracted attitudes, people constructed explicit links making their specific beliefs relevant to their voting decision (Pennington & Hastie, 1988). They saw attitudes as differently relevant and valid to inform their vote choice, discounting also strongly valenced cues as peripheral if they did not see them as closely related. They regularly acknowledged deviant readings of the same cues, and were capable of arguing why they had rejected these as minor, temporary, or not personally relevant to them. People interpreted their attitudes in light of how they saw them related to the referendum proposal, thus using the same evaluations in different ways (Shah *et al.*, 2004). Most notably, Yes-voters re-framed the commonly shared stereotypes about European bureaucracy, unaccountability and disregard for people's concerns to become those ills the proposed treaty promised to cure. 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; de Vreese & Semetko, 2004; Sapiro & Soss, 1999; Siune, Svensson, & Tonsgaard, 1994).

Regarding the selection of frames utilized by the participants, there is a strongly visible influence of those interpretations highlighted by the campaigning political camps. On the whole, Yes-voters' interpretations reflected much of the media's attempts to inform voters about the main contents of the Constitution; their accounts tended to accept the government's claim that the treaty mainly represented a streamlined summary of the status quo, changing little but increasing efficiency and transparency (Aarts & van der Kolk, 2005). All participants' accounts reflected the media's heavy criticism of the referendum campaign, and the government's role in it in particular (Schuck & de Vreese, 2008). No-voters followed the media-discourse to a lesser degree, relying more on their prior knowledge and EU stereotypes. Nevertheless, the range of stereotypes retrieved clearly reflects those themes raised by the No-camp actors, above all the Socialist Party (Aarts & van der Kolk, 2005; SP, 2005).

However, this is not necessarily to say that people simply followed these elite cues. Most crucially, they needed to decide which and whose cues to apply. There are several indications that they made rather conscious decisions about this. People routinely rejected proposed cues as irrelevant or invalid (Druckman, 2001). They drew upon their understanding gathered from their situation definition and other cues to decide whether specific heuristics were relevant to the decision as they saw it. They selectively combined various cues taken from domestic political discourse, European stereotypes, and concrete experiences and observations made during the campaign (Sapiro & Soss, 1999; Shu, 2003). Interpreting cues in the light of their understanding of other related issues, people drew heavily on their underlying belief systems about what things they saw as related. The elaborateness with which they justified their inferences defies the image of an electorate blindly following the first best cues. For instance, people accepted government behavior as valid cue precisely because they recognized it as symptomatic for a European policy

style that could be blamed on national governments. In constructing elaborate narratives about how those issues considered relevant were related, people demonstrated their command of reasonably well-structured schematic knowledge. Receiving, considering, but also rejecting readings suggested by elite discourse, people thus drew considerable autonomy from their ability to put issues into perspective themselves.

In summary, people's understandings of the European constitutional referendum relied on a wide range of considerations taken both from domestic public discourse, EU-related schematic knowledge, and personal experiences. Agreeing on most schemata's contents and evaluations, they drew upon various frames popularized in discourse to decide how retrieved attitudes related to the vote choice, as well as to each other. They argumentatively connected multiple considerations, strategically applying specific frames and organizing them into coherent narratives. What conclusions people arrived at depended, mainly, on what frames they applied, and ultimately, whether they saw the treaty as representing continuity or change in EU integration (Milner, 2006; Shu, 2003; see also Siune et al., 1994).

Linking back to the discussion of people's capability to form independent preferences, these results can be interpreted in more than one way. At a first reading, the high degree of agreement between participants' schemata can be seen as indicating a strong dependency of people's informational bases on public discourse. People relied on common knowledge, and constructed their opinions using, largely, frames provided by the competing campaign actors. Juggling with pre-filtered and pre-defined arguments and frames from elite discourse, the range of achievable conclusions is severely constrained. However, at a second reading, the variability of people's re-combinations of considerations suggests that people retained a relevant amount of discretion over how they utilized the information provided to them. People regularly demonstrated their capacity to entertain different narratives, considering their plausibility and ultimately deciding for one that, in their views, made most sense. While Yes-voters strongly reflected themes present in

the media, and No-voters relied heavily on elite-cued EU stereotypes, there are good reasons to believe that both consciously chose to see things this way.

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 a different discourse environment and higher politicization elsewhere or at different times (Milner, 2006), people might use the same heuristics differently. Likewise, an analysis of provided cues and enshrined social representations would be needed to further substantiate claims about elite influences. Another issue concerns the possibility that 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 into people’s opinion construction, needs to stop where lacking theory does not warrant further inferences. A more interactive theoretical conceptualization of heuristic reasoning, allowing interactions both between multiple cues, and between elite cues and individual constructions, is needed.

Conclusion

The present study has argued that, despite the salience of both “first-” and “second-order” elite cues in people’s reasoning, the most consequential choice concerned *how* exactly people applied these. Instead of simply following cues and adding up valences, they consciously select, carefully interpret and creatively integrate those heuristics they consider helpful. This conclusion belies depictions of a politically immature, dependent public, incapable of casting a well-directed, meaningful vote in EU elections. Being constrained to the set of ingredients presented by elite discourse, voters still demonstrate considerable autonomy in putting the pieces together. This

study thus speaks of a badly informed, yet highly reasonable electorate, using the little knowledge it holds to achieve the best vote choice possible. Integrating these various heuristics into coherent narratives, voters gave their own meaning to the referendum choice. Maneuvering across the dimly lit terrain of European politics, people rightfully concluded that both European and domestic cues were highly relevant for this First-and-a-half-order election.

NOTES

⁰ Data collection for this study was co-funded by the Amsterdam School of Communications Research (ASCoR). The interview transcripts, derived concept maps and the codebook can be obtained from the authors. Access to and use of the anonymized transcripts remains subject to restrictions due to privacy protection.

¹ Coverage in the Dutch press (including the 8 most widely read publications) fell from almost seven articles per day per newspaper mentioning the EU Constitution in the two months preceding the referendum to about one article every three days in the subsequent phase (Lexis Nexis search).

² Nonverbal communication is mostly non-propositional. Since the mapping approach relies on propositional networks, non-propositional data cannot be treated adequately here.

³ 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).

⁴ 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.

⁵ See also Mishler, 1986 for a similar test.

⁶ Specifically, this network type involves named, directed links and treats concepts, not propositions as nodes (for reviews see Kintsch, 1998; Raaijmakers and Shiffrin, 1992). Propositions are represented as dyads of linked concepts, or longer paths across the net. Links can be associative or dissociative (Read, Vanman, and Miller, 1997, see below).

⁷ 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 and Thagard, 1995).

⁸ 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.

⁹ action, causality, conduciveness, desire/goal, possibility/capability

¹⁰ opposition, comparison

¹¹ object relation, category relation, possession/attribute relation

¹² codes retrieved: Vote Yes, Vote No, Result, and the question sections 2.2 and 3.1

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Figure 1.

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

