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Public support for referendums in Europe: A cross-national comparison in 21 countries

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ABSTRACT

Previous research is unclear about *who* supports the use of referendums and *why*. One line of research suggests that people with greater cognitive resources are more supportive of referendums. Another line claims that referendums are supported by citizens who feel disconnected from the political process. We integrate both perspectives, include *civic duty* and *political cynicism* as key explanatory variables, and offer a model explaining referendum support across Europe drawing on both individual and contextual factors. Our study is based on a survey conducted in 21 EU member states (N = 22,806). Results show support for both perspectives and for our new indicators, suggesting that referendum support is highest among citizens who are critical of traditional party politics but committed to democratic practices.

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1. Introduction

The use of referendums has become increasingly popular in recent years and public support for direct democracy is generally high. However, previous research has yielded inconclusive results as to *who* supports referendums and why. On the one hand, the *cognitive mobilization* perspective claims that people with greater cognitive resources, such as education or knowledge, are more likely to make use of the referendum opportunity since they are more motivated to participate in politics. On the other hand, the *political disaffection* perspective assumes that referendums are supported by those citizens who feel disconnected from traditional party politics and who are particularly critical of the political process. Thus, whereas one perspective assumes that public support for referendums is rooted in a general and active commitment to democratic practices, of which referendums are just one example, the other suspects that it is frustration with the way politics is run that makes citizens see referendums as a particularly effective tool to have an alternative say and to exert actual influence.

The present study integrates these two perspectives. In addition, we introduce new factors for each of these, i.e. focussing on the role of *political cynicism* and *civic duty* as additional explanations for referendum support. Finally, since we investigate referendum support with regard to European Union (EU) integration issues and across 21 EU member states, we pay special attention to the role of EU-related attitudes and contextual factors in determining support.

In sum, our study builds on, and extends, previous research by investigating the role of new explanations for both perspectives (e.g., civic duty, habitual voting, political cynicism, EU attitudes) and also tests for the influence of contextual factors (e.g., number of past referendums in a country, new vs. old EU member states). We investigate this using a unique cross-nationally comparative study design, namely a survey conducted in 21 EU member states. Results lend support to extant explanations in the literature but

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also emphasize the need to consider new explanations and overall suggest that referendum support is highest among citizens who are critical of the political process as such but feel committed to democratic practices.

2. Public support for referendums

The use of referendums is on the increase (e.g., de Vreese, 2007; de Vreese and Schuck, 2014). This development squares well with citizens' wishes: in general, citizens in Western representative democracies are supportive of referendums as a supplement to a system in which representatives are elected. While a lot of efforts have been devoted to theorizing about the potential threats and benefits of direct democracy (e.g., Barber, 1984; Bowler and Donovan, 2002; Budge, 1996; Christin et al., 2002; Fishkin, 1995; LeDuc, 2003; Resnick, 1997; Sartori, 1987) and support for direct democracy is generally high among the public (e.g., Bowler and Donovan, 1998; Dalton et al., 2001; Mendelsohn and Parkin, 2001), it is also clear that different groups of citizens are more supportive than others. One line of research suggests that the referendum opportunity is more embraced by those who are already more politically interested and involved (e.g., Donovan and Karp, 2006), also dubbed the *cognitive mobilization hypothesis*. 'Persons who are interested in one form of election are also interested in the other; almost all of those who are very or somewhat interested in one type of election are very or somewhat interested in the other […]' (Magleby, 1989: 99). A second line suggests that referendums are rather supported by citizens at the margins of the political process and those who feel disaffected with traditional party-based politics who see referendums as an effective alternative (e.g., Dalton et al., 2001; Gilljam et al., 1998), also dubbed the *political disaffection hypothesis*.

3. The cognitive mobilization hypothesis – the role of civic duty

The cognitive mobilization hypothesis posits that people with more political interest and higher engagement are more supportive of referendums. They possess greater cognitive resources, such as education or knowledge, and consequently are more inclined to embrace the referendum opportunity because they are more motivated to participate in politics. This perspective is linked to the observation that political skills among citizens have increased over time and, as a result, citizens demand to have more of a say and are less willing to leave political decision-making up to political elites (e.g., Dalton, 1984; Inglehart, 1990). Thus, in this perspective, citizens who are more interested and engaged in politics and possess greater cognitive skills are seen to be the driving force behind public support for referendums because these offer an additional opportunity for political expression (see Schuck and de Vreese, 2011).[1]

However, the picture is more nuanced and Anderson and Goodyear-Grant (2010) argue that highly informed citizens are sometimes even *sceptical* of referendums. They note that 'an intriguing tension presents itself in that those citizens who may be best equipped for referendum voting, the highly informed and politically sophisticated, are the least likely to support the use of this tool of direct democracy' (p. 227). This view resonates with the concern that referendums are prone to populist tendencies and influence (e.g., Dalton et al., 2001) which under certain circumstances might create scepticism among those who are most politically engaged and who worry about an 'uninformed' outcome. However, this concern might be more situational and tied to particular referendum contexts, e.g. when these are very polarized and/or on sensitive subjects, and not be of general nature. Returning to the mobilization hypothesis, Rose and Borz (2013) stress the need to see political participation as a socialization process. They suggest that the more inclined one is to participate in politics, the more one favours referendums due to a self-reinforcing socialization process. Empirically, this argument takes the shape of including political interest in their analysis which yields a positive and significant effect on referendum support. In this article, we build on this research and suggest that reinforcing processes of political interest and previous electoral experiences are part of generating what we may refer to as a sense of '*civic duty*' (see also Bowler and Donovan, 2013).

A self-perceived sense of civic duty has been shown in previous studies to be a key predictor of turnout (e.g., Blais, 2006; Clarke et al., 2004). Indeed this also applies to the referendum situation. Bowler and Donovan (2013) argue that individuals are socialized to politics differently and this results in a baseline level of 'duty'. For example, those who were socialized to develop an interest in politics also become more engaged and see politics in a more positive light. They also attach a greater sense of duty to the act of voting, more so than those with less political interest, and value political engagement up to the extent of seeing it as an obligation. As Bowler and Donovan (2013) show, civic duty boosted turnout in the 2011 British electoral system referendum. They also took a step further and examined what drives that sense of duty. Here they find that assessments of civic duty are structured by evaluations of politics and politicians. Low interest in politics, low political efficacy, and low regard for politicians correspond with less support for the idea that citizens have a duty to vote on referendums and at other elections. Some of these propositions are also closely connected to the underlying assumptions of the political disaffection perspective discussed below. In the current study, we assume that civic duty is an important predictor not just for political participation (i.e., turnout) but also for referendum support as referendums provide an additional opportunity to have a say and become politically engaged and thus perform citizenship.

Regarding the cognitive mobilization hypothesis we propose civic duty as a new relevant factor explaining referendum support next to other more established indicators (specified in method section below) which have been

[1] In a previous publication (Schuck and de Vreese, 2011) in West European Politics we outlined the key perspectives. In this article we build on this while incorporating recent research in these areas.

tested by previous research and which we also control for in our model.

4. The disaffection hypothesis – cynicism, the missing link?

The political disaffection hypothesis claims that referendums are especially supported by those citizens who feel disconnected from traditional party politics and who are at the margins of the political process. The assumption is that for these citizens a referendum presents an alternative way of expressing themselves politically and one which they favour because they have lost confidence in the way politics is run. Previous research has shown that support for referendums indeed often stems from citizens with critical or sometimes even cynical attitudes towards politics (e.g., Inglehart, 1999; Norris, 1999). Thus, in this perspective citizens who are dissatisfied and disillusioned with governments and party politics and who are at the periphery of politics are seen to be the driving force behind public support for referendums because these offer an alternative and more attractive opportunity for political expression (see Dalton et al., 2001; Donovan et al., 2009). In sum, and different to the cognitive mobilization perspective, support for direct democracy here is not seen as linked to a desire for more political participation or responsibility but instead to the dissatisfaction with traditional political representation (e.g., Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2001).

Rose and Borz (2013) address this aspect of political disaffection in terms of political performance, mainly grounded in performance evaluations. Such evaluations can take different shapes. Webb (2013) distinguished between two types of political disaffection – 'dissatisfied democratic' and 'stealth democratic'. Both types share a low trust in political elites, but the dissatisfied democrat is politically interested, efficacious and desires greater political participation, while the contrary is generally true of the stealth democrat. As Webb (2013) shows, however, stealth democrats favour direct democracy more, which he interprets as a result of the populist nature of stealth democratic attitudes.

We concur that evaluations of politics are indeed very relevant. We also posit that this is quite a sophisticated process whereby performance is evaluated by yardsticks (see also Desmet et al., 2012), and that these evaluations then contribute to (the presence or absence of) support for referendums. However, we also believe it is important to broaden the scope of evaluations we look at: the thrust of the dissatisfied citizen perspective is aversion to current politics and in recent years, this has been investigated looking at the concept of *political cynicism*, however, political cynicism so far has not been operationalized as a key predictor for referendum support.

Political cynicism refers to a (perceived) gap between voters and their political representatives. It '… implies that the self-interest of political actors is their primary goal and that the common interest is secondary at best or played out only for its political advantage' (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997: 142). At the aggregate level it has increased over the past decades (e.g., Jackson, 2011; Rhee, 1997). Previous research has mostly focused on cynicism as an outcome variable, e.g., the impact of election news coverage on levels of political cynicism (e.g., Schuck et al., 2013; Valentino et al., 2001). Few studies also considered cynicism as a mediator, e.g. for the effect of strategic news coverage on vote choice (Elenbaas and de Vreese, 2008). The assumption underlying most of these studies is the same - that higher levels of cynicism can alienate people from politics, reduce learning, erode civic engagement and result in lower levels of participation in the political process (see e.g., Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1995; Patterson, 1993, 2002; Valentino et al., 2001) although this view has been challenged.

Recent research suggests that cynicism does not necessarily need to be related to disengagement but can rather be an indication of a kind of critical citizenship which does not inevitably let people turn away from politics (de Vreese and Semetko, 2002; de Vreese, 2005). Thus, it can mean that citizens are critical or even lost confidence in traditional party politics but remain committed to democratic practices – or are even especially supportive of alternative democratic means such as referendums. Picking up both these perspectives from previous research, i.e. lower levels of cynicism being related to higher levels of engagement and cynicism being a form of critical citizenship, we argue that cynicism is likely to lead to more support for the use of referendums. Citizens who feel cynical about traditional party politics may be more inclined to vote in referendums because for them it represents an opportunity to have an unfiltered and more direct say with a concrete outcome, i.e. bypassing those standard political practices they are particularly critical of.

Regarding the political disaffection hypothesis we thus propose political cynicism as an important factor explaining referendum support alongside other established indicators tapping into the characteristics of those at the 'periphery of politics' (specified in method section below).

5. Hypotheses

Based on the above considerations we propose that above and beyond all relevant key predictors of both the cognitive mobilization and the political disaffection hypotheses and other EU-specific and contextual controls *civic duty* and *political cynicism* are important predictors of referendum support.

(H1). *Higher levels of civic duty contribute to higher levels of support for referendums* [cognitive mobilization hypothesis].

(H2). *Higher levels of political cynicism contribute to higher levels of support for referendums* [political disaffection hypothesis].

6. Study context

We test our hypotheses in the context of popular support for referendums on issues of European integration. Referendums on European integration issues are amongst

Table 1
Multilevel regression model explaining EU referendum support.

	Fixed effects model	
	B	SE
Gender	−0.091***	0.024
Age	−0.004***	0.001
Education	−0.031*	0.013
Political interest (EU)	0.119***	0.008
Civic duty	0.083***	0.008
Habitual voting	0.019	0.010
Political ideology (right)	0.071*	0.028
Political ideology (left)	0.130***	0.030
Political efficacy	−0.080***	0.011
Satisfaction w/domestic democracy	0.070***	0.010
Satisfaction w/EU democracy	0.070***	0.011
Political cynicism	0.198***	0.011
Satisfaction w/government handling of EU integration issue	−0.070***	0.009
EU support	−0.031***	0.008
Number of past referendums	0.038	0.040
Eastern Europe	−0.315*	0.159
Constant	3.362***	0.157
Variance country level	0.111	
Variance individual level	2.642	
Log restricted-likelihood	−37236.167	

Note. Bs are unstandardized coefficients from a fixed-effects multilevel model.
*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001 (two-tailed); N = 19,503.

the most common in the Western world and the EU and its treaties, currency, policies, and membership are among the most voted on issues in the world (e.g., Hobolt, 2009). European referendums have often been described as 'second-order' elections in which domestic considerations are more important than EU issue-related attitudes (Franklin et al., 1994). However, this view has also been challenged (Svensson, 2002) and EU attitudes have been shown to become more important over time in line with the increasing decision-making power of the EU and had a major impact on recent referendum outcomes (Garry et al., 2005; Glencross and Trechsel, 2011) and even mattered for national elections (De Vries, 2007). In the current study, this means we also include several EU-specific factors in our analysis (e.g., general EU support, satisfaction with government handling of EU integration issues etc.) in order to account for the fact that voting on European issues is becoming increasingly influenced by actual EU-specific attitudes and considerations. Furthermore, as our investigation spans 21 countries across Europe we also control for the influence of relevant contextual factors. However, as shown below (see Table 1 and Fig. 1), cross-country variation in referendum support is rather low and we are limited in the number of contextual factors we can include in our analysis.

7. Data & methods

The data for this study stem from the 2009 European Election Campaign Study.[2] It is based on a two-wave panel survey which was carried out in 21 EU member states.[3] Respondents were interviewed about one month prior to the EP elections and immediately afterwards. Fieldwork dates were 6–18th of May and 8–19th of June 2009. The survey was conducted using Computer Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI).[4] The dependent variable we use is referendum support measured in wave 2 of this survey. The specific wording of all variables listed below can be found in appendix A.

Country sample: The fieldwork was coordinated by TNS Opinion in Brussels and involved TNS subsidiaries in each country. All subsidiaries comply with ESOMAR guidelines for survey research. A total of 22,806 respondents participated in the second wave of the survey.[5] On average, 1086 respondents per country completed the questionnaire, varying from 1001 in Austria to 2000 in Belgium. In Belgium, 1000 Flemish respondents and 1000 Walloon respondents completed both waves of the survey. In each country, a sample was drawn from TNS databases. These databases rely on multiple recruitment strategies, including telephone, face-to-face, and online recruitment. Each database consists of between 3600 (Slovakia) and 339,000 (the UK) individuals. Quotas (on age, gender, and education) were enforced in sampling from the database. The average response rate was 31% in wave 1 and the re-contact rate was on average 80% in wave 2.[6] The samples show appropriate distributions in terms of gender, age and education compared to census data. As we are mostly interested in the underlying relationships between variables, we consider the deviations in the sample vis-à-vis the adult population less problematic and we exert

[2] The study was funded by the Dutch National Science Foundation (VICI grant) and additional grants from the Danish Science Foundation, the University of Amsterdam, and the Swedish Riksbanken Foundation.

[3] The countries were the UK, France, Italy, Germany, Spain, Sweden, Denmark, Greece, Hungary, Czech Republic, Poland, Ireland, Austria, Portugal, Belgium (Flanders and Wallonia), Netherlands, Finland, Lithuania, Latvia, Slovakia & Bulgaria. The country selection includes larger and smaller member states, countries from North, South, East and West, and long term and new members to the Union. The country selection was finalized based on feasibility.

[4] Fieldwork started on May 6 in all countries. In the UK and Ireland data collection finished on May 11, in France, Italy, Germany, Spain, Sweden, Greece, Czech Republic, Austria, Portugal, Netherlands, Finland and Slovakia on May 12, in Hungary, Poland and Latvia on May 13, in Denmark and Belgium on May 14, in Lithuania on May 15 and in Bulgaria on May 18. In Slovakia data collection finished on June 11, in Italy, Germany, Sweden, Czech Republic, Lithuania, and the Netherlands on June 12, in Ireland and the UK on June 13, in France, Poland and Austria on June 14, in Spain, Denmark, Greece, Hungary, Portugal, Finland, and Latvia on June 15 and Belgium on June 19.

[5] The lower number of respondents in our reported model is due to missing data on some of the variables included in the analysis.

[6] The response rates vary from 19% (Denmark) to 63% (Lithuania) in wave 1 and the re-contact rate between 67% (Latvia) and 89% (Hungary). An analysis of the non-participation (i.e. respondents who were invited but did not participate or not complete the interview) showed that non-respondents were younger, included more men compared to women in the UK, Sweden and Denmark and more women in Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal and Austria. Concerning education, the pool of non-respondents was significantly lower educated in six countries (Spain, Denmark, Czech Republic, Poland, the Netherlands and Finland).

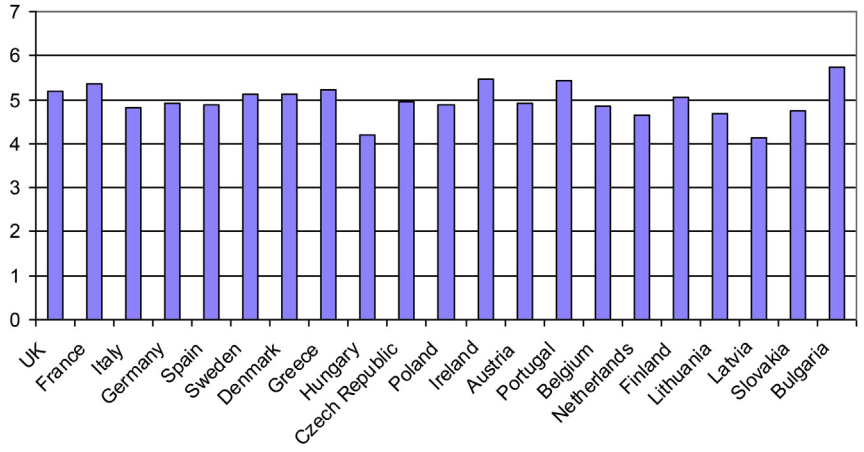

Fig. 1. EU referendum support across 21 countries. *Note*. Bars indicate average levels of EU referendum support in the respective member states with higher numbers indicating stronger support ($M = 4.95$, $SD = 1.72$); N = 22,806.

appropriate caution when making inferences about absolute values.[7]

Questionnaire and translations: The questionnaire was developed in English and translated into the different national languages. It was then translated back into English as an additional check of the accuracy of the translations. The translation was supervised by the research team and it was carried out by TNS (which also executes and translates the Eurobarometer surveys). Irregularities and problems arising from this process were resolved by deliberation.[8]

7.1. Measures

7.1.1. Dependent variable

Respondents were asked to what extent they are against or in favour of holding referendums on matters of European integration (1-strongly against EU referendums, 7-strongly in favour of EU referendums) ($M = 4.95$, $SD = 1.72$).

7.1.2. Independent variables

Civic duty is assessed with four items on 7-point Likert scales asking respondents to what extent they disagree (1) or agree (7) that it is a citizens' duty to participate in elections, feel a sense of satisfaction when they vote, would feel guilty if they do not vote and think they would neglect their duty as citizen if they would not vote ($M = 4.56$, $SD = 1.81$, Cronbach's alpha = 0.87).

Political cynicism was measured with four items on 7-point Likert scales on which higher scores represent stronger levels of cynicism, asking respondents to what extent they disagreed or agreed that politicians are in politics for what they can get out of it personally, will sell out on their ideals and break their promises if it will increase their power, are truthful with voters (reverse coding) and are dedicated and should be thanked for their work (reverse coding) ($M = 5.33$, $SD = 1.24$, Cronbach's alpha = 0.78).[9]

7.2. Individual controls

To be in line with extant research we control for age ($M = 39.30$, $SD = 13.21$), gender (53.3% female), and education (three categories from 1-low to 3-high based on obtainable degrees in a country) in our model. We also control for factors at the country level, however, variation on this level was limited (see below).

In line with the *cognitive mobilization perspective* and previous research, younger age and higher education are expected to be positively related to referendum support (see Schuck and de Vreese, 2011). Furthermore, we include *political interest* which is expected to be positively related to referendum support as well (see Donovan and Karp, 2006; Rose and Borz, 2013). Interest in the current study is measured with one item on a 7-point Likert scale asking respondents how interested they are in political issues

[7] An overview of the composition of our sample vis-à-vis census data per country showed no differences between the adult population and the sample in terms of gender in Austria, Ireland, Slovakia and Spain. The mean difference between the population and the sample was 2.76% (SD = 3.43%). Small deviations occurred (0–8%), with sometimes women overrepresented and sometimes men. One substantial overrepresentation (of women) by 15% occurred in Latvia. Young citizens were generally slightly overrepresented in the samples. The share of young citizens (under 35) deviated 9.62% on average (SD = 8.95%), with a minimum of 1% absolute deviation (overrepresentation) in Italy and Sweden, and a maximum of 34% (overrepresentation) in Greece. The largest underrepresentation of younger citizens was found in Latvia (14%). The share of older citizens (55+) (M = 16.57%, SD = 9.91%) deviated from 1% in France and the UK (overrepresentations) to 33% (underrepresentation in Greece). Most countries had slight underrepresentation of older citizens. The German sample had the largest overrepresentation (2%). In terms of education (collapsed in three categories, following the European Social Survey), the sample reflected the population in Ireland and Spain, while deviations (M = 8.12%, SD = 8.37%) were found in other countries with higher educated citizens being overrepresented in the samples. Underrepresentations were found in Greece (1%), France (6%), Slovakia (5%) and Sweden (11%). For more information, see de Vreese et al., 2010.

[8] For more information, see de Vreese et al., 2009.

[9] Political cynicism is conceptually and empirically distinct from political efficacy and both concepts correlate only weakly with another (r = −0.27).

regarding the European Union (EU) with higher scores representing stronger interest ($M = 4.37$, $SD = 1.59$). *Habitual voting* is included to provide a more conservative test of our key independent variable civic duty which is conceptually and empirically distinct, albeit related to some extent, in its focus on motivational considerations rather than habitual behaviour. Habitual voting in the current study is assessed with one item asking respondents how often they vote considering all elections they are eligible to participate in (1-never, 7-every election) ($M = 5.83$, $SD = 1.60$).[10]

In line with the *political disaffection perspective* and in line with previous research, we include *political efficacy* in our model, which was assessed with four standard items on 7-point Likert scales on which higher scores represent higher levels of efficacy comprising both internal and external efficacy with regard to EU politics ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 1.25$, Cronbach's alpha = 0.68), and which is expected to be strongly and negatively related to referendum support (see Dalton et al., 2001; Schuck and de Vreese, 2011). Furthermore, we control for left and right *political ideology* which is expected to be related to stronger referendum support (see Donovan and Karp, 2006). Tapping political ideology on a 11-point scale (1-left, 11-right) we recoded this variable into two dummy variables, one for left political ideology (1–4) (26.4%) and one for right political ideology (8–11) (32.7%) with centre political ideology as the reference category in our model. *Satisfaction with democracy* is expected to be negatively related to referendum support (Rose and Borz, 2013) and was measured with two single items, asking respondents how satisfied they were with the way democracy works in their country ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 1.69$) and in the EU ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 1.41$).[11] Furthermore, given that in our study we aim to explain support for referendums on EU integration issues (i.e. not domestic issues) we also include several new EU-specific indicators as part of the political disaffection perspective, i.e. satisfaction with the handling of the EU integration issue by the national government and general support for the EU. According to the political disaffection hypothesis and previous research including other EU-related indicators these factors should be expected to be negatively related to referendum support (see Rose and Borz, 2013). *Satisfaction with government handling EU integration* is measured with one item asking respondents how well they think their own national government is handling the issue of EU integration, with higher scores indicating greater satisfaction ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 1.54$). *EU support* was measured with one standard Eurobarometer question on a 7-point Likert scale asking respondents to what extent they disagree (1) or agree (7) that EU membership of their country was a good thing ($M = 4.61$, $SD = 1.70$).

[10] Habitual voting and civic duty are only moderately correlated ($r = 0.50$).

[11] Both items have been included as in previous models explaining support for referendums (Schuck and de Vreese, 2011) and correlate only moderately with each other ($r < 0.50$).

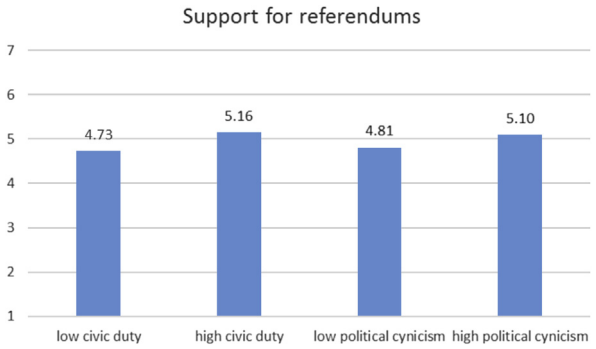

Fig. 2. EU referendum support by levels of civic duty and political cynicism. *Note*. Bars indicate average levels of EU referendum support among respondents with low ($M = 4.73$, $SD = 1.72$) and high ($M = 5.16$, $SD = 1.71$) civic duty and low ($M = 4.81$, $SD = 1.63$) and high ($M = 5.10$, $SD = 1.81$) political cynicism (median split).

7.3. Contextual controls

In our model we control for the number of past referendums on EU integration issues in a country (ranging from 0 to 8, $M = 1.26$, $SD = 1.83$) as well as for old Western vs. new Eastern European member states (i.e. those which joined the EU after 2004). For the latter variable we included a dummy variable indicating geographic affiliation to Eastern Europe (seven countries in our sample).

7.4. Data analysis

We report multilevel regression results from a fixed-effects multilevel model estimated with restricted maximum likelihood (REML) which allows us to assess both individual and contextual factors simultaneously (see Gelman and Hill, 2007). Referendum support is our dependent variable and we include socio-demographics and the two sets of cognitive mobilization and political disaffection indicators including civic duty and political cynicism as independent variables in these models.

8. Results

As Fig. 1 illustrates, the degree of individual level referendum support varies across countries, however, not a lot ($M = 4.95$, $SD = 1.72$).[12] It is generally high and highest in Bulgaria ($M = 5.73$, $SD = 1.53$), Ireland ($M = 5.45$, $SD = 1.73$), Portugal ($M = 5.43$, $SD = 1.61$) and France ($M = 5.38$, $SD = 1.69$) and lowest in Latvia ($M = 4.13$, $SD = 1.81$) and Hungary ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 1.71$).

Turning to our hypotheses and looking at some bivariate descriptives first, we see that referendum support is indeed higher on average among respondents with high levels of civic duty ($M = 5.16$, $SD = 1.71$) and high levels of political cynicism ($M = 5.10$, $SD = 1.81$) compared to respondents with low levels of civic duty ($M = 4.73$, $SD = 1.72$) and low levels of political cynicism ($M = 4.81$, $SD = 1.63$) (see Fig. 2).

[12] Ranging from 4.13 in Latvia to 5.73 in Bulgaria.

We now turn to the results of our multivariate analysis. Based on the empty model the intraclass correlation is .050, which means that about 5 percent of the variance in our dependent variable is on the country level. This is not a lot but still worth considering.[13] Turning to *civic duty* and the cognitive mobilization hypothesis first, we see in Table 1 above that a stronger sense of civic duty is indeed related to stronger referendum support, providing support for H1. Habitual voting is unrelated to referendum support. Of the other standard predictors, age and political interest have the assumed impact. Younger citizens and those more interested in EU politics are more supportive. However, education has a marginally negative impact, i.e. support is stronger among the lower educated compared to the higher educated, which already points to the generally stronger support for the political disaffection hypothesis which we will discuss next.

Regarding *political cynicism* and the political disaffection hypothesis we see a strong effect of cynicism on referendum support. Thus, citizens who are cynical about traditional party politics and who do not believe that politicians are reliable show stronger support for referendums, supporting H2. Furthermore, most of the other standard predictors of the political disaffection hypothesis show the assumed impact. In line with previous research we find support for the expectation that people with more extreme political ideology are more supportive of referendums, both on the right as well as especially on the left side of the political spectrum. As also shown in previous research, political efficacy is a key variable in explaining referendum support and has a strong negative effect. Thus, it is especially those who feel inefficacious when it comes to traditional party-based politics, i.e. those feeling that their voice usually does not count and that government is not responsive, who embrace referendums as an alternative opportunity to have their say. Related to this observation, our analysis also shows that EU-related attitudes and policy evaluations indeed do matter for referendum support in Europe. Low levels of EU support and low levels of satisfaction with how the national government is handling the EU integration issue lead to stronger support for referendums. At the same time, satisfaction with domestic and EU democracy in general are both positively related to referendum support.

Thus, overall we find support for both of our new proposed indicators, civic duty and political cynicism. Both of them matter for referendum support and add to the explanation who supports referendums and why. Furthermore, we find general support for both perspectives, cognitive mobilization and political disaffection, on the individual level. Overall, support is stronger for the political disaffection perspective, however, there are connections between both perspectives which we will further discuss below.

On the contextual level, the variance is rather low, as was also already indicated by Fig. 1 above. As we can see the number of past referendums plays no role but support is overall slightly higher in the old Western European member states compared to the new Eastern European member states.[14]

9. Discussion

It is a paradoxical situation that while referendums are increasingly popular, they are also increasingly contested. The discussion is waged in both the scholarly literature and in societal debates. Can we trust that referendum outcomes are well informed and carried by a qualified majority or are they prone to populist tendencies, hijacked by particular interests and/or turned into punishment traps by an angry citizenry frustrated with traditional party politics? We still have only limited knowledge about which citizens support the use of referendums and why. These questions are essential since the answers help us understand the dynamics of such direct democratic means and they are telling about the quality of our democracies. At the core of extant research we may distil two major schools of thoughts, one suggesting that it is primarily those who are most politically engaged who support in referendums, and the other suggesting that it is rather those at the periphery of politics that exhibit support.

In this study, based on a large-scale survey spanning 21 European countries, we introduce *civic duty* and *political cynicism* as two, thus far neglected but important factors determining public support for referendums. We hereby add to two rivalling perspectives on this topic according to which either cognitive mobilization or public disaffection are the key driving force behind popular support for referendums. Identifying and theorizing about additional factors which help explain referendum support is important given that almost all extant models suffer from very low explained variance. The first of the factors we identified, civic duty, relates to the cognitive mobilization perspective in the literature, which posits that referendum support is strongest among those already most engaged in politics (e.g., Clarke et al., 2004). We find support for this notion which we interpret to be an indication of the *motivational* aspects underlying the sense of duty (i.e., including a sense of satisfaction and self-assurance).

The second factor, political cynicism, is well established in the literature (e.g., Patterson, 1993, 2002; Valentino et al., 2001) and has most often been accused of turning citizens off (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997). However, another perspective sees cynicism as a form of critical citizenship and claims that citizens can well be cynical and engaged at the same time (de Vreese and Semetko, 2002). Our findings

[13] Empty model (not reported here): Variance country level: .147; variance individual level: 2.779.

[14] Compared to the empty model the final overall model reported in Table 1 performs significantly better (decrease in LL = 444,582 with df=16). The model explains 24.4 percent of the variance at the country level and 4.9 percent of the variance at the individual level. This is not a lot but in line with previous studies explaining public support for referendums (also see discussion section). We also tested a range of other possible contextual controls which we do not report here and which could not all be included in the model due to the restriction on the number of possible country level variables given the number of countries included in the analysis. Among other contextual variables the length of EU membership (in years) and quality of democracy (index) showed to not affect referendum support.

show that, in line with the political disaffection perspective, political cynicism is indeed a strong predictor for referendum support. Those frustrated with and cynical about traditional party-based politics embrace the referendum opportunity as an alternative way of having a more unfiltered say regarding a particular policy issue. That said, our findings suggest that the story is less straightforward. Indeed, support for referendums is driven by dissatisfaction with the political process and politicians, a lack of perceived self-efficacy, and negative policy evaluations. However, support is also higher among citizens with greater interest and satisfaction with democracy.

The overall picture which emerges from our analysis suggests that both leading perspectives, cognitive mobilization and political disaffection, receive support, however, political disaffection matters more overall. In general, we do not believe that these two perspectives should be seen as mutually excluding explanations but rather as complementary to each other. In this respect political cynicism plays an interesting role. Cynicism is often seen as problematic, but our findings suggest that support is strongest among cynical voters who are critical towards party-based, representative democracy and who feel that usually their voice is not being heard or EU politics is going the wrong way but who *at the same time* remain committed to democratic principles. These 'critical citizens' embrace referendums as a more reliable tool to exert democratic influence and as an alternative way of having a more direct say which for them seems 'worth it' to engage in. In this perspective, referendum support would not be driven by sore 'losers' in the political process or generally disengaged outsiders but by critical and concerned citizens who are dissatisfied with the way politics is run but care about the whole.

Aside from civic duty and political cynicism and other established relevant factors we also considered several EU-specific and performance-related evaluations as additional explanatory factors and these also showed to affect referendum support. In more general terms, EU-issue voting is gaining in prominence and citizens vote more based on actual EU-specific considerations in European Parliamentary elections and referendums (e.g., Hobolt, 2009; van Spanje and de Vreese, 2011) and the EU even matters more in national elections (De Vries, 2010), especially in recent years and due to the prominence of the financial crisis in the EU. This stresses the need to indeed step beyond the current standard set of indicators when explaining popular support for referendums and consider factors more closely related to the actual context in which referendums take place, such as the EU (see also Rose and Borz, 2013). Next to the topical context (EU integration), we also explored the influence of country-specific characteristics and how such type of context affects referendum support. However, there appears to be little variation across countries and we merely control for certain possible influences on this level and our findings in this regard are not too conclusive and further work needs to be done in terms of theorizing which factors should be considered here.

Previous research has identified the media as relevant factor in *changing* individual referendum support, e.g. over the course of a referendum campaign (Schuck and de Vreese, 2011), which has not been the focus of the current study. We do believe that referendum support is not a stable construct and is susceptible to change, especially in light of changes in the information environment. An agenda for future research will be to identify the content features in media coverage which exert an influence on changes in individual-level referendum support. This does not necessarily have to be evaluations of the referendum instrument as such but could also be more indirect and expand to other aspects, such as, for example, the quality of debate during a referendum campaign, or evaluations of democratic performance within the context the referendum takes place in (such as the EU or other), or evaluations attached to the referendum topic, or any content features with the potential to influence the factors relevant to explain referendum support (such as political cynicism etc.). In addition, future research should also consider the role of social media. This role may be double-edged, i.e. social media may on the one hand affect how citizens look at referendums as such while they may of course also play a role in mobilizing and affecting vote preferences (see this discussion in Quinlan et al. this issue). Furthermore, the impact of traditional mass media as well as social media is likely to be conditional on other contextual changes. More work is still needed to disentangle these dynamics. These challenges and open questions notwithstanding we believe the current study has made an important contribution in identifying, theorizing, and testing civic duty and political cynicism as two additional factors helping us to better understand who supports referendums and why.

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Appendix A. Overview of variables

Referendum support: One item on a 7-point Likert scale: 'In referendums, people can vote against or in favour of, for example, a proposal or a treaty. Some people think that it is a good idea to hold referendums on matters of European integration, others do not think that this is a good idea. What is your position on this issue?' (1-strongly against EU referendums, 7-strongly in favour of EU referendums) ($M = 4.95$, $SD = 1.72$).

***Political cynicism*:** Four items on 7-point Likert scales: (1) 'Almost all politicians will sell out their ideals or break their promises if it will increase their power'; (2) 'Most politicians are in politics for what they can get out of it personally'; (3) 'Most politicians are truthful with the voters' (reverse coding); (4) 'Most politicians are dedicated and we should be grateful to them for the work they do' (reverse coding) ($M = 5.33$, $SD = 1.24$, Cronbach's alpha $= 0.78$).

Civic duty: Four items on 7-point Likert scales: (1) 'It's every citizen's duty to vote in an election'; (2) 'I would be seriously neglecting my duty as a citizen if I didn't vote'; (3) 'I feel a sense of satisfaction when I vote'; (4) 'I would feel very guilty if I didn't vote in an election'; (1-strongly

disagree, 7-strongly agree) ($M = 4.56$, $SD = 1.81$, Cronbach's alpha = 0.87).

Gender: Male = 0; female = 1 (53.3%).

Age: Measured in years ($M = 39.30$, $SD = 13.21$).

Education: Measured with country-specific lists indicating obtainable educational degrees and recoded into three categories comparable across countries from lowest to highest: (1) low (51.4%); (2) medium (9.3%), (3) high (39.3%).

Political interest: One item on a 7-point Likert scale: 'How interested are you in European Union (EU) issues?'; (1-not at all interested, 7-very interested) ($M = 4.37$, $SD = 1.59$).

Habitual voting: One item: 'Some people vote in every election, other people never vote. Of all elections in which you were eligible to vote, how many times have you actually voted?'; (1-Never, 2-Hardly ever, 3-Slightly less than half of the times, 4-About half of the times, 5-Slightly more than half of the times, 6-Almost every time, 7-Every time) ($M = 5.83$, $SD = 1.60$).

Political ideology: Respondents were asked to indicate their political orientation on an 11-point left–right scale. Two dummy variables were built representing respondents with left political ideology (1–4) (26.4%) or right political ideology (8–11) (32.7%) with centrist orientation (5–7) as the reference category.

Political efficacy: Four items on 7-point Likert scales: (1) 'People like me don't have any say about what the EU does' (reverse coding); (2) 'I don't think the EU cares much what people like me think' (reverse coding); (3) 'Having European Parliamentary elections makes the EU pay attention to what people think'; (4) 'Over the years, the EU pays a lot of attention to what people think when it decides what to do'; (1-strongly disagree, 7-strongly agree) ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 1.25$, Cronbach's alpha = 0.68).

Satisfaction with democracy: Two separate items focussing on satisfaction with domestic democracy and EU democracy on 7-point Likert scales: (1) 'Regardless of who is in government, on the whole, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way democracy works in (COUNTRY)?' ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 1.69$); (2) 'How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way democracy works in the European Union?' ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 1.41$); (1-very dissatisfied, 7-very satisfied).

Satisfaction with government handling of EU integration: One item on a 7-point Likert scale: 'How well do you think the government is handling the issue of European integration?'; (1-very poorly, 7-very well) ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 1.54$).

EU support: One item on a 7-point Likert scale: '(COUNTRY)'s membership of the European Union is a good thing' (1-strongly disagree, 7-strongly agree) ($M = 4.61$, $SD = 1.70$).

Number of past referendums: The number of past referendums on EU integration issues in a country, ranging from 0 to 8 in our sample ($M = 1.26$, $SD = 1.83$).

Eastern Europe: Old Western vs. new Eastern European member states (joined the EU after 2004). Dummy variable indicating geographic affiliation to Eastern Europe (seven countries in our sample).

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