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A reconstruction of people's understandings of the European Constitutional Referendum

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The world of politics is complicated. Generally, increasing complexity of interactions, indeterminacy of expectations and immense information demands characterize most aspects of contemporary society. However, unlike other domains, the need to understand politics is not limited to a few educated experts: In democratic societies, every citizen is called upon to judge political developments and proposals (Kuklinski & Quirk, 2000). This challenging task becomes even more daunting in popular referenda: First, issues selected for direct voting are usually those entailing most far-reaching consequences, which are hard to estimate even for specialists. Second, heuristics such as party cues provide less guidance in referenda (Hobolt, 2007; de Vreese & Semetko, 2004). Both is particularly true for the referendum on the Draft European Constitution, held in the Netherlands on June 1, 2005 (Aarts & van der Kolk, 2005).

Unsurprisingly, research has found that people are usually unable to grasp the intricate details of political happenings. Knowledge about even basic political facts is low; awareness of issues and problems rises and falls with media attention; and attitudes seem to be not half as stable and reasoned as one might prefer (Converse, 1964; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Due to even lower knowledge of supranational politics, scholars questioned the very existence of citizens' attitudes towards European politics (Franklin, Marsh, & Wlezien, 1994; Svensson, 2002). Yet, a growing body of literature shows that, under certain circumstances, people can still arrive at surprisingly consistent, change-resistant (Brewer & Gross, 2005; Druckman, 2001; Druckman & Nelson, 2003) and "rational" judgments (Gabel, 1998; Karp, Bowler, & Garland, 2005, Hobolt, 2007). Despite all their lacking resources, citizens somehow manage to make their own sense of political happenings (Popkin, 1991; de Vreese & Semetko, 2004). Exactly how people use information to construct meaning, however, is unknown (Berinsky & Kinder, 2006; Scheuer, 2005).

This paper contributes to filling this gap by mapping those schemata people use to grasp a political phenomenon as remote as the European Constitutional Process. It reconstructs how people use available information selectively and creatively for their own purposes, utilizing the formal, network-based view of comprehension advanced in cognitive and social psychology (van

Dijk & Kintsch, 1983; Raaijmakers & Shiffrin, 1992; Schaap, 2006). This approach contributes to current research on citizens' political judgments in two ways: First, the network-based conceptualization of understanding provides a unified platform to link different views on context-sensitive understanding, most notably research in framing, schematic processing, and social representations. Second, by assessing the resources of sense making from the viewpoint of the individual, it complements current studies in political reasoning with an audience perspective (Mishler, 1986; Schaap, 2006).

THEORY

In their review of the Dutch referendum campaign, Aarts & van der Kolk (2005) conclude that the debate had been less concerned with different preferences or evaluations, but with completely different interpretations of what the referendum was all about (see also Fossum & Trenz, 2006). In their view, Yes-voters understood the draft constitution mainly as a consolidation and summary of existing accomplishments. No-voters, by contrast, interpreted the Constitution as another important step towards some vision of Europe they loathed (see also de Vreese & Semetko, 2004). They constructed entirely different understandings of the situation confronting them (Kintsch, 1998; Mishler, 1986; van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983), integrated available information in different ways, and consequently answered different questions when voting in the referendum (Milner, 2006). This study tries to reconstruct these understandings, and to identify what differences people made in using the information provided to them. Therefore, it is necessary to review briefly what is already known about people's construction of meaning.

Construction of understanding & schema building

When building an understanding of what is happening, people seek to connect bits of provided information. They put evidence into relation with other information they perceive as relevant, (Brewer & Gross, 2005; Graber, 1988), using their experiential knowledge, or drawing upon popular wisdom and public discourse (Gamson, 1992; Haste, 1992; Schaap, 2006). Thus, they model new information and prior knowledge into belief systems, which are at least superficially

coherent, and account for the received information (Converse, 1964; Fiske & Kinder, 1981; Graber, 1988; Iyengar, 1990; Pennington & Hastie, 1988).

People tend to prefer understandings that are relatively parsimonious, suggest unique evaluations, and are thus easy-to-handle guides for behavior. In order to reduce the complexity of information included in their understandings, they use information highly selectively. Evidence is filtered upon reception, disregarding information that is seen as non-credible, inconsequential, or simply not connected (Gamson, 1992; Raaijmakers & Shiffrin, 1992). Processing and storage of information is highly synthetic, abstracting and memorizing only the perceived “gist” of processed information (Graber, 1988). Finally, information is linked to stored knowledge selectively, following cues. What knowledge is regarded as applicable depends on the schemata formed in prior construction processes (Conover & Feldman, 1984; van Gorp, 2007; Graber, 1988). Schemata are conceptualized as relatively stable subsets of knowledge which group considerations commonly activated together, and can be referred to as wholes (van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983; Graber, 1988). Consequently, schemata can overlap, group information by almost any criterion, and appear at almost any level of abstraction (Conover & Feldman, 1984). By building schemata, and thus storing constructed understandings in memory, people accumulate and structure knowledge to feed subsequent sense making processes (Berinsky & Kinder, 2006).

Cue based processing & framing

In most cases, simply matching information with stored knowledge is insufficient to decide which out of several related schemata are relevant. (Graber, 1988; Holyoak & Thagard, 1995; Schaap, 2006; Shah *et al.*, 2004). Context is needed to move beyond denotational understanding, and select what stored knowledge new information is integrated with (Asch, 1952; Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992; Raaijmakers & Shiffrin, 1992; Shah *et al.*, 2004). This process is commonly known as framing: By virtue of being embedded in specific semantic contexts, provided information suggests certain schematic structures as most appropriate for processing (Berinsky & Kinder, 2006; Valkenburg, Semetko, & de Vreese, 1999; de Vreese & Semetko, 2004). Frames

are semantic structures that make certain aspects of reality more salient than others. The selection of aspects implies some “central organizing idea or story line” and thereby “provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, weaving a connection among them” (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987, p. 143). Following this organizing idea, people can identify applicable schemata. Framing thus selects from a range of possible contexts, and thus suggests how information should be related to other evidence and knowledge. Framing thus shapes how schematic understanding evolves. (Berinsky & Kinder, 2006; Druckman, 2001; Neuman *et al.*, 1992; Shen, 2004).

This function of frames has been described also from an aggregate level perspective in the study of social representations. This theory holds that certain understandings become popularized in a society and culture, and form a repertoire of frames commonly available to its members (Axelrod, 1973; Brewer & Gross, 2005; Moscovici, 1961, van Gorp, 2007). Social representations build mainly through mediatized public discourse, which ensures both a wide distribution and relatively coherent structure of interpretations. Common understandings spread, and become objectified as cultural knowledge (Doise, Clemence, & Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1993; Moscovici, 1961). Social representations are neither static nor deterministic (Doise *et al.*, 1993; van Gorp, 2007). They organize multiple frames, a core set of which is relatively stable and widely shared, while other parts may vary and shift across constituencies. Also, contrary and competing frames can co-exist in a culture’s social representations, although coherence requirements tend to limit the presence of directly opposing frames within the same representation (see also Chong, 1996; Edy & Meirick, 2007; Kumlin, 2000; van Gorp, 2007).

Idiosyncrasy, values & permanent accessibility

Neither social representations, nor message frames, determinate information processing (Neuman *et al.*, 1992). On the one hand, particularly in political communication, multiple, often competing frames are provided simultaneously (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Fossum & Trenz, 2006; Shah *et al.* 2004). People may follow cues selectively, or process information in relation to more than one context to enhance the integration of their schematic understanding (Edy & Meirick,

2007; Iyengar, 1990; Kinder, 1998; Neuman *et al.*, 1992). They may accept frames as more or less persuasive, disregard or counterargue frames. People thus enjoy considerable discretion in how they model their understandings (Druckman, 2001). On the other hand, people are capable of making knowledge relevant to provided information even if no frame suggests they should do so (van Gorp, 2007). This is particularly the case if people hold strong predispositions and beliefs (Brewer & Gross, 2005; Chong, 1996): Individual experiences and convictions may highlight specific implications of provided information, while others would not make this connection unaided (Shen, 2004). Furthermore, where their core beliefs are concerned, people are both more motivated and well-equipped to construct meaning consciously. They may use their knowledge to discount, weigh, or counterargue frames, or even create their own frames. Thus, where people see information as related to beliefs they hold dear, these beliefs are likely to be an important resource in their sense making process.

Intentional construction & goal-directed biased processing

The third main influence in selective processing stems from intentional construction: As people form understandings, they often direct both their search for, use of, and integration of information according to specific goals in sense making (Brewer & Gross, 2005; Haste, 1992; Holyoak & Thagard, 1995; Smith, 1994). Thus, information relevant to pursued goals is more likely to be used, regardless of provided cues and frames. In the given case, the need to form a dichotomous voting decision for the referendum increases the need to avoid ambiguity: Constructions are most useful if they unequivocally suggest either a positive or negative evaluation of the European Constitutional project. Moreover, the campaign context allows organizing provided information by the vote choice advocated by its authors. Thus, it becomes easier to identify information that might conflict with one's emerging situation model *ex ante*, and to discount its credibility based on the implied persuasive intent. The more people are leaning towards either side, the less likely will they accept opposing information, and the easier can they avoid it.

Once a decision is cast, coherence of considerations can be easily crafted by discounting the other camp's arguments, and selectively accepting further information. While people should generally know arguments advanced by either side, they should highlight information supporting their decision, and suppress doubts they might have had. They may refer to contrary considerations as well, presenting their decision as carefully weighted and well informed; However, they would be expected to explain also why these thoughts had been dismissed in casting a decision.

Expectations for individuals' understandings

Summing up, these dynamics of sense making point at three main influences which form people's acquired understanding: First, culturally proliferated frames¹ provide a broad basis indicating how a phenomenon should be understood. People's constructions are expected to share a common core shaped by social representations, including connections and contexts recognized by nearly everyone.² Second, idiosyncratic beliefs are an important resource in sense making. Therefore, individuals can be expected to deviate from cultural or media-promoted interpretations where their core beliefs are concerned. Third, people's constructions should show traces of enforcing coherence with one's voting decision. Arguments should be introduced selectively, and contrary considerations are expected to be explicitly discounted, or discredited.

These dynamics imply distinctive patterns in individuals' sense making, and are expected to capture the main forces structuring understandings. Other influences such as temporary primes, situative goals, or scattered media frames should remain minor disturbances, and become consequential only where they resonate with the other main dynamics. Gathering data of the achieved understandings about a year after the actual referendum, in a period preceded by very low coverage of European politics, this study focuses on the core of people's constructed schemata.

Case

This study looks for patterns in people's understandings that indicate which of the above resources have been used in sense making (Gamson, 1992; Schaap, 2006). While drawing in additional data from the ASCoR EU Constitution Referendum Study (2005), however, sources of

people's constructions cannot be demonstrated beyond plausible matches. Selecting the European constitutional referendum as a case study thus mainly serves to reduce the range of resources available for sense making while maintaining a real life non-experimental setting. The focusing of public attention towards the referendum provides a homogenous incentive for using available information to arrive at a dichotomous choice. Focusing on accounts of voting decisions thus constrains the range of pursued construction goals.³ At the same time, the novelty and unobtrusiveness of the subject severely limit the use of experiential knowledge, and restrict the crucial information sources to the brief campaign period preceding the referendum (Iyengar, 1990; de Vreese & Semetko, 2004). The other likely main resources for sense making – chiefly popular wisdom, as well as prior experiential or media-proliferated knowledge about the EU (Gamson, 1992) – are relatively simply structured and have been described in previous research (e.g., Aarts & van der Kolk, 2005; Gabel, 1998; Hewstone, 1986; Medrano, 2003; Scheuer, 2005). Thus, people's understandings of the EU Draft Constitution will in most cases have to be constructed from a constrained set of ingredients. By contrast, representations of national politics draw upon so many different sources that distinguishing patterns becomes hardly possible.

METHOD

Approach

So far, theories of sense making and comprehension have sketched out a range of mechanisms that plausibly account for discovered mental processes *ex post*. Given well defined, low complexity stimuli and experimental conditions, some approaches also make probabilistic predictions about people's responses. None of these, however, is capable of predicting what schemata people will construct in real world high complexity conditions: preexisting knowledge, complex environments, sporadic attention to uncouneted information sources, and many more uncontrollable, but highly consequential disturbances interfere. The formation of well-specified expectations about people's acquired understandings of the European Draft constitution is impossible.

However, all mentioned approaches share a view of sense making that can be represented in connectionist network models of meaning and memory (Read, Vanman, & Miller, 1997). They specify formal patterns that are expected in constructed meanings, regardless of their content. This study uses the existing theories to formulate an approach treating sense making data in accordance with the structures that were supposedly responsible for its creation. It maps the connections made between concepts, and looks for patterns that correspond to the formations suggested in theory (Axelrod, 1973; Doise *et al.*, 1933; Haste, 1992; Kuklinski, Luskin, & Bolland, 1992; Schaap, 2006). It performs substantively a qualitative analysis, based on highly formalized representations of the data. Thereby, it allows a deeper look than classic qualitative approaches: It avoids biases stemming from the analyst's preconceptions, and leaves the emergence of patterns to the rule-bound mapping procedure; the derived network representation not only highlights what connections are being made, but also which are *not*. Finally, despite all data reduction required for mapping, the context of statements is retained 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. Each group comprised three Yes- and three No-voters, and was kept heterogeneous with respect to gender, political interest, and media use habits. Each group represented a particular social group (students, white collar workers, blue collar workers, senior citizens) (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, preceded by a brief pre-test questionnaire collecting data on people's political interest, media use, and attitude towards the European.

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.⁴ Actual statements were stripped from all filler utterances (e.g., “you know”, “I mean”, “actually”, etc.), redundancies, and expressions not made relevant⁵ 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.⁶ 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.⁷) Also word groups were considered as one concept if they could not be separated without affecting the semantic content of either component (Spradley, 1979);⁸ 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 network⁹, every statement was parsed into the contained propositions of the format [concept]–relation–[concept],¹⁰ 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).¹¹ 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”).¹² 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”).¹³ 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”),¹⁴ as well as modifiers (quality, time, location) are treated as directed relations. Most relationship types can occur as either associative or dissociative relations, which was distinguished in coding (Collins & Loftus, 1975; Read, Vanman, & Miller, 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.¹⁵ From these discussions, thematic maps were constructed capturing the (claimed) connectedness of issues, feelings and conclusions. The same procedure was repeated later for all statements discussing the role of the European common currency, which was selected for in-depth analysis due to its remarkable multifacetedness. Through the mapping procedure, four maps emerged, capturing statements

related to the individual Yes- and No-vote¹⁶, the referendum outcome, and the Euro, respectively. 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 maps, 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. Based on the composition and arrangement of these clusters, the respective maps were compared, analyzing how patterns changed depending on the focus of discussion.

Subsequently, the construction patterns were examined by tracing mapped contributions back to their authors. Common themes were identified by looking for connections made by different participants, and across different focus groups. All statements were put into relation with the speakers’ vote choice, seeking patterns associated with either camp. Finally, each participant’s contributions were analyzed looking for recurring themes and patterns. For this, I compared the thematic ranges of participants’ contributions to all drawn semantic networks. This comparison was further extended to the 20 most frequently coded concepts in a participant’s contributions throughout the whole interview. These coded concepts were collapsed and clustered according to the same procedure as in mapping. Concepts repeatedly connected by the same participant were organized into idiosyncratic clusters.

RESULTS

Semantic Networks

Clusters & Relations

All created maps can be easily organized into thematic clusters. Coded relationships discuss relations within a cluster, or make these relevant to other clusters and the target concepts, vote choice and referendum outcome. Within clusters, the predominant relationship types are actions, qualities, and object-relations. Between clusters, abstract associations prevail, followed by relationships typical for specific clusters (e.g., the feelings cluster shows many inbound causality and outbound object-relations). Causality is most frequently expressed towards vote choices, as well as within certain clusters (mainly the euro cluster). Connections between clusters are usually of the same kind, implying similar meanings. Clusters thus conform van Dijk and Kintsch's definition of schemata as "subsets of [a] network that can function as wholes" (1983: 47).

Clusters group considerations with the same valence, with few contested exceptions. However, differently valenced clusters are often closely connected, and even sometimes made relevant to opposite vote choices: Most notably, one cluster criticizing provided information is frequently cited in relation to either voting decision. Particularly Yes-voting often appears as weighted decision, considering also important contrary thoughts; accounts of voting No are more homogeneous. Explanations of the referendum outcome refer almost exclusively to negative clusters.

Clusters differ widely with respect to their internal complexity and integration with the rest of the discussion. For instance, the two most densely integrated clusters discuss the behavior of the Dutch government and the quality of provided information, respectively. However, while the government cluster contains a range of different considerations and examples of arrogant, patronizing and unprofessional behavior, the information cluster contains almost exclusively qualifications of information offers. At the same time, some other clusters are internally complex, but largely unrelated to anything else except vote choice (e.g., the power cluster).

Particularly large clusters are rarely covered in their entirety. Rather, there are subtle shifts in focus, usually accompanied by specific linkages drawn to other themes. For instance, information tends to be qualified as "bad" or "unclear" in relation to expressing discontent or blaming the government; however, in relation to one's own uncertainty in judging the referendum proposal,

the predominant description is “contradictory”. In conjecture with own information searches, finally, it is qualified as “false”, typically followed by a reference to oneself voting in favor. Still, information is consensually judged as low quality and insufficient. In a few cases, focus shifts also imply shifts in evaluation. For instance, “open borders” tend to be positively evaluated and associated with traveling, living and working abroad. However, if raised in the context of security, open borders become a threat because criminals and migrants can travel and operate unobstructed. Different valences within the same cluster almost always stem from different foci; only in one case, participants evaluate the very same proposition differently: The notion of a closely integrated, state-like Union raises hopes amongst some, and fear amongst others.

Maps in Juxtaposition

Participants’ explanations of individual and collective vote choices show some marked differences. Explanations of the referendum outcome are less diverse, while most connections made are somewhat stronger. Figure 1 shows the cluster structure of participants’ accounts for their individual vote choice, and the collective outcome. Seven clusters present in explanations of individual decision vanish in accounts of the collective vote choice, while two new clusters appear. Unsurprisingly, most positively valenced clusters disappear or are considerably less prominent with regard to the (negative) referendum outcome. Concerns with progressing European integration, or Europe as a powerful global player and democratic entity are seen as irrelevant to the majority of No-voters. Aside that, most knowledge- and uncertainty-related considerations, as well as doubts about the feasibility of further integration, are attributed to individual, but not collective vote choices. Instead, some abstract economic considerations, as well as worries about Dutch sovereignty, are seen as relevant for other people’s choices, but not raised in the individual context. The euro- and surrender-clusters show considerably more weight and complexity in explanations of others’ voting decisions.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Moreover, while some clusters (concerning government arrogance, negative feelings, bad information, as well as simplifying effects of EU integration) appear largely unchanged in both conditions, others are profoundly re-organized. A small cluster discussing the EU as a bureaucratic “water head” changes in content, valence, and alignment: In explaining the referendum outcome, this cluster contains the common Euro-bureaucracy stereotype (e.g., Medrano, 2003) as well as complaints about costs and frictions. Aside the referendum outcome, this cluster is linked to the united Europe cluster, as well as another cluster discussing the desirability of the common market for larger and smaller economies. In explaining individual vote choice, however, both links disappear, as do the components regarding costs and frictions; instead, the Draft Constitution is made relevant to the cluster as potentially reducing bureaucracy and increasing efficiency. In accordance with this frame shift, the negative valence switches to hopes for improvement. Another cluster that differs strongly between the conditions is the discussion of party cues. These occasionally justify individual Yes-voting by citing most parties’ endorsement of the Constitution. However, when explaining the outcome, the centrist parties are eclipsed entirely, while the rejection by two fringe parties provides a negative party cue.

Similar differences in framing occur also within some otherwise stable clusters. Most notably, the surrender cluster (stably causally related to the feelings cluster) is in the individual context mainly concerned with the Dutch influence in Europe. With regard to the referendum outcome, however, this is replaced by worries about Dutch national identity, objectified in a number of “achievements” such as gay marriage, abortion laws and soft drugs tolerance. The prototypical objectification of the European threat is – consensually – the Euro, which has already taken away the Dutch Guilder, another identity symbol. Thereby, the surrender- and euro- clusters become closely related around a common identity-threat-frame, which is said to be relevant to others’ voting decisions. Also connected to others’ reasoning only is political cynicism, which generalizes and escalates from the specific disinterest and doubts some participants admit for them-

selves. A similar generalization occurs within the labor cluster. In the individual condition, this cluster contains personal worries about employment, and the personified threat of cheap (always Polish) labor migrants. At the collective level, this is extended to a general fear of globalization, liberalization, and social retrenchments, while the personalization is dropped. The complete list of occurring frames and clusters can be found in the annex.

Bases of Arguments

Assessing the thematic range of clusters, only a minority concerns (claimed) implications of the European Constitution (e.g., democracy, labor, security, surrender). By far most, and also the most salient issues discussed pertain to experiential observations during the referendum campaign. This is followed by a group of clusters reflecting popular wisdom about previous steps of European integration. These themes are, however, sometimes made relevant indirectly. One way of doing this is to portray them as symptomatic for general problems, such as political unresponsiveness, disregard towards the people, or the intransparency of EU politics. Another connection works via the feelings cluster and justifies voting based on general (usually dis-) content with perceived dynamics in Europe. Interestingly, the debatable quality of the euro as reason for (no-) voting seems to be clear to most participants. Statements regularly qualify the euro as invalid reason, followed by the reservation that “it was still relevant somehow”.

Construction Patterns

Common themes: Social representations

Tracing back propositions to their authors, it becomes visible that only some themes are shared by almost all participants. Particularly in explanations of the referendum outcome, where several personally important clusters disappear, more weight is given to common knowledge explanations.¹⁷ Five of the stable clusters form the common ground of most participants' understandings: The euro, the government, and worries about Dutch identity (surrender cluster) give rise to a feeling of discontent, which is made responsible for the outcome; aside that, bad information was unable to persuade people, confusing and enraging even positively predisposed voters. With

the exception of the identity theme, the same pattern emerges also from the individual explanations. There, a strong role of one's own unsatisfactory knowledge and uncertainty appears next to the information cluster.

Amongst these core clusters, the euro cluster shows by far the broadest range of shared connections: It is associated with strong negative feelings and economic disadvantages, while its contribution to simplified traveling is admitted just as consensually. Also, its (contested) relevance to the EU Constitution is salient in all conditions. By contrast, in the government cluster participants only agree that it caused discontent; what or who exactly is held responsible varies between participants. Outside the network core, also several other shortcut connections are shared widely: Parties are perceived as taking controversial, if not contradictory stances, participants describe themselves as actively seeking information, and people have no influence on anything.

Divided themes: Intentional construction

Both within and outside these shared themes, Yes- and No-voters selectively referred to different frames and clusters. For instance, hopes that the EU Constitution might reduce bureaucracy appear repeatedly in Yes-voters' statements, but no No-voter mentions this theme. Indeed, the whole bureaucracy cluster is only mentioned by Yes-voters. This holds true even in explaining the referendum outcome, where the theme gets a decidedly negative twist. Also another cluster, stressing a need to stand united as a global economic or political power, is almost exclusively raised by Yes-voters, and common amongst these. Less common, but also a pure domain of Yes-voters is the democracy cluster. Similarly, discussions of what the EU Constitution actually is, contains, and implies for enhanced cooperation are dominated by Yes-voters.

FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

Perhaps more surprisingly, the same can be said about most of the euro cluster. As figure 2 show, Yes-voters agree that the euro caused discontent, and was an important, if formally inva-

lid, reason for many voters. The No-voters, by contrast, contribute the economic disadvantage and identity themes to the cluster. Both camps agree that there is also a simplifying effect.

Within the information cluster, contributions are just as sharply divided: No-voters predominantly criticize information for coming too late, being too little, and of bad quality. Particularly the first two aspects are stressed exclusively by No-voters. Yes-voters, by contrast, use attributes such as dry, contradictory and plainly false. Also, they refer to several topics that information should have informed about, whereas No-voters tend to refer to information in general. A similar division occurs in the government cluster: Yes-voters tend to specify concrete culprits (mainly the prime minister), as well as specific culpable behavior, such as not taking people seriously. No-voters refer more generally to “the way” how “Dutch politics” conducted the whole campaign. Interestingly, however, No-voters are much more specific about politicians’ reactions to the referendum outcome, stressing particularly that the failure had caught them unprepared.

The part of the network which is most dominated by No-voters is the nexus of negative feelings, uncertainty and oneself. More than two third of all self-related propositions are made by No-voters. These describe themselves as not convinced by the bad information, doubtful about the utility, necessity, and feasibility of the whole project, and intuitively predisposed against it. Doubts about the feasibility are usually justified citing European diversity, conflicting interests and identities. At the same time, the current state of affairs is implicitly qualified as acceptable,¹⁸ rendering grand designs for future integration unnecessary. At any rate, they prefer the current state to a perspective of uncertain changes or, as one participant put it:

“Ik stem gewoon tegen want dan heb ik inderdaad die zekerheid, het blijft gewoon zo.”

[“I simply vote against, because then I am certain that it stays the same”; Claire¹⁹, Student, No-voter]

Idiosyncratic themes

These recurring patterns notwithstanding, an analysis of individual contributions reveals a range of consistent idiosyncrasies. The clustering procedure generated on average three (one to four) recurring themes per participant, accounting for more than half²⁰ of a person’s coded contributions. Accounts of participants with higher interest were somewhat more complex (involving

more clusters), and better integrated (fewer unaccounted-for statements) than those of disinterested participants. While some individual themes overlapped with the co-constructed clusters introduced above, others deviated clearly from the shared understanding. For instance, one participant (Willemijn, white collar, No-voter) seemed very concerned with the roles of countries in the EU, applying this perspective to discussions of economic benefits, diverging interests and identities, and even knowledge. Another participant (Henk, blue collar, No-voter) repeatedly referred to migration topics, connecting this theme to cheap laborers, crime, and open borders. Other preoccupations matched those clusters already described. For instance, Martijn (senior, Yes-voter) mainly referred to the euro in all its facets, and the power cluster. The breadth of idiosyncratic themes varied from simple buzzwords reliably provided in almost any context (e.g., security; Emma, student, No-voter) to elaborate themes with multiple connections also to other clusters (e.g., Sjoerd, white collar, Yes-voter, connected the EU Draft Constitution to expected improvements in European democracy, the current status quo as well as people's influence). The same participant's idiosyncratic themes often represented detached or even contrary considerations. For instance, Lies (blue collar, Yes-voter) focused repeatedly on national identities threatened by European integration, while also stressing the benefits of enhanced cooperation.

These personal themes are highly selective and go beyond shared understandings in two main ways: First, explicit weighting of discussed themes seems to be bound to individual preferences. Other than intentional construction, which relies on attaching salience to different aspects of clusters, idiosyncratic weighting allows subjective choices based on the very same considerations. Second, individuals highlight particular aspects and elaborate on their connections to the set of common understandings. By this means, they also add considerations which may be novel, or in disagreement with others' perceptions. In both cases, but particularly in the latter, idiosyncratic contributions are usually legitimized by references to specific expertise or anecdotes. Participants provide additional information to justify why not commonly shared beliefs might be highly sali-

ent, or more valid than others. Both direct disqualifications of others' arguments and elaborations to support one's own point of view are markedly more prevalent amongst the Yes-voters.

DISCUSSION

Elements of sense making

The results show that, despite their confessed low knowledge and interest, most participants constructed rather complex and systematic understandings of the European Draft Constitution. Without judging the adequacy of people's reasoning (Fossum & Trenz, 2006; Hobolt, 2007), it is clear that judgments were neither random, nor unfounded. All participants contributed to creating some shared understanding,²¹ and all but two exhibited systematically organized belief systems also within their own contributions.²² Both idiosyncratic and co-constructed clusters show most qualities expected from cognitive schemata: They group thoughts based on semantic relatedness, forming relatively stable and coherent representations. Their internal integration is dense and semantically rich, while towards other clusters they behave as wholes, summarizing general relations between themes, or drawing vague associations. Furthermore, these schematic structures group considerations with similar emotional "tags" (Kumlin, 2000; Lodge & Taber, 2000), which support ambiguity avoidance in judgment. Indeed, participants referring to schemas containing differently charged considerations usually covered *either* positive *or* negative elements.

Substantive disagreements over evaluations of the very same belief were extremely rare, supporting Aarts and van der Kolk's (2005) view that the referendum revealed not different preferences, but different interpretations. This also resonates with the scarcity of moral or value judgments typical for politicized controversy (Gamson, 1992). Occurring judgments were mostly consensual, describing what is commonly accepted as good or bad for certain actors, or generally considered (dis-)advantageous. Controversy derived almost entirely from selectivity highlighting different aspects of a theme: Participants controversially framed uncontroversial "facts". Drawing in different contexts, participants arrived at different evaluations from the same shared beliefs.

Participants used frames strategically in their accounts, stressing considerations matching their respective argumentation lines (Brewer & Gross, 2005). They introduced their own frames even while acknowledging other frames currently present in the debate. Apparently, the social representations forming people's common understandings easily accommodated contrary frames²³ – more easily than was expected from literature. Participants were often willing to accept also different interpretations. For instance, nobody objected to qualifying information as “false”, a crucial element of a frame discarding most of No-voters' fears as unfounded. Generally, contrary frames involving similar contexts were hardly contested. Rather, people simply gave a different twist to a similar narrative (e.g., subsuming “false” under “unreliable” information, thus justifying a No-vote with the lack of persuasive arguments). People argued more about entirely different summoned contexts – e.g., whether the euro related to identity or economic concerns.

Particularly cultural knowledge about the euro proved extremely multifaceted: Most participants shared frames indicating both personal and general, positive and negative implications, from domains as diverse as identity, economy, everyday life, national and European politics. Apparently, people's understandings of European politics depend to a large degree on relatively concretely objectified knowledge. While most common EU-stereotypes and abstract principles were only weakly integrated in people's accounts (e.g., the clusters bureaucracy, power, economy), the central considerations mainly dealt with rather tangible, and directly self-related information – such as uncertainty, discontent with the euro, or “European experiences” (Bruter, 2004).

Strategies of sense making

While participants hardly disagreed about the valence of made arguments, they occasionally debated their validity or importance. This resonates with the view that framing affects the weight given to different considerations in casting a decision, rather than the content of these considerations (Brewer & Gross, 2005; Nelson & Oxley, 1999). Participants often had a range of considerations available, even introducing contrary perspectives themselves. Shifting frames, they arrived at a preferred interpretation by selectively discounting and highlighting considerations.

People maintained coherence and evaluations in their understandings by selecting frames and contexts carrying matching valence (Axelrod, 1973; Berinsky & Kinder, 2006; Brewer & Gross, 2005). Coherence was even achieved by Yes-voters accounting for the negative referendum outcome: By reframing their own considerations, they arrived at accounts reconciling their beliefs with the contrary choice of the majority of No-voters.²⁴ Additionally, they already portray their own vote choice much more as a weighted decision, thus acknowledging valid arguments for the other side. However, Yes-voters' offered reasons for No-voting tend to be considerations that are easily unmasked as "invalid" or not convincing. They even suggest reasons hardly named by No-voters themselves, attributing superficially plausible, but mislead considerations to these. Accordingly, they see the outcome as caused by a majority falling for populist propaganda, or yielding to frustration with aspects peripheral to the referendum. The same considerations, strategically reframed, could be used both to explain the negative outcome, and to justify a positive vote (de Vreese & Semetko, 2004). Clearly, people retain considerable discretion over their use of cues from their information environment (Druckman, 2001; Druckman & Nelson, 2003).

The same degree of strategic integration pervades the way people reflect their idiosyncratic interests in their constructions. Most notably, personal concerns affect which elements from the commonly shared understandings are made central in people's accounts. People link their interests to information learned from mediatized social representations. They cite events and examples from the public discourse, but embed them in different ways in their own narratives (Schaap, 2006; Shen, 2004). This "integrated resource strategy" (Gamson, 1992), however, only partially relies on actual experiences.²⁵ Rather, people "experienced" the same referendum and sense making process quite differently, as they were trying to find out how the project related to their personal concerns (Lang & Lang, 1990). Reliance on such personal experiences was notably more prevalent amongst No-voters (see also de Vreese & Semetko, 2004). Yes-voters were more likely to reflect the media discourse. They relied more on shared understandings, and used more balanced arguments and trade offs reflecting themes prominent in broadcasting (Gamson, 1992).

For instance, both media and Yes-voters linked the Draft Constitution closely to its expected consequences for European integration, while simultaneously highlighting the lousiness of information provided to the voters.²⁶ Yes-voters largely follow the themes central to the media discourse, while No-voters are more selective and often focus on peripheral themes. They are, as Gamson predicts for users of integrated resource strategies, “constrained by omissions from the media discourse, but relatively immune to differences in the relative prominence of visible frames.” (1992: 180; see also Edy & Meirick, 2007). Themes imported from outside the media mostly reflect popular wisdom generated, arguably, in previous decades of EU coverage (e.g., EU bureaucracy, simplified traveling; Hewstone, 1986; Medrano, 2003; Scheuer, 2005).

Summing up, participants showed remarkable sophistication in linking common understandings with their personal concerns. They constructed personalized situation models, which forged available information resources to support unique evaluations. To create coherent understandings from the “blooming, buzzing confusion”, people strategically selected frames from their information environment, and reframed contrary arguments to fit their constructions. While media discourse and popular wisdom largely delimited the range of raised elements,²⁷ individuals retained considerable control over how they connected these. By selecting, weighting and (re-)framing information, they created well-organized and coherent understandings of the EU Constitutional referendum. Combining knowledge from different sources, they managed to come to systematic preferences despite their evident lack of relevant information (Karp *et al.*, 2005).²⁸

Limitations

Obviously, this study is subject to 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. Given different social representations and higher politicization (Milner, 2006), people might use sense making strategies missed here. Also, better control of the information resources available for

construction would be desirable to strengthen the above findings. Without an analysis of the information environment during the referendum campaign, the assignment of patterns to sources remains highly dependent on theory (de Vreese & Semetko, 2004). While the pursued highly systematic analytic strategy effectively addresses the danger of exaggerating anecdotal findings, it cannot substitute for deficits in the theoretical conceptualization of individuals' sense making.

Conclusion

As the present study shows, people command a rich variety of strategies to use available information. They actively construct meaning, utilizing provided cues and frames. Their understandings are informed and constrained, but by no means determined, by public discourse. Consequently, research in political reasoning and communication needs to take audiences' active constructions more into account: On the one hand, investigations of message effects, or comprehension of political facts, may miss the amazing complexity of interacting cues available to people in real-life situations. Our lacking understanding of how people select, weigh, and frame information calls for the move towards a stronger audience perspective on the political public sphere. On the other hand, research designs could benefit from a more explicit modelling of how communicated information is processed. Models of cognition populate the theory sections of many studies in political communication, but they are usually discarded in the research designs (see Berinsky & Kinder, 2006, for a notable exception). I have argued above that many theories of context-dependent comprehension and communication effects are compatible with network models of thought and meaning. This approach has informed rich methodology in cognitive and social psychology, and may prove promising to supplement and extend framing research into more realistic, complex, and interactive settings. The need to take audiences more seriously thus follows not only from the richness and independence of peoples' constructions; A focus on how individuals combine different strategies and resources might also help integrating existing knowledge from different research perspectives. Making connections between approaches, we might gain a more encompassing, and coherent, understanding of sense making.

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ANNEX

Frames occurring in the co-constructed clusters explaining vote choice, and the referendum outcome

Cluster	Frame	Va- lence	Com- plexity	Inte- gration	Sou- rces	Neighbours	Vote Choice	Out- come
GOV Government	Arrogance & pushing through	-	+	+	(+)	INF EUR DEM	x	x
	Balkenende's blunders	-	0	0	(+)	INF	x	x
	Distrust & cynicism	-	-	-	-	FEE		x
	Moral threat	-	0	-			x	
INF Information	Provision: little, bad & too late	-	0	+	-	GOV PRO UNC	x	x
	Quality: conflicting & unclear	-	0	+	(-)	GOV PAR UNC	x	x
	Reliability: false	-	-	0	+	ECO EUR SUR	x	
	Neutrality: biased	-	-	+		GOV PAR UNC	x	x
	Guidance: unanimity	+	-	-		PAR	x	
EUR Euro	Consequences: more expensive	-	0	-	-		x	
	Influence: delayed euro referendum	(-)	-	0		DEM GOV	x	x
	Utility: practical	+	+	0		SIM	x	x
	Identity: loss of symbol	-	+	+	-	SUR		x
	Invalid yet relevant for vote	+/-	-	0	+	PRO FEE	x	x
LAB Labor	Cheap labor migration	-	0	-	-	FEE	x	
	Liberalization & retrenchment	-	0	0		FEE ECO		x
SUR Surrender	Influence & independence	-	-	-	(-)	FEE	x	
	Identity	-	+	+	-	FEE PAR PRO EUR		x
SEC Security	Cooperative security	+	-	0	+	PRO	x	
	Immigration & crime	-	0	0	-	SIM FEE	x	
NEC Necessity	Performance of EU	(+)	-	-		PRO	x	x
POS Possibility	Further integration/implementation	(-)	+	-	-	UNI UNC	x	
ENL Enlargement	Influence on acceding countries	+	0	-	+		x	
POW Power	Unite to gain political power	+	0	-	+	UNI	x	
	Unite for global competition	+	-	-	+	UNI	x	

DEM Democracy	Transparency & accountability	+	0	-	+	PRO	x	
	Institutional weights	+	-	-	+	PRO	x	
	People's influence	(+)	-	-		EUR	x	(x)
BUR Bureaucracy	Hopes for less bureauc. & efficiency	+	-	-	+	PRO	x	
	Eurocracy & costs	-	0	0	+	UNI ECO		x
PRO Progress	Not much change anyway	+			+	INF UNC	x	
	Streamlining the status quo	+			(+)	DEM	x	
	Enhanced cooperation in policy	+	+	0		NEC SEC	x	
	The Constitution is...	0	0	-	(+)	SUR EUR	x	x
PAR Party Cues	Controversy	0	-	-		INF	x	x
	SP & CU	-	-	-		INF SUR		x
	Unanimity	+	-	-		INF	x	
FEE Feelings	Discontent	-	-	-	(-)	INF GOV EUR	x	x
	Intuition	-	-	-	-		x	
	Worries	-	-	-	(-)	SUR LAB	x	
UNC Uncertainty	Doubts	-	-	0	(-)	INF POS PRO	x	
	Risk-averse No-voting	-	-	-	-		x	
UND Understanding	No knowledge	-	-	0		UNC INF PRO	x	x
SIM Simplify	Travel, work, & pay abroad	+	+	0		EUR PRO	x	x
	Simplify immigration	(-)	-	-	(-)	SEC	x	
ECO Economy	Which countries benefit	-(+)	+	-		PRO LAB		x
SOV Sovereignty	Endangered sovereignty	-	-	-				x
UNI United Europe	No United States of Europe	-	0	-	(-)	POW POS	x	x
	A closer union	+	-	-	(+)	POW NEC	x	

Note: In the “Valence” column, + indicates positive, - indicates negative valence. In the “Complexity” and “Integration” columns, +, 0, and - indicate high, medium, and low internal frame complexity, and integration with other clusters outside the frame. In the “Source” column, + and - indicate that a theme was used mainly by Yes- or No-voters, respectively. The crosses in the last column show whether frames occurred in accounts of individual or collective votes.

Figure 1.

Mapped clusters in accounts of individual voting decisions and the referendum outcome

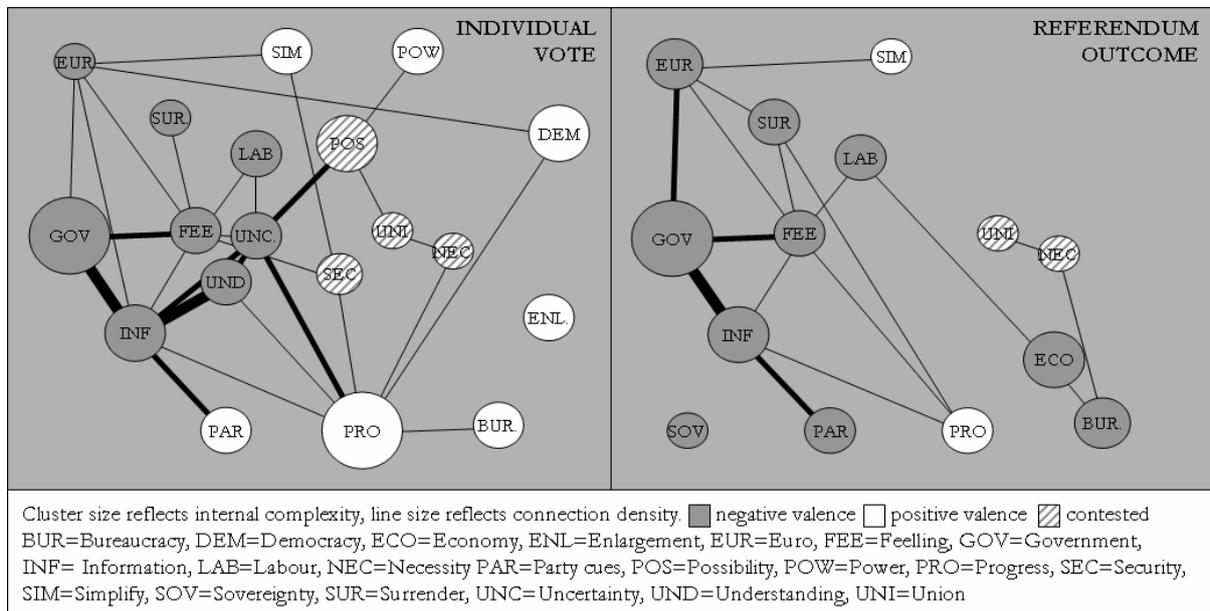
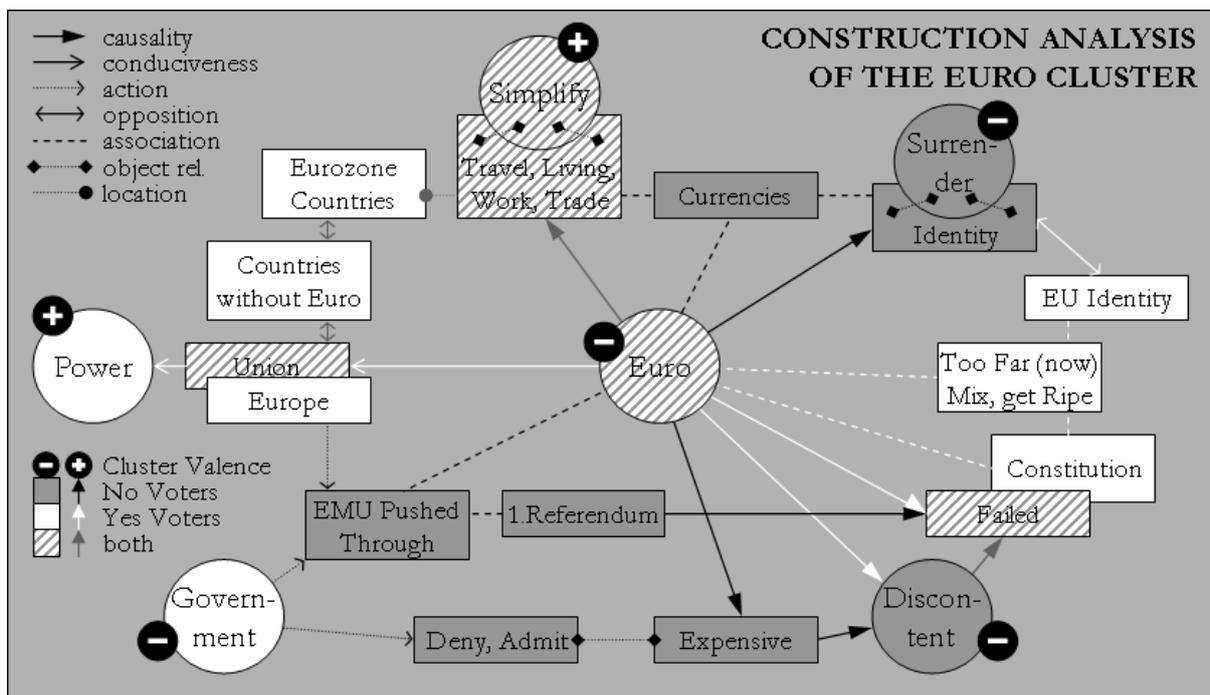


Figure 2.

Construction analysis of the euro cluster and its neighborhood



¹ The same role can also be assumed by recurring media frames available to users of specific outlets. However, without an analysis of media frames received by different subgroups of participants, this influence cannot be convincingly isolated in the present study. It must therefore be ignored here, and left to further research.

² Note that common structure does not imply common evaluations (Doise et al. 1993). Acknowledging, for instance, that the EU is largely about economic integration does not imply whether this is a good or a bad thing.

³ Also, the focus on vote choices links to an existing body of research in political reasoning.

⁴ Nonverbal communication is, for most parts, non-propositional. Since the mapping approach relies on propositional networks, non-propositional data cannot be treated adequately here.

⁵ Statements were regarded as relevant if they were explicitly related to the discussed subject matter, or raised in direct response to the moderator's questions. Thus, content was coded also if it was not elaborated *how* it was seen as relevant, excluding only clearly unrelated utterances. (Grice, 1975; see also Mishler, 1986).

⁶ As Collins & Loftus (1975) demonstrated, semantic network conceptions of memory are preferable to lexical ones.

⁷ 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.

⁸ See also Mishler, 1986 for a similar test to decide which elements in sentences could not be separated.

⁹ There are various formats of network representations of meaning. The version chosen here includes more advanced assumptions than simple associative networks (with undirected and unnamed links, Collins & Loftus, 1975) and deviates also from some kinds of propositional networks, which treat whole propositions as nodes (for reviews see Kintsch, 1998; Raaijmakers & Shiffrin, 1992). The chosen form of propositional network includes propositions as dyads of qualitatively linked concepts, or even longer paths across the network. The links can represent both associative and dissociative relations (see below), in accordance with advanced computational network models used in cognitive and social psychology (Read, Vanman, & Miller, 1997).

¹⁰ All complex statements can be split into such dyadic micropropositions (Kintsch, 1998); for instance, the sentence "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, because one cannot believe "that X", only "that X relates to Z" or "X acts Y". (Holyoak & Thagard, 1995)

¹¹ Mostly, referred-to concepts were substituted in sentences continuing preceding thoughts (for instance, "they" or "it" references). When referred-to actors could not be identified, unspecified actors (People, They, etc.) were coded. Irresolvable references other than actors are rare, as sentences would be incomprehensible in most cases.

¹² action, causality, conduciveness, desire/goal, possibility/capability

¹³ opposition, comparison

¹⁴ object relation, category relation, possession/attribute relation

¹⁵ codes retrieved: Vote Yes, Vote No, Result, and the question sections 2.2 and 3.1

¹⁶ These two maps were closely interrelated, due to participants' references to entertained, yet overruled considerations suggesting a different decisions. They were therefore analyzed jointly.

¹⁷ Most obviously, those themes irrelevant to personal decisions (Sovereignty, Economy) refer to common knowledge explanations. However, these themes are not made central in explaining the outcome.

¹⁸ This does not conflict with expressed discontent, which is linked to domestic politics, and past EU actions (notably, the euro introduction). The code "status quo" (in Europe) is not connected to the negative feelings cluster.

¹⁹ All names changed. First letters indicate groups: A-F: Students, G-L: Blue Collar, M-S: Senior, T-Z: White Collar

²⁰ 55% (25-100%) of a person's statements contained at least one concept assigned to idiosyncratic clusters; overall, 39% (20-58%) of assigned codes were covered. In two cases, only one cluster could be identified, which covered 20% and 26% of the assigned codes, 33% and 40% of statements, respectively; in the other cases, each of the two to four cluster identified covered on average 13% of assigned codes, and 19% of statements.

²¹ The shared understanding mapped resonates with other research in European attitudes and knowledge; For instance, the core clusters match the concepts central to Scheuer's (2005) dimensional structure of EU attitudes.

²² The other two were rather silent, such that only one idiosyncratic theme could be identified.

²³ Note that there were no directly "opposing" frames present in the debate (Druckman, 2001; Edy & Meirick, 2007). Rather, "contrary" frames suggest opposite valences and vote preferences, without being directly contradictory themselves. The full list of recurring frames, organized by clusters, can be found in the appendix.

²⁴ For instance, Yes-voters reframe the bureaucracy theme, stressing either hopes for improvement or dissatisfaction with the current state. Thereby, they account for opposite evaluations without contradicting their own beliefs.

²⁵ Cited personal experiences were usually „European experiences“ (Bruter, 2004) linked to the simplify cluster, or anecdotal evidence underlining individuals' expertise in judging public opinion, the actual content of the treaty, etc.

²⁶ The structure of topics in the media was analyzed assessing the likelihood of topics co-occurring in a news story. Pearson correlations and Euclidean distances were calculated from the ASCoR EU Constitution Referendum Study (2005) content analysis data, and mapped using network analytic software. Maps can be obtained from the author.

²⁷ Even many experiential examples, e.g., from the information campaign, were closely linked to the respective media coverage, which was highly critical of the campaign, as well (ASCoR EU Constitution Referendum Study 2005).

²⁸ Indeed, the lack of information itself became a cue for either vote choice: Some concluded that most things would stay the same, while others inferred that apparently the elites were not willing to share information.