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

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VI

Frames in Cognition

The third set of propositions advanced by the schematic network theory concerns the organization of information in mind (chapter II.4): When communicated frames are processed, they should be stored and integrated with prior knowledge, forming an increasingly complex, well-structured schematic network. The derived expectations regarding both the structure of knowledge and its use for the construction of coherent understandings will be scrutinized below.

When people acquire knowledge from the variety of messages available in public discourse, they simultaneously achieve three things: First, they acquire information. However, not all knowledge acquired over the course of following public discourse – more or less inattentively – is actually integrated, and therefore, made useful and meaningful. While such knowledge may be correctly produced if tested for, it should remain inconsequential for the construction of understandings (Gilens, 2001). Thus, second, people also acquire and extend schematic knowledge structures that organize the acquired information. Integrating new beliefs into their existing knowledge, they partly follow publicly proliferated frames, while simultaneously bringing other resources and interpretations to bear, as well (Graber, 1988; Neuman *et al.*, 1992). As a consequence, some popular frames should be widely taken over, while other knowledge is more idiosyncratically organized. When using their knowledge, the acquired schematic structure informs what interpretations people can form, and hence, what uses they can put their knowledge to. Third, as a consequence of schema creation, attitudes are formed by transferring valence, along the acquired beliefs, toward those objects that have been considered (Brewer, 2001). Since the acquisition of knowledge, in the chosen setting, is directly related to the formation of voting decisions in the Dutch EU constitutional referendum, the key object toward which attitudes are formed is the draft constitution. However, the acquired knowledge is likely to shape attitudes toward different, closely related objects, as well, and influence the evaluation of already familiar concepts.

However, people do not stop at acquiring knowledge from public discourse: They use their knowledge to form a wider understanding and thereby instate, as the fourth achievement, a certain degree of semantic and evaluative coherence among their related schemata and attitudes (Neuman *et al.*, 1992). Since voting decisions typically rest on a variety of considerations, they should lead voters to connect multiple schemata and attitudes believed to relate to the decision, bolstering opinion formation. In line with the schematic network theory, a narrative structure should be developed to integrate people's knowledge far beyond their specific attitudes toward the EU constitution itself. This narrative should relate the issue under consideration to believed causes and goals, relevant actors as well as related values (Just *et al.*, 1996; Neuman *et al.*, 1992).⁵¹

⁵¹ As noted above, judgments can be formed also without semantic integration, as non-reasoned judgments based on the raw set of belief retrieved (Zaller, 1992). Such judgments, however, are mostly formed ad hoc. Opinions formed over a longer period in time are, by necessity, reasoned: Only if integrations are formed, the

VI.1. Expectations

Semantic contents

As a consequence, it is possible to look at the belief systems people acquired over the duration of the public debate on the EU constitution from a range of different perspectives: When assessing range of beliefs acquired, the most important question is not which beliefs have been acquired, but which have been integrated and hence made useful for the construction of meaning. The assessment of belief acquisition is inseparable from the schematic organization of beliefs. Verbalized frames constructed from schematic knowledge can serve as a proxy for a person's schematic belief system – or at least that part of it which has been found useful: People should only use frames in their accounts that contribute to their understanding. Acquired but non-integrated beliefs as well as frames found uninformative should not be verbalized. At most, they will be acknowledged when verbalized by others. The first questions that can be raised with regard to the structures of people's acquired understandings thus concern (1) what knowledge has been commonly acquired at all, and (2) which parts of this are consensually considered important across participants. This common ground of accounts can be expected to refer mostly to those frames consonantly advanced in public discourse (Gamson, 1992, see chapter V), as well as older, social representation embedded schematic knowledge about the EU (Gamson's (1992) popular wisdom; Hewstone, 1986; see chapter III). At the same time, idiosyncratic frames remain an important resource in sense making: To the degree that a person relates the EU constitution to her own idiosyncratic interests, values and concerns, this person's specific knowledge is likely to enrich the constructed understanding (Graber, 1989; Tourangeau & Rasinski, 1988).

RQ1.1: Which schematic knowledge structures have been commonly acquired?

RQ1.2: Which schematic knowledge structures are consensually regarded as relevant by most participants?

H1: People agree mostly on schemata pertaining to issues structured by social representations.

RQ1.3: How important is idiosyncratic schematic knowledge for people's constructions?

Evaluative content

As regards the acquired attitude structure, the selected setting should have induced people to mostly form attitudes with the goal to derive a coherent judgment of the EU constitution. Over the lengthy period available for attitude formation, most salient attitudes should be sufficiently well-rehearsed to instate evaluative coherence: While different people may still disagree what ideas they endorse or reject, the same person's frames referring to the same object should carry similar valence (de Liver *et al.*, 2007). To the degree that frames used by persons are based on proliferated social representations, however, also links to normative standards should be relatively consensual (Himmelweit *et al.*, 1981). Hence, where people disagree on the evaluation of the same object, the

outcome of prior reasoning processes can be stored and made available for subsequent reasoning (Matthes, 2007).

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disagreement should mostly rest in different frames: Rather than evaluating the very same propositions differently, they should embed the same object in somewhat different contexts, rendering different normative considerations applicable for judgment. Genuine disagreement is expected mostly outside of the socially shared realm of knowledge.

H2.1: Schematic structures informed by social representations are consistently evaluated by most people.

H2.2: Differences in evaluations of the same object derive from their embedding within different contexts.

Narrative integration

As a consequence, the overall vote choice formed by people should depend on (1) which attitudes are seen as relevant to the task, and (2) how these are seen as related. When integrating diverse attitudes toward a coherent judgment, people should form narrative accounts that explain how and why the objects under consideration provide relevant grounds for evaluation. Using frames to craft semantic coherence across multiple schemata, they should map each attitude's valence onto the decision depending on how they see their objects to be related (Brewer, 2001): Someone who dislikes the Dutch government and associates it with the referendum should transfer negative valence; someone who thinks the EU might counterbalance the government's policies, by contrast, might take the same attitude as a reason for voting yes. Consequently, there are three possibilities for accounts to justify different vote choices: First, people may disagree about the desirability of something, relying their attitudes in similar ways, but with contrasting results (*different preferences*). However, deriving their information from consonant media coverage and consensual social representations, their evaluations should mostly be consensual, too (see above). Differences in substantive preferences should be rare. Second, if people agree on an evaluation, it still may appear in both camps' narratives in qualitatively different roles (*different interpretations*). Being informed by diverse political accounts (chapter V), people are bound to perceive different connections between issues. Their interpretations should vary systematically. Third, if people agree on both an object's relation to the EU constitution and its evaluation, it should be discounted either in Yes- or No-voters' accounts (*different priorities*). However, this mechanism is less powerful than reinterpretation, turning an opposing argument into a supporting one, rather than just neutralizing it. It should occur only where reinterpretation fails.

H3.1: Differences in participants' accounts mostly derive from different interpretations.

H3.2: Differences in participants' accounts derive from different priorities where reinterpretation fails.

H3.3: Yes- and No-voters' accounts draw upon similar schematic information (social representations) but integrate them in characteristically different ways around a narrative core (COF).

VI.2. Approach

Different techniques have been employed in empirical social research for recording people's knowledge and belief structures. Measuring recognition speed is a highly sensitive measure for testing the acquisition of single propositions, however, it is inapplicable for testing complex knowledge (e.g., de Liver *et al.*, 2007): It is neither feasible to collate an exhaustive list of relevant propositions, nor to administer such a test if the list existed. Moreover, all closed strategies provide information to the individual and are hence likely to prime and thereby alter the very belief structures they are supposed to measure (Brewer & Gross, 2005; Southwell, 2005). Among the open ended strategies, four main techniques are available. First, thought-listing techniques are good at recording salient associations (Druckman, 2010; J. Lodge, Tripp, & Harte, 2000; Price *et al.*, 1997; Schaap, 2006). They can be used to determine which out of a range of held beliefs are most accessible. However, they do not exhaust available knowledge very well. Second, several authors have asked participants to produce written accounts of their understandings (e.g., Bonito, 2004; Kim & Rhee, 2009; Rhee, 1997; B.T. Scheufele, 2004b). While well-suited to record narrative structures in knowledge, this technique enables individuals to screen carefully what they put in writing. Half-developed and vague considerations, as well as considerations unrelated to the main narrative are unlikely to be recorded. By contrast, in qualitative interviews – the third technique – it is easy to prompt also for secondary explanations (Mishler, 1986). However, people are still likely to preferably reveal rational, well-elaborated accounts to the perceived authority of an academic interviewer – a tendency reinforced by the social desirability of reasoned rather than intuitive or heuristic vote choices (Hobolt, 2007; Popkin, 1991). Another problem is that many held beliefs will be omitted in accounts given to a believed expert, as these are assumed to be familiar to the other (Grice, 1975). For these reasons, I opted for the fourth technique, namely the focus group interview (Merton, Fiske, & Kendall, 1956). In the given case, the common experience of voting in the EU referendum constituted the focus for the group discussion. Explaining themselves to other laypeople, participants were led to spell out also seemingly trivial or obvious beliefs (Merton *et al.*, 1956; Mishler, 1986). The presence of both Yes- and No-voters ensured that also most evaluations would require explicit justification. The diversity of cues exchanged over the course of group interviews promised to exhaust a wide range of knowledge held by participants. The moderator was instructed to encourage people to also contribute incomplete thoughts and intuitions, and stressed that no contribution would be judged as right or wrong. Aside of these desirable properties in fostering the verbalization of beliefs, the focus group setup also allows directly assessing the degree to which beliefs and frames were consensual among participants (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996; Mishler, 1986).

VI.3. Method

Sample & data collection

To record the diversity of citizens' understandings of the EU Constitutions, four focus groups with six persons each were conducted in May 2006 at the premises of

TNS/Nipo Veldkamp, Amsterdam.⁵² Every group comprised three Yes- and three No-voters. Groups were kept heterogeneous with respect to gender, political interest, and media use habits. Age and socio-economic status varied between groups (students, senior citizens, blue- and white-collar workers) but were kept homogeneous within groups to facilitate discussion (Kitzinger, 1994; Lunt & Livingstone, 1996; Morrison, 1998).⁵³ 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: They started with a free association task designed to record the most salient, decontextualized thoughts associated with the EU Constitution in the participants' minds. Subsequently, the participants were asked to explain to a hypothetical novice what the referendum had been all about; this question served to instigate a very general sketch of the schemata immediately related to the subject matter (Shah *et al.*, 2010). Over the course of the interviews, questions became increasingly focused and pre-structured: Participants recalled alleged motivations for and consequences of the treaty (to check for schematic beliefs underlying possible heuristics concerning suspected goals and expected impacts); Subjects were asked to explain their own vote choice and to account for the No vote chosen by the majority of voters (to determine the relative persuasiveness of entertained considerations). Finally, subjects were asked to speculate about the impact of the referendum's failure (to check what expectations were connected to the impact of voting No), and to describe their hopes regarding the further trajectory of the constitutional process (to add any evaluative or normative dimensions not yet tapped, Höjjer, 1990; Kitzinger, 1994; Lunt & Livingstone, 1996; Neuman *et al.*, 1992). Throughout the discussion, 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. The complete moderators' guidelines can be found in annex IX.8.

Coding of concepts & relations

All interviews were transcribed, taking into account all verbal interactions. Nonverbal communication was ignored for the present study.⁵⁴ Actual statements were stripped from all filler utterances (e.g., 'you know', 'I mean', 'actually', etc.), redundancies, and

⁵² The delayed setup was chosen to allow for campaign priming effects to subside. It tries to reconstruct voters' full information bases addressing the vote choice they faced, including implicit assumptions, contingencies and incoherences usually not accessible from top-of-the-head responses. Interview questions were designed to tap a broad range of considerations in the first stages before funnelling in to further probe the acquired understandings (Dervin, 1991/2001; Finney, 1981). While participants may have forgotten several details since the referendum, the persistent, permanently stored core of acquired understandings should be validly recorded (Burnett, 1991; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977).

⁵³ Party affiliations were not recorded separately: I did not want to prime party heuristics to those adhering to different considerations. Participants were expected to refer to party cues during the discussion when they found them relevant, which about half of them did.

⁵⁴ Nonverbal communication is mostly non-propositional. Since the mapping approach relies on propositional networks, non-propositional data cannot be treated adequately here.

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expressions not made relevant⁵⁵ 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. Anaphora were resolved where the referent was identifiable and explicitly mentioned (Kintsch, 1998; Schaap, König, Renckstorf, & Wester, 2005).⁵⁶

Within the transcripts, raised concepts were coded using a codebook created inductively (van Gorp, 2010): Concepts could be concrete entities (actors, objects, etc.), qualities and attributes (characteristics, goals, etc.) or abstract ideas (e.g., values, principles). All potentially codeable concepts were collected and brought together into defined concept codes by grouping descriptions that were used interchangeably (for instance, 'behind closed doors' was coded jointly with 'back room politics', 'intransparency in decision making', and complaints about the inaccessibility of EU political bodies, 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).⁵⁷ Also word groups were considered as one concept if they could not be separated without affecting the semantic content of either component (Spradley, 1979). For instance, 'big countries' could refer to a type of collective actor, while in other instances countries were merely qualified as 'big'. Concepts were disregarded for coding if they occurred less than three times and could not be merged with another concept code. Otherwise, all occurring, meaningful concepts were coded in all participants' statements. To ensure coding reliability, approximately 10% of the data were coded by two coders, and disagreements were analyzed to improve the concept definitions. Thereafter, one coder processed the remaining text. All together, 3068 instances of 236 concepts were coded. The coding guidelines and codebook are reprinted in annex IX.9 and IX.10.

For mapping in a propositional network,⁵⁸ the text was subsequently parsed into propositions of the format [concept]—relation—[concept],⁵⁹ following a procedure introduced by van Dijk and Kintsch (1983, see also Kintsch, 1998; Schaap, 2006). Propositions were coded at the level of dyads, discriminating between 14 generic relationship types synthesized from the work of Spradley (1979) and Schaap, Renckstorf,

⁵⁵ 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; Mishler, 1986).

⁵⁶ These mostly concerned 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.

⁵⁷ 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 refer to the codebook reprinted in annex IX.10.

⁵⁸ Specifically, this network type involves named, directed links and treats concepts, not propositions as nodes (for reviews see Kintsch, 1998; Raaijmakers & Shiffrin, 1992). Propositions are represented as dyads of linked concepts, or longer paths across the net. Links can be associative or dissociative (Read *et al.*, 1997).

⁵⁹ 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]. Concepts raised without explicit relation to other coded concepts were ignored.

↻ Wester (2005, see also Collins ↻ Loftus, 1975; Shah *et al.*, 2010). Most of these types are directed relations, indicating that there is a semantically defined order or hierarchy among the concepts (e.g., ‘the constitution has four parts’ makes sense whereas ‘four parts have the constitution’ does not; ‘discontent caused the outcome’ is different from ‘the outcome caused discontent’).⁶⁰ Some other types are mutual, indicating that both participating concepts affect each other (e.g., ‘opposition between national identities and an EU superstate’ implies that either is detrimental to the respective other).⁶¹ 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’),⁶² as well as modifiers (quality, time, location) are treated as directed relations. For instance, the sentence ‘I voted no because of the euro, everything has become more expensive’ contains four codeable propositions: [Self]–action→[Vote No]; [Euro]–cause→[Vote No]; [Reality]–quality→[More Expensive], and, by conversational implicature, [More Expensive]–associated–[Euro] (Grice, 1975). Finally, most relationship types can occur as either associative or dissociative relations, which was distinguished in coding (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]). The coding of concepts and propositions was implemented using the qualitative data analysis software package NVivo 7.

Analysis

Based on the discussion questions and assigned codes, all statements concerning individual voting decisions and explanations of the referendum outcome were identified. A total of 849 relevant propositions were retrieved.⁶³ Representing each proposition in the discussion as a link between the participating concepts, the belief systems verbalized by the participants can be sketched as a complex network. This highly formalized representation of the data hence considers all contexts linked to a concept simultaneously, disregarding their sequential order. Concept pairs could simultaneously be connected by qualitatively different links (e.g., the concept pair ‘EU Constitution’ and ‘Cooperation’ could be related by a two causal, five goal-, and three possibility-links). To reduce complexity, I identified concepts that were structurally equivalent (i.e., related to the same third concepts in the same ways, Wasserman ↻ Faust, 1994) and collapsed them if they expressed semantically similar or interchangeable beliefs (Spradley, 1979). For instance, the information-quality codes ‘little’ and ‘bad’ were collapsed, while the code ‘false’ remained separate, because the discussion discriminated confusing from misleading information.

⁶⁰ action, causality, conduciveness, desire/goal, possibility/capability; see also (Shah *et al.*, 2010)

⁶¹ opposition, comparison

⁶² object relation, category relation, possession/attribute relation

⁶³ codes retrieved: Vote Yes, Vote No, Result, and the question sections referring to personal vote choice and the decision to vote No by the majority of Dutch voters. For the thematic map of beliefs related to the euro (see below), also all statements containing the code ‘euro’ were retrieved.

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Depending on the focus of the analysis, this overall map could be ‘sliced’, representing only contributions from one of the focus groups, or by Yes- or No-voters only. Likewise, thematic submaps could be constructed by considering only propositions from statements relating to a specified concept. For the below analysis, accounts of people’s own vote choice were distinguished from their explanations of the overall referendum outcome. For an in-depth analysis, another thematic map was constructed based on all statements that contained the concept ‘euro’. This focal concept was chosen due to its remarkably multifaceted contexts in people’s argumentations. Within each map, thematic clusters were identified based on interconnection density. I defined clusters as ‘2-clans’ (concept sets where most concepts are directly linked to one another, while single links may be absent as long as no concept is farther than two steps from all others, Wasserman & Faust, 1994). Concepts that were not part of a cluster were subsequently assigned to the cluster they were most strongly linked to. All clusters were labeled to express the semantic content of the included propositions. Avoiding biases stemming from the analyst’s preconceptions or unsystematic attention, this analytic strategy leaves the emergence of patterns to the rule-bound mapping procedure.

The clusters served to analyze the schematic base of voters’ reasoning. Comparisons between different slices of the overall map allowed drawing conclusions about differences in people’s ways of organizing their beliefs into schematic structures. Likewise, comparisons between thematic submaps enabled an assessment of how integration patterns changed depending on the focus of discussion. Looking beyond the thematic submaps again, the patterns in which participants drew connections between the identified clusters could be organized into larger narratives. Analyzing the interplay of schemata within these narratives, I addressed the third block of hypotheses posited above.

In order to assess the remaining research questions, the degree of consensus among participants on the schematic belief structures was assessed by counting how many participants referred to a cluster. Clusters were considered shared if they were referred to by more than two thirds of participants from each group; partly shared clusters were defined as those referred to by at least a third of all participants, from at least three groups. Finally, the role of idiosyncratic knowledge was examined by tracing mapped contributions back to their individual authors. 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 by grouping interrelated concepts according to the same procedure as in mapping. Concepts repeatedly related to one another by the same participant were organized into idiosyncratic clusters.

VI.4. Results

Semantic knowledge

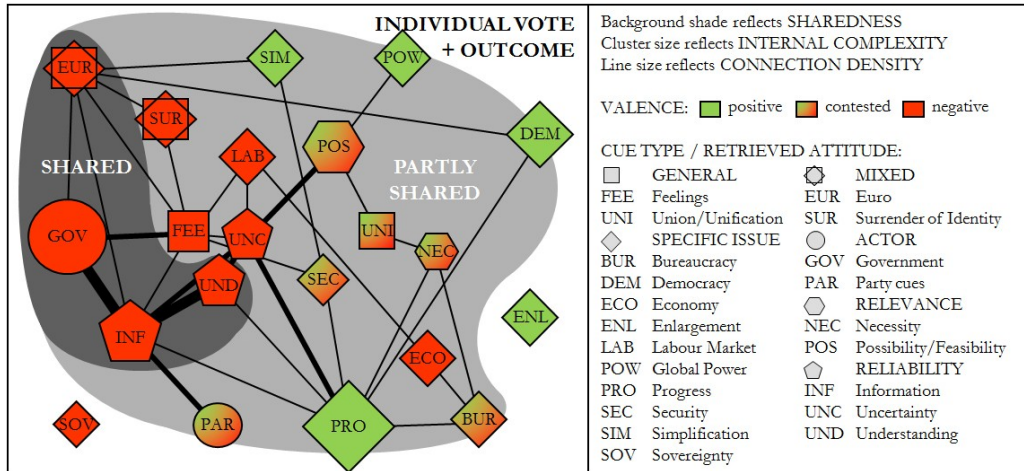
Acquired beliefs & schematic structure.

Mapping the provided considerations, a well-structured network emerges. Disconnected beliefs are rare in individuals' contributions, and entirely absent when the co-constructed networks of the group interactions are considered. Areas of dense interconnectedness tend to group thematically related propositions. Within clusters, the predominant relations expressed by beliefs are actions, qualities, and object-relations. Between clusters, unspecified associations prevail, followed by relationships typical for specific clusters (e.g., one cluster discussing people's feelings shows many inbound causality and outbound object-relations). Causality was most frequently expressed towards vote choices, as well as within certain clusters (e.g., one cluster grouping beliefs about the Euro). Connections between clusters are usually of the same kind, implying similar meanings. Clusters thus can be interpreted as schematic structures, "subsets of [a] network that can function as wholes" (van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983: 47).

Thematically, the schemata revolve around a number of salient objects connected to the EU constitutional referendum, although they operate on somewhat different levels of abstraction. Most cited schemata refer to rather specific aspects of the EU integration process – e.g., bureaucracy, democracy, progress, or enlargement. At least two schemata, by contrast, concern EU integration at large: They group beliefs about the possible end point of integration – an EU superstate – and a range of intuitions and feelings toward the EU integration process, respectively. Two clusters – discussing the euro as well as national identity and influence – lie in between: They refer to specific issues while their implications are generalized toward the EU as a whole. Two more clusters group beliefs about domestic governmental and party actors. Aside these thematically structured schemata, two more clusters discuss the importance of the decision at hand, focusing on the Constitution's necessity and feasibility. Finally, three closely interrelated clusters group a broad range of considerations about the quality of provided information and decision certainty. Notably, only a minority of schemata concerns (claimed) implications of the European Constitution. The most salient issues discussed pertain to experiential observations during the referendum campaign. The structure of schematic beliefs recorded is shown in figure VI.1.

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Figure VI.1: Schematic structure of statements related to individual vote choices and the overall referendum result in all focus group discussions



Clusters differ widely with respect to their internal complexity – the number of contained beliefs – and their integration with the rest of the discussion. For example, 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 wide range of different considerations, including references to specific actions, suspected motives, and detailed normative benchmarks, the information cluster almost exclusively contains 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).

Social representations

With regard to the degree of agreement among participants on the schematic structure of accounts (*RQ1.1-1.3*), three areas can be distinguished. Four schemata are used by nearly every participant's accounts (*RQ1.2*): These refer to the Dutch government, the European common currency, the information made available during the referendum campaign, and the quality of the understandings people had been able to gain in consequence. The information campaign was mostly criticized for being devoid of arguments, biased, controversial, inaccurate, scarce, too late, or plainly 'bad'. Consequently, participants also expressed their dissatisfaction with their own understandings of the EU constitution, discussing their uncertainty, but also admitting that their own information searches had been limited. The third schema shared by nearly all participants characterizes the government as arrogant and criticizes its superficial treatment of the whole EU Constitution issue and referendum campaign. The euro, lastly, was predominantly characterized as undesirable, responsible for price rises and a threat to national identities. Although people acknowledged there was also a positive side to the euro, these considerations are part of a different schema ('simplify') which refers to various amenities caused by European integration. Albeit acknowledged by all participants, not everyone actually raised beliefs from this schema in their accounts. The

same is true for the majority of other schemata, which will not be introduced individually here. The complete list of occurring frames and clusters can be found in annex IX.11. Together with the shared four clusters, representing the core, these ‘partly shared’ schemata form the social representation structure developed around the EU constitution: Their contained beliefs were clearly familiar to all participants, even if they may have disagreed with some or regarded them as irrelevant (*RQ1.1*). The data thus offer partial confirmation for *H1*: While most long standing EU-stereotypes are included in these commonly acknowledged schematic structures, participants did not agree on their relevance for their accounts.

Idiosyncratic framing

Proceeding to *RQ1.3*, the widespread agreement notwithstanding, people’s accounts were not at all determined by the social representations formed. Drawing predominantly upon commonly shared sets of beliefs, participants still enriched these with their own idiosyncratic knowledge – mostly, by instantiating or adding emphasis by reference to personal concerns. More importantly still, they regularly grouped beliefs into frames in idiosyncratic ways. Most participants recurrently referred to a limited range of frames. On average, three (one to four) recurring themes were identified for each participant, accounting for more than half of a person’s coded contributions.⁶⁴ 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 shared schemata introduced above – e.g., Martijn’s (senior, Yes voter)⁶⁵ concern with the euro and EU economic power – others deviated clearly from the shared understanding. For instance, one participant (Willemijn, white collar, No-voter) recurrently discussed the roles of states in the EU. Another participant (Henk, blue collar, No-voter) consistently referred to migration, connecting this theme to cheap laborers, crime, and open borders. 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. Where participants referred to information outside the shared realm, they usually legitimized these contributions by references to specific expertise or anecdotes. Such special knowledge often served to rebut others’ arguments and to contest the commonly agreed-upon interpretations. This strategy was markedly more prevalent amongst Yes-voters.

⁶⁴ 55% (25-100%) of a person’s statements contained at least one concept from idiosyncratic clusters; 39% (20-58%) of all codes were covered. In two cases, only one cluster could be identified, covering 20/26% of codes, 33/40% of statements, respectively. In the other cases, clusters covered on average 13% of codes, 19% of statements.

⁶⁵ All names changed. First letters indicate groups: A-F: student group, G-L: blue collar group, M-S: senior citizens’ group, T-Z: white collar group

Evaluative reasoning

Attitudes

The most salient, shared part of the network is heavily dominated by negative attitudes. One positively valenced cluster – ‘progress’ – qualifies as internally complex and well-integrated, but is located outside the shared realm. Among both actor endorsements, general(ized) attitudes and also information quality, non-negative evaluations play peripheral roles at best. For specific issue attitudes the picture is inverted, negative issue attitudes are of minor importance. Relevance was consensually unclear to most participants, and the information state was clearly unsatisfactory.

All of the detected schematic structures carry strong valence. In line with *H2.1*, only very few schema are evaluated in different ways by different participants. Moreover, as expected by *H2.2*, in those cases where schema valence was contested, people still evaluated the same propositions in similar ways. Evaluative disagreements derived from differently valenced frames, stressing different aspects of the same schema while discounting others. Different frames within the same schema rested mostly on consensual beliefs. Participants diverged merely with regard to which beliefs were considered most pertinent. For instance, most participants acknowledged that ‘open borders’ related both to traveling, living, and working abroad, as well as to security, international crime and migration. However, depending on which of these frames they considered more pertinent, they arrived at contrary evaluations. The closest people came to evaluating the same belief in different ways was the conviction that the constitution would lead toward a more unified, possibly federal European state (*‘union’ cluster in figure VI.1*). However, evaluative disagreement again derived from the frames applied to the same belief: While some people focused on prospects of peace and intercultural understanding, others focused on harmonization and the loss of national identities. A third group saw unification as inevitable due to market pressures, and assumed a neutral stance. Neither of the groups, however, contested the validity of the others’ frames. In most schemata, however, the occurring frames pointed toward the same evaluation, supporting strong and consensually univalent attitudes.

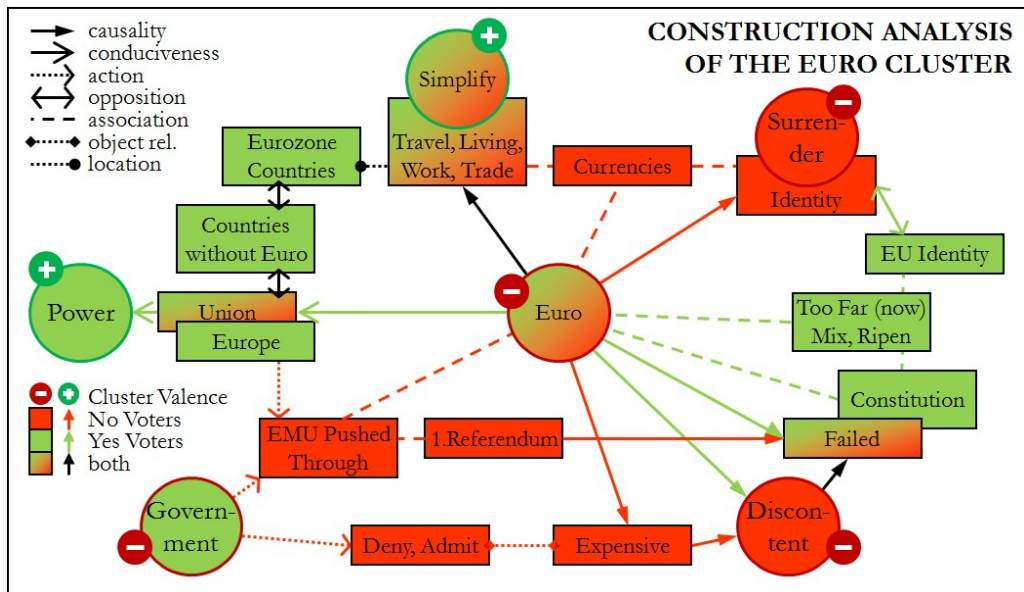
Evaluative coherence & semantic framing

The differences in people’s use of attitudes lay not in their evaluations, but in the way they saw these as related to one another. Most controversy in the discussions focused not on propositions within, but the links between the clusters. Negative attitudes could contribute strong positive valence to the reasoning process, and vice versa – e.g., people’s rejection of bureaucratic overregulation was regularly cited as a reason to support the EU constitution, which was seen as a measure to crop EU bureaucracy. Consistent with *H3.1*, different implications raised by the same attitudes were achieved by means of selecting frames within the schema that semantically supported the intended use of the information: For instance, information tended to be qualified as ‘bad’ or ‘unclear’ when the schema was used to justify discontent or reproaches against the government. In relation to one’s own uncertainty in judging the referendum proposal, the predominant description was ‘contradictory’; and in conjecture with active information searches, it was qualified as ‘false’ and ‘misleading’, typically followed by a statement that the campaign should therefore be disregarded. Still, consensus remained that the quality of campaign

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information was low and unsatisfactory. In other cases, attitudes were referred to but discounted by some participants – e.g., the euro was argued to be unrelated to the referendum proposal. As expected by *H3.2*, since the constitution could hardly be reinterpreted as opposed to the euro, the consensually negative attitude toward it had to be discounted. In several cases, even strong (mostly negative) attitudes were disregarded in this manner. Again, both inclusion and exclusion of the euro as a valid cue was achieved by means of framing: Participants legitimized attitudes toward the euro as useful cues by framing the currency as a symbol of a common policy style in EU politics: Pushed through by irresponsible elites, they saw it as part of a larger strategy to supplant national identities with some faceless, neoliberal market, threatening both the social and economic existence of common people. With regard to this frame, the euro could easily find its place in a narrative about the constitution – another imposed, transnational, risky policy. By contrast, other participants delegitimized the euro as a cue by framing it as a long-standing fact of everyday life entirely unrelated to the referendum. Even when accounting for others' vote choices, Yes- and No-voters framed the euro in subtly, but consequentially different ways: As figure VI.2 shows, both camps agree that the euro caused discontent among the Dutch electorate, hence contributing to the failure of the referendum. However, in the view of the No-voters, this discontent is rooted in price rises and, notably, the government's denial that such price rises had occurred. They thus not only legitimized the discontent, but also implied that punishing the government was a sensible strategy. By contrast, for Yes-voters, the euro directly caused discontent, without further reason. This enabled them to still account for the majority's rejection of the referendum proposal, while simultaneously retaining the ability to discount the euro as invalid cue when explaining their own vote choices.

Figure VI.2: Yes- and No-voters' references to the euro when accounting for the referendum outcome.



Narrative integration

Using frames to construct semantically coherent relations between the various beliefs drawn upon for opinion formation, participants combined various considerations into a narrative structure. Almost without exception, accounts started from a confession of ignorance, explained by the bad information campaign. This lack of information motivated and legitimized the heuristic use of other schematic information – most notably, attitudes toward the government and the euro. However, in line with *H3.3*, the way in which these were linked to the EU constitution differed between Yes- and No-voters. The latter predominantly blamed the bad campaign on the government, which was also seen as responsible for the constitutional referendum. Conclusions to vote No derived either directly from a determination to reject something one does not understand, the inference that the absence of compelling pro-arguments meant there was little positive about the treaty, or from a conviction that everything the government touched was faulty. In addition, No voters likened the constitution to the euro, understood both as products of the same irresponsible, arrogant and nivellating EU integration process, and concluded that the treaty had to be rejected. Likewise, negative feelings about EU integration and other general attitudes were linked in to bolster the narrative. Valence was transferred in a rather straightforward fashion: The constitution was associated (by authorship or similarity, respectively) with the negatively evaluated government and the euro, and valence was attributed accordingly.

For Yes-voters, who partly relied on the same negatively valenced attitudes, integration was somewhat more complex. In their accounts, the government was responsible for the bad information, too, but otherwise detached from the issue under consideration. Discontent with government was consensual, but peripheral. Even those trusting some political figures' endorsements underscored that they voted Yes *in spite of* the government. Instead, Yes-voters took the lack of reliable information as a reason to disregard the many voiced doubts, and focused instead on the little knowledge they were certain of. In consequence, Yes-voters relied mostly on specific information about the draft treaty itself: They referred to specific provisions or goals attributed to the treaty, making use of the predominantly positively valenced attitudes toward specific issues. Their narratives advanced a rather narrow definition of the issue to be voted on, evaluating only the treaty and those implications on which dependable information was available. They disregarded wide analogies with the euro or EU integration at large as inapplicable. Aside of transferring the positive valence attached to several specific issues associated with the treaty, Yes voters also utilized several available negative attitudes for their accounts: While some salient, countervailing attitudes were discounted as irrelevant for their narratives, they regularly derived positive evaluations by portraying the draft treaty as opposed to negatively evaluated aspects of EU integration. Notably, they expected that the treaty would reduce the democratic deficit and curb bureaucracy. Hence, they re-interpreted cues in light of the semantic quality of the links to the referendum proposal. They could accept claims about an irresponsible, undeserving European policy style, yet still argue in favor of the constitution by framing it not as an expression of, but a possible cure for this situation. Negative experiences from the euro introduction could thus, in one view, demonstrate the need to halt EU integration, and simultaneously present a not less urgent need, in another view, to support a treaty that

might improve matters. As expected by *H3.1-3.3* participants agreed largely on the desirability of ends, but disagreed how the constitution related to these.

The narrative structure of the accounts advanced by either Yes- or No-voters determined to a large degree the role that different attitudes could play. Forming clearly distinct ideas of what exactly was to be decided, the different COFs structuring Yes- and No-voters' accounts determined how otherwise consensual concerns were seen as related. The frames applied to relate the available cues to one another made most of the difference between the camps. This task of narrative construction was considerably easier to manage for No- than for the Yes-voters, who had to achieve evaluative coherence despite the dominance of shared negative attitudes. However, also No-voters struggled to achieve narrative coherence in their accounts, instead of simply adding up or averaging available belief valences. Both Yes- and No-voters did not merely aggregate attitude valences when forming their opinions, but they established semantically coherent narratives justifying their choices.

VI.5. Discussion

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 their reasoning (Fossum & Trenz, 2006; Hobolt, 2007), it is clear that judgments were neither random, nor unfounded. Instead, participants based their accounts on a wide range of schematic knowledge.

Semantic content

A large part of the schemata drawn upon closely mirrors those outlined by previous studies of people's European belief systems (see chapter III, Hewstone, 1986; Medrano, 2003; Scheuer, 2005). However, while these long-standing, rather intangible Euro-stereotypes were widely referred to in most participants' accounts, they were not central to the discussions. 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). People pursued an 'integrated resource strategy' (Gamson, 1992), combining experiential knowledge, media-proliferated situation observations and arguments, and long standing popular wisdom. However, people were highly selective in their use of these resources, emphasizing different observations, interpretations and information backgrounds (Lang & Lang, 1990).

Yes-voters relied on a combination of prior knowledge and concrete information about the constitution received from media discourse. They referred mostly to socially shared beliefs and regularly advanced balanced arguments and trade-offs between considerations discussed in public discourse (Gamson, 1992; Schuck & de Vreese, 2008). No voters, by contrast, were more selective and often focused on themes peripheral in media discourse (chapter V). Aside of this, they relied heavily on personal experiences and intuitions, as well as specific observations about the referendum campaign (see also de Vreese & Semetko, 2004).

Regardless of the different selections drawn upon, however, most participants acknowledged their familiarity with a much wider range of considerations. By far most

raised themes qualify as common knowledge. Idiosyncratic knowledge made no major independent contribution to the accounts, but mostly served to determine which out of the commonly available schemata were most important. Controversy derived almost entirely from selectively highlighting different aspects of a theme: Participants controversially framed uncontroversial ‘facts’ (Nelson *et al.*, 1997). They introduced frames sustaining their deviant reading even while acknowledging other frames currently present in the debate. Mostly, participants tolerated different frames, but discounted these as less important than their own interpretations. 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). While the few, highly selectively retrieved beliefs in immediate-posttest framing effects research neither require nor allow much weight variation (see chapter IV), the weight variation assumes a central role in the construction of reasoned accounts: Over the duration of a referendum campaign, the range of contexts considered by an individual forming a vote choice is necessarily large – much larger and much more diverse than can be accommodated in one coherent account (Graber, 1988; Zaller & Feldman, 1992). Being principally familiar with various available frames, people consciously disregard those considered invalid or otherwise unimportant. The role of non-retrieval, reducing the amount of available information to a manageable, relatively coherent set, is taken over by the discounting of raised beliefs that do not match the person’s formed understanding. However, unlike in ad-hoc belief retrieval, people discounted not so much single beliefs, but entire frames and schemata:⁶⁶ Having already considered the meanings provided by the respective contexts, they rejected entire substructures of their knowledge as irrelevant to the task. The schematic knowledge formed upon belief acquisition differentiated schema structures which, in the words of van Dijk and Kintsch (1983: 47) “function as wholes”, and could hence be discounted as wholes.

Evaluative content

Beyond the schematic structure of beliefs, the recorded clusters also showed the properties expected from schema-based attitudes. Like the semantic content, also the evaluative load of most attitudes was consensual (Kumlin, 2000; M. Lodge & Taber, 2000). Where different evaluations persisted within the same schematic structure, the differences could be traced to different frames (considerations) applicable to the common object. Participants referring to schemata containing differently charged considerations almost exclusively covered *either* positive *or* negative frames. Disagreement due to genuinely different *preferences* about the very same set of propositions did not occur (Aarts & van der Kolk, 2005). As a consequence, the valence of people’s attitudes toward the range of relevant objects was rather inconsequential for their vote choices. People agreed far more on the evaluations of raised beliefs than on the quality of their relatedness to the referendum proposal.

⁶⁶ Technically, also those ‘considerations’ whose relative importance was affected in the experiments conducted by Nelson and co-authors are better described as frames than as beliefs in the terminology of this study: They concerned entirely different kinds of context, composed of and alluding to a variety of propositions. Thus, this argument does not necessarily contradict the findings reported by Nelson *et al.* (1997).

Rather, participants differed with regard to the interpretations built from the advanced considerations. People deliberately reframed consensual, consensually evaluated attitudes to derive completely different evaluative implications. For instance, while all participants agreed that the present state of EU bureaucracy was lamentable, Yes voters used this negative attitude as a positive cue. Evaluative inferences hence made detailed use of the semantic knowledge about the quality and pertinence of a cue's relation to the target. People did not simply transfer valences in a linear fashion, but they interpreted transferred cues in light of the meaning they implied (Brewer, 2001; de Vreese & Semetko, 2004; Franklin, 2002): They qualitative *transformed* the evaluative load attached to a cue while transferring it to a target (Gross & D'Ambrosio, 2004; Shah *et al.*, 2004). If no compelling relation between cue and target was identified, people discounted also strong attitudes as irrelevant to the task, rejecting the heuristic inference as invalid. This enabled people to use their (predominantly negative) general attitudes towards EU politics and still conclude that the constitution posed an opportunity for improvement. Speaking with Nelson and Oxley, "this is framing par excellence: to concede to your opponents' factual claims, but to assert that, under the proper framing, those facts aren't important" (1999: 1058). What conclusions people drew from their attitudes depended crucially on how the referendum proposal was framed (de Vreese & Semetko, 2004; Sapiro & Soss, 1999; Siune, Svensson, & Tonsgaard, 1994).

Narrative integration

Weaving together those schematic beliefs and attitude-based evaluations they considered relevant, participants used frames to instate coherence among the raised considerations. They referred to other arguments made before, putting new contributions into perspective (Just *et al.*, 1996; Neuman *et al.*, 1992). Although most accounts were predominantly based on consensual, consensually evaluated schematic beliefs, participants selectively used frames to form diverse, but coherent arguments. These were organized by a narrative core (COF) which defined the choice situation facing the voters in the referendum (Peterson, 2004): No voters perceived the situation as characterized by unreliable information, resorting to their general knowledge about the EU integration process to evaluate the draft constitution. The treaty was seen as a more or less typical case of EU policy making, legitimizing the transfer of knowledge and experiences from other cases (de Vreese, 2006; Hobolt, 2007; Neijens & van Praag, 2006). Yes voters, by contrast, differentiated between false and misleading information on the one hand, and some rare bits of concrete, reliable information on the other. They relied mostly on specific information about the constitutional treaty, referring to their general EU knowledge not as a template, but as a backdrop against which the ambitions of the treaty needed to be understood. Both camps' COFs hence drew upon highly similar information within the core of the formed social representations. However, due to the different functions assigned to available knowledge by these central frames, the same information was used in radically different ways. No voters could mostly transfer evaluative loads in a linear fashion from other familiar aspects of EU politics toward the judged treaty. Yes voters, however, first consulted their understandings about how the treaty would affect these aspects, often concluding that the treaty aimed at curbing familiar ills in EU politics.

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Generally, the narratives crafted by Yes voters were somewhat more differentiated than No voters' accounts. While the latter mostly cited negative experiences, intuitions, and knowledge about lamentable states, Yes voters portrayed their own vote choice more as a weighted decision. However, those arguments favoring a No vote advanced by Yes voters tended to represent connections easily 'unmasked' as invalid or unconvincing. They even suggest reasons hardly named by No voters themselves, attributing superficially plausible, but ultimately misled considerations to their vote choices. In the narratives about voting No presented by Yes voters, the majority of their countrymen and -women had voted No out of understandable, but misplaced resentment against past EU policies (notably, the euro) and the current government. In either case, the situation definitions determined in the narrative core constrained the uses other schematic knowledge could be used to, and informed the framing strategies needed to connect the relevant pieces (Shu, 2003). The resulting accounts were well-integrated, semantically and evaluatively coherent. Selecting strategically out of a wide range of available shared knowledge, people used frames to construct connections between the different pieces of evidence. By the same means, they discounted or reframed those considerations that did not support their conclusion. Participants went to some lengths to explain how cues made sense together (Pennington & Hastie, 1986, 1988). They neither simply followed the set of strongest attitudes that came to mind, nor did they mindlessly aggregate all cues encountered over the course of the campaign. In line with the predictions made by the schematic network theory, they selected frames resonating with their idiosyncratic concerns, predispositions and knowledge, and constructed their personal narratives in consequence. Deliberately selecting, framing and integrating available information, they arrived at highly reasonable, well-founded accounts.

Limitations

This study obviously suffers from several limitations. First, while literature recommends adding focus groups until contributions become redundant, the observed sample fell short of this requirement (Morrison, 1998). Also, more confidence could be gained from comparing sense making in different information environments: Juxtaposing, for instance, the French referendum campaign characterized by higher politicization and different social representations (Milner, 2006), the robustness of heuristic strategies detected in the Dutch case could be scrutinized. Also, without measuring belief systems at different time points *during* people's opinion forming process one cannot say which considerations were decisive for opinion formation. People might try out various accounts before settling for one. The approach taken by the above study measures what understanding remained after a long period of opinion formation, and some further period of forgetting. The claims it makes about the origin and genesis of understandings rest on the theoretical conjectures sketched in the schematic network theory above. The highly systematic analytic strategy effectively addresses the danger of exaggerating anecdotal findings, which haunts other accounts of individuals' acquired knowledge (Höijer, 1990). The fact that most observations are in line with expectations hence considerably bolsters the advanced theory. Nevertheless, most theoretical knowledge the acquisition of complex knowledge in messy information environments is thin, recent (and, consequently, not tested in sufficient detail), and hence prone to error.

In summary

In summary, the above study underlines five main findings that relate to the theoretical expectations formulated above: First, despite the limited agreement detected among the coverage of various media (chapter V), the range of information acquired by the focus group participants is highly similar. Moreover, even the evaluation of most considerations is consensual within the formed social representations. Second, despite this high similarity of available information, the accounts constructed by participants were highly dissimilar. Participants demonstrated considerable discretion in the selection and integration of relevant information. They were, as Gamson predicted 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). Third, the differences in vote decisions can be traced to the different narratives constructed from the mostly consensual, consensually evaluated information. Voters did not show markedly different evaluations, but mostly differed in the priorities they attached to various considerations, and connections they saw between these. In line with Aarts and van der Kolk’s (2005) conclusion, the referendum was decided not over different preferences, but over different interpretations. Fourth, and consequently, the transfer of evaluative loads toward the judgment task did not so much depend on *which* attitudes were considered, but *how* these were related to the decision. It seems therefore necessary to pay much more attention in opinion formation research to the believed relations underlying the transfer of valence from a cue to the target. Neither an assumed reliance on single, dominant cues, nor a (weighted) aggregation of evaluative loads across cues adequately represents the opinion formation process documented above. Finally, the narrative integration of complex accounts, integrating idiosyncratic, publicly communicated, and traded knowledge speaks against common notions of an uninformed, immature and disengaged electorate. Despite scarce and unreliable information as well as limited motivation to consider the issue systematically, all participants managed to form reasoned accounts justifying their vote choice. While the resources available to voters may be limited, their creativity and ingenuity should not be underestimated.