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Communication, contextualization & cognition: Patterns & processes of frames' influence on people's interpretations of the EU constitution

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III

Case Selection

Theoretical requirements

Knowledge acquisition, as laid out above, depends on all contextual information available in a given situation: It cannot be understood without simultaneously considering the processing individual's background knowledge and processing motivation, as well as observable and communicated information. A fundamental unpredictability regarding precisely which bits out of the available information will be drawn upon further complicates matters.

Research to date has tackled the many intricacies of knowledge acquisition in different ways. One approach, heralded by the seminal studies of Lane (1962) and Graber (1988), has been most concerned with the transformations and meanings derived from information, and has opted for a qualitative approach. Their strength in looking beyond itemized, decontextualized knowledge is taken up by the network conceptualization advanced in this study.[31] However, their inability to control confounding influences and thereby establish causal relations constitutes a severe limitation. A second approach seeks certainty in large numbers, assessing people's acquired knowledge by means of survey interviewing. However, the possibilities for measuring knowledge in a survey are mostly restricted to factual, itemized knowledge (Garramone & Atkin, 1986; Gilens, 2001). Also, the validity of both self reports and knowledge quizzes has been questioned (Czesnik, 2003). Moreover, it usually remains unknown what information respondents had actually been exposed to (Slater, 2004). Only few recent and ambitious studies tackle this problem, combining the measurement of knowledge with both measures of media use and content analyses of media discourse. While this approach helps linking acquired knowledge to its sources – and hence will be pursued in the present study, as well – lacking control of confounding influences remains a major concern (Brewer & Gross, 2010). The third, predominantly psychologically oriented strand of research into belief acquisition has therefore opted to constrain the available information experimentally: In tightly controlled environments, sometimes even after pre-testing for prior knowledge, researchers manipulated processing motivations as well as the range of cues available (Druckman & Bolsen, 2009; Lecheler et al., 2009; Schuck & de Vreese, 2006; Slothuus, 2008). However, this approach is applicable only to test the acquisition of precisely defined, decontextualized information. It is not particularly well suited to investigate real life processes of knowledge acquisition, let alone long term learning processes (Brewer & Gross, 2010). In order to get a grip onto the highly complex, uncontrollable processes of

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[31] Researchers interested in structural knowledge have therefore exhibited a preference for knowledge measures that allow deriving relations between knowledge items – notably, open ended (e.g., Berinsky & Kinder, 2006; Culbertson & Stempel, 1986; de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006), concept-sorting (e.g., Berinsky & Kinder, 2006; Kitzinger, 1994) or graphical measures (e.g., Green, Muncer, Heffernan, & McManus, 2003).

meaning construction in real societal communication environments, a different strategy, or a combination of strategies is required (Kinder, 2007).

However, the basic requirements remain the same: In order to isolate the processes responsible for the acquisition and integration of beliefs, it is necessary to restrict or control as much of the available information as possible. In particular, four aspects need to be considered: First, belief acquisition is best studied with regard to topics where prior knowledge is low, limiting the range of possible inferences. At the same time, an entirely blank slate is not desirable: If no knowledge is available at all, people are likely to search for relatable information more or less at random, and hence, unpredictably. What is required is a topic about which limited, well-described knowledge is available. Second, in order to make sure that people actually use available information to create meaning – rather than ignoring things all together – some motivation to consider the issue matter is required. The more specific the motivation for learning is, the less will deviant personal interests interfere with the process, ensuring that people will use available information to achieve similar ends. These two first requirements imply that either the topic or the motive for learning – preferably both – need to be novel: If both had been available for a long time, it is unlikely that people never bothered to diversify their knowledge. The need for uniform, society-wide incentives for learning suggests that salient political issues are well-suited to the demands: Such issues call upon all democratic citizens to form an opinion. The novelty requirement, however, rules out all recurring or everlasting issues on the political agenda. Arguably the most clear-cut situation in which novel, salient issues motivate goal-directed opinion formation is a referendum campaign (de Vreese, 2006; Hobolt, 2005). Unlike elections, referenda revolve around only one, typically uncharted and complex but otherwise well-delimited issue.[32] Moreover, they limit voters' ability to rely on habitual voting behavior and party loyalties. As a consequence, citizens will usually approach referendum campaigns with an acute need for information (Aarts & van der Kolk, 2006; Hobolt, 2007; Neijens & van Praag, 2006).

The third aspect that needs to be controlled is the availability of situational cues that inform knowledge acquisition. Among other things, this relates to the distinction between obtrusive and unobtrusive issues (McCombs, 2004; Walgrave & van Aelst, 2006): Where direct observations enable people to form understandings and opinions based on experiential knowledge, their dependency on provided information is reduced (Gamson, 1992). At the same time, other familiar cues can be drawn upon to shortcut opinion formation on unfamiliar issues: To the degree that people can use heuristic inference strategies – e.g., following prominent speakers' endorsements, or basing conclusions on familiar situations – these interfere with information processing (Iyengar, 1990; Lau & Redlawsk, 2001). Hence, a suitable case should pertain to a highly unobtrusive issue, which is introduced to people in an out-of-the-ordinary context, by relatively unfamiliar authors. One case which fulfils these requirements reasonably well is European politics: Even more than national politics, European policies are unobservable to citizens and accessible almost exclusively through the media (Peter, 2003). European politicians are mostly unfamiliar, and EU-related campaigns are regularly led by second- and third-row

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[32] Referenda are rarely called on policy issues where interest aggregation is already well-entrenched in routine political processes. Mostly, they deal with new challenges or fundamental changes in the order of a political system (de Vreese & Semetko, 2004).

national actors (de Vreese & Semetko, 2004).[33] Among those referenda held on EU-related matters, the EU constitutional referenda stand out as polls on an EU policy innovation which has aroused considerable interest among some European peoples – notably, the French and the Dutch. Also, due to their long standing experience as EU member states, citizens in these countries can be expected to possess at least some, well-structured knowledge on the European Union (Medrano, 2003, see below; Scheuer, 2005). Due to the scarce and distinct EU coverage in the Dutch media – compared to the French media, which cover EU matters both more regularly and more in connection to domestic political issues (Kevin, 2003; Peter, 2003) – the knowledge formed by citizens over the years should be more restricted in the Netherlands. It is for this reason that this study focuses on the Dutch referendum.

However, there is one aspect left to control with regard to the study of information acquisition: Having severely restricted the usability of the other available cues due to the case selection, the communicated information available for processing advances to become the key determinant of acquirable knowledge. This source, obviously, can only be controlled experimentally (as it will be in chapter IV). However, it is possible to *record* the available information relatively exhaustively: Due to the EU constitution's short life span and the dominance of media and political elites as information providers (Iyengar, 2010; Peter, 2003), most of the relevant public discourse can be easily identified. Even within the three years of its existence, public attention to the EU Constitution concentrated almost entirely on the brief, superficial but salient referendum campaign (Hobolt, 2009; Kleinnijenhuis, Takens, & van Atteveldt, 2005; Nijboer, 2005). The messages available for making sense of the EU constitution were both highly salient, widely available, and comparatively few (Hobolt, 2009). Consequently, the diversity of acquired understandings should be limited. Given a near-exhaustive account of the information available to Dutch voters, their interpretations can be contrasted against the proliferated explanations. Instead of controlling and manipulating the supply of information, this study thus exploits the properties of the natural situation (Brewer & Gross, 2010; Druckman, 2010). While the possibilities will by no means be exhausted by the present study, the case allows a – for real-life complexity – unusually well-controlled investigation of knowledge acquisition.

Embedding in related research

Aside of the suitability for investigating knowledge acquisition, the selected case also possesses a number of other useful properties that help linking it to research in related fields. With regard to classic framing research, first, many experimental studies have already utilized the context of EU politics (de Vreese, 2004b; de Vreese & Boomgarden, 2003; Lecheler et al., 2009; Petersen et al., forthcoming; Schuck & de Vreese, 2006). The subject allows varying contexts for information processing along multiple dimensions: As usually in politics, European issues are regularly presented in diverse thematic contexts similarly familiar to most people. Simultaneously, different evaluative stances toward political issues are common and respective frames easily constructed (Petersen et al.,

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[33] Political leaders' propensity to entangle themselves with European campaigns is low – even more so whenever EU topics are not merely relatively unexciting to the electorate, but also prone to failure (de Vreese, 2006; Hobolt, 2009).

forthcoming). Beyond this, it is possible to vary the perceived relevance of issues, as well as the availability of background knowledge (Lecheler *et al.*, 2009). The selected case thus lends itself well to experimentally testing the specific propositions laid out above (chapter IV).

From the perspective of message production, the combination of media coverage and campaign discourse allows exploring the diversity of the actors' characteristic framing strategies (chapter V). The life span of the EU constitution included both phases characterized by sporadic, facts-oriented media coverage of EU-level decisions, and more continuous, conflict-oriented campaign coverage. At the same time, political parties used the campaign to argue for specific interpretations of the EU constitution (Carrubba *&* Timpone, 2005; Nisbet *et al.*, 2003; Slothuus, forthcoming; Slothuus *&* de Vreese, forthcoming; Zhou *&* Moy, 2007). Emphasizing those aspects that best supported the party's stance as well as its typical master frames, their frames should differ characteristically from those common within journalistic discourse (Moscovici, 1961; van Gorp, 2007). The selected case is thus also well suited to observe differences between episodic and integrated, neutral and evaluative, journalistic and political uses of frames.

Third, research in political attitude formation has recurrently considered the European case as well. This is particularly important since this work has inventorized people's EU-related attitudes and belief systems (Scheuer, 2005). Most interestingly, the majority of schemata have been remarkably consistently turned up in studies of both people's accounts and media reporting since the 1970es (Hewstone, 1986; Medrano, 2003). There is reason to conclude that, at least in the long standing EU member states, a stable schematic structure has formed to organize people's EU-related beliefs. Among these, a set of generalized, mostly negative attitudes focus on the EU's bureaucratic, undemocratic and top-down policy style and its commitment to neoliberal capitalism. Positive generalized attitudes portray the EU as area of economic prosperity and progress, an idealized humanistic-cosmopolitan polity, and a peace project steering clear from past wars and authoritarianisms. On a more specific level of knowledge, further attitudes discuss bureaucratic (over-)regulation and inefficiency, the democratic deficit, threats to sovereignty and identity, the prosperous common market, and the disappearance of borders. Less saliently recurring schemata refer to agricultural, security, defense and labor market policies. In view of the last decade, it is probably safe to add enlargement and the monetary union (EMU) to the list. Together, these schematic belief structures account for most themes people link to the EU (Hewstone, 1986; Medrano, 2003; Scheuer, 2005; Schönbach, 1983).[34] People's knowledge can be characterized as limited, relatively shallow, but well-organized and – crucially – well-charted.

Finally, European polls have been the object of much research into the formation of voting preferences. This research has mostly focused on heuristic reasoning – a mechanism relevant within the schematic network theory, as well (see also Iguarta *&* Cheng, 2009 on the relation between heuristics and framing). However, most heuristic

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[34] In an effort to determine an underlying structure beneath these themes, Scheuer (2005) found EU-attitudes to be organized into four dimensions: interest in the EU, attitudes towards integration, political unification, and the quality of democratic representation. Integration attitudes are strongly driven by perceptions of the common currency; the core dimensions of attitudes towards unification and democratic representation relate to citizens' influence in EU politics, and European and national politics' trustworthiness for safeguarding citizens' interests, respectively.

voting studies in the EU context primarily distinguished between heuristics based on EU-related attitudes and those deriving from domestic cues. This study, by contrast, allows a much more detailed treatment of cues used in the foundation of individual voting preferences. Results regarding the role of heuristic inferences in the formation of vote choices can be easily linked to existing findings from similar settings, assessing the importance of the specificities of the Dutch campaign.[35] In sum, the case of the Dutch EU constitutional referendum facilitates both controlling the information environment available for people's sense making and relating the findings to established fields in empirical research. It not only represents an unusually well-constrained case of information acquisition, but it can also be understood as a case of journalistic and political frame building, a context-rich setting for framing effects research, and a case of political opinion formation.

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[35] The most well-researched case, Denmark, is noted for its citizens' rich prior knowledge on EU matters (Franklin, 2002; Svensson, 2002). The Spanish EU constitutional referendum has been characterized as similarly information-poor as the Dutch one, however, it was accompanied by a much more supportive public opinion climate and resulted in a Yes vote (Hobolt, 2009). The French referendum started from similarly poor knowledge and unclear cues as the Dutch case, but the debate quickly became much more politicized and controversial than in the Netherlands (Ivaldi, 2006; Milner, 2006). The Irish referenda – notably, the first ones on the Nice and Lisbon treaties – were marked by a campaign even less salient than the Dutch one (Garry, Marsh, & Sinnott, 2005; Hobolt, 2009).