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# Voting in the Dutch ‘Ukraine-referendum’: a panel study on the dynamics of party preference, EU-attitudes, and referendum-specific considerations

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On April 6, 2016, the Netherlands organized a citizen-initiated, non-binding referendum on the association treaty between the European Union and Ukraine. The turnout of this referendum was 32%, of whom 61% voted ‘no’ and 38 ‘yes.’ In this study, we seek to explain this outcome. We focus particularly on the extent to which referendum-specific considerations became more important for vote intentions during the campaign.

Existing research on voting behavior in EU-referendums has basically produced three rivaling explanations for the referendum outcomes, which are not mutually exclusive. The first explanation is that voters do not know much about the issues at stake, because of the highly complex and technical nature of such issues. Therefore, voters will take cues from *domestic politics*, particularly the recommendations of parties they trust (Schuck and De Vreese 2008). In addition, voters often use these referendums to express content or discontent with the policies of the incumbent government (e.g., Franklin et al. 1995; Franklin 2002). The second explanation is very similar to the first, as it also assumes that voters do not know much about the details of the proposal on which they are asked to vote in a referendum. In addition to taking cues from domestic politics, they also base their vote in EU-referendums on their general attitudes towards the European Union (e.g., Siune et al. 1994; Aarts and Van der Kolk 2006). A third explanation is that voters do indeed base their decision in the referendum on referendum-specific characteristics. However, the extent to which voters do so depends very much on the dynamics of the referendum campaign. Hobolt and Brouard (2011) argue that the decisions of voters in these referendums are determined largely by the issues that are primed in the campaign (see also: Hobolt 2009).

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The Dutch Ukraine-referendum is an excellent case in which to examine the kinds of campaign dynamics proposed in the literature. Even though Europeanization has become increasingly politicized in Dutch elections (e.g., De Vries 2007), it is still a secondary issue (cf. Schmitt and Toygür 2016). In addition, the April 6 referendum itself stands out because of the rather technical nature of the proposition. Since it is unlikely that the average citizen would have specific knowledge of the EU's treaty with Ukraine at the start of the campaign, there is much room for the campaign to exert an effect on citizens. While earlier EU-referendums (in other countries as well as the 2005 referendum in the Netherlands) were mainly about the future of the EU and/or the position of a country within the EU, most of the debate in the April 6 referendum focused on the question 'what's at stake' at this referendum. Opponents of the treaty claimed that the treaty would be a first step towards accession, where another corrupt net-receiving country would join the EU. According to them, a no-vote would send a strong and clear message to Brussels that the EU should not take additional steps to expand. So, the opponents were trying to make the referendum a referendum about the future of the EU. Mainstream politicians, on the other hand, were claiming that the EU's association treaty with Ukraine was mainly intended to promote trade and good governance in Ukraine. These politicians claim that the EU has association treaties with several other countries, which will never join. So, mainstream parties did not frame the referendum as an EU-referendum, but as a referendum about the normal trade agreement, which would be potentially beneficial to the Dutch economy.

Like previous studies (e.g., Hobolt 2005), this paper predicts electoral choices in the Ukraine-referendum by three factors: the importance of national cues, EU-attitudes, and specific considerations related to the referendum itself. As voters are expected to obtain knowledge of the issue at stake over the course of the campaign, we expect referendum-specific considerations to become more important. EU-attitudes are expected to exert a weaker effect, because voters will rely less on such cues. Moreover, since the contestation is mainly about 'what's at stake,' we expect voters to rely strongly upon the positions taken by national parties. Over the course of the campaign, we would expect the effect of national party support to be increasingly mediated by referendum-specific considerations. Those with preferences for mainstream parties and trust in national politicians will be most likely to base their support increasingly on the specific arguments proposed by the yes-side, while the proponents of populist parties will be more likely to base their vote on the arguments proposed by the no-side.

We test these ideas by means of a three-wave panel study that covers the campaign period, and which, besides vote intentions and demographics, includes items specifically focused on the referendum campaign, trust in EU-institutions, and national party preferences. Our results provide only partial support for the hypotheses. While referendum-specific arguments play an increasingly important role in predicting the vote (intentions) in the referendum, this does not go at the expense of the direct effect of national party preferences, not at the expense of EU-attitudes. This means that the campaign did not simply function to provide supporters of populist parties and Eurosceptics with arguments to vote no, and EU-supporters and proponents of mainstream parties to vote yes. Instead, there was a campaign



dynamic which lead many voters to base their choice increasingly on referendum-specific considerations, even when these do not correspond to general EU-attitudes nor to the positions taken by one's preferred party.

These results are theoretically as well politically relevant. From a theoretical perspective, the results speak to recent developments in the referendum literature, which point to the fact that the information the citizens process during campaigns is affected by their partisan attitudes (Colombo and Kriesi 2016). Citizens are more likely to be affected by those arguments put forward by parties they trust (see also, Bartels 2002; Slothuus and de Vreese 2010; Taber et al. 2009). Our study shows that this bias is conditional, and most likely depends on the intensity of parties' involvement in the referendum campaign. Politically, our results warrant a more optimistic perspective on the role of referendums than some of the previous studies. Over the course of the referendum campaign, people actually obtained relevant information about the issue at stake.

The paper proceeds as follows. We first discuss the state of the art in research on referendum campaigns. Then we discuss the data and the operationalization of our concepts. In the next section, we present our results and in the final section we reflect upon the theoretical and political implications of our findings.

## Theory

When citizens are asked to cast a vote in an election, whether it is an election of candidates for representative positions or whether it is a referendum, they are faced with a rather complex choice. When voting for candidates or parties, the number of issues and different positions of parties on those issues is endless. Even the more simple 'yes' or 'no' vote in a referendum is not as simple as it may seem. More often than not, good arguments can be given for both positions and even for well-informed voters, it is often impossible to assess the consequences of the different outcomes. In the case of the Ukraine-referendum, consequences have to be considered for the economy (as it is a trade agreement), the position of the Netherlands in the EU (as the Netherlands would veto an agreement that was supported by the 27 other member states), the process of democratization in Ukraine, the military consequences for Ukraine-Russia relations, the position of the EU towards Russia, etc. Given the complexity of the choice, and given the uncertainty of the consequences of different outcomes of referendums, it seems an utterly impossible task for any voter to weigh all these different aspects.

Electoral researchers have argued that, given the complexity of the decisions that voters make, they usually behave like 'cognitive misers' (e.g., Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Iyengar 1991). The idea behind this is that most people have limited capacity to process relevant information and therefore rely on proxies or cognitive shortcuts (Fiske and Taylor 1991). In other words, rather than weighting and judging all of the available information, people tend to simplify the decisions by relying on more easily accessible kinds of knowledge. Several kinds of cognitive shortcuts could theoretically be used, but in the context of EU-referendums two



types have been mentioned particularly in the literature: Attitudes towards the EU and attitudes towards national politicians.

Suppose one has no information whatsoever about the association treaty between the EU and Ukraine, an obvious cognitive shortcut is to rely on one's attitudes towards the EU. If one is very skeptical towards the EU, one may be inclined to think that the association treaty is (another) bad thing. If on the other hand one feels very favorable towards the EU, one may be inclined to think that the association treaty will help to promote trade and prosperity. Many studies have demonstrated that voting in EU-referendums is strongly affected by more general attitudes towards the EU (e.g., Siune and Svensson 1993; Siune et al. 1994; Svensson 2002; De Vreese and Semetko 2004; Aarts and Van der Kolk 2006; Glencross and Trechsel 2011).

Another obvious shortcut is to rely on trusted sources. If one is a strong supporter of party A, and the leadership of this party speaks out in favor of voting 'yes,' one may decide to follow this advice. This is not an unreasonable strategy. Especially if the decision is very complicated and if the consequences of the outcomes of the referendum are highly uncertain, why would one not rely on the judgments of reliable sources with more knowledge and expertise of the subject matter (see also: Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Lupia and Matsusaka 2004)? Many studies have shown that parties influence their supporters' choices in referendums (e.g., Arceneaux 2008; Bowler and Donovan 1998; Boudreau and MacKenzie 2014; Franklin 2002; Colombo and Kriesi 2016).

The idea that voters base their choices in EU-referendums on cues that they take from national politics is grounded in the idea that European elections—whether these are elections for the European Parliament or for referendums on EU-related issues, are essentially of *second-order* elections. Most voters do not care much about European politics, which is too complex and too distant. So, when offered the opportunity to speak out on EU-related topics in an election, people use these to send a message to their national parties (e.g., Reif and Schmitt 1980). Franklin et al. (1995) show that support for the national party is a very good predictor of the outcome of EU-elections, probably for two reasons. The first reason is that people simply use these referendums as a referendum on the government, rather than as a referendum on the particular issue at stake. This is especially so when the government itself called the referendum. Yet, in addition, unpopular governments are usually not able to convince the electorate of the deal they negotiated in Brussels (see also Franklin 2002).

Even though the Ukraine-referendum was not called by the government, those who took the initiative to organize the referendum to stop the Dutch government from ratifying the treaty explicitly framed it as an anti-EU move and as a step against the establishment. So, we may well expect EU-attitudes and preferences for national parties to exert a strong effect on referendum vote intentions from the very start of the campaign. In a study on the previous Dutch EU-referendum regarding the Lisbon Treaty, Aarts and Van der Kolk (2006) found that both types of attitudes played a big role. On the basis of this reasoning, we derive the following two hypotheses:

**H1** The more one is supportive of the EU, the more likely one is to vote 'yes.'



**H2** Those who support parties that favor the Ukraine treaty are more likely to vote ‘yes’ than those who support parties that reject the treaty.

These two hypotheses are both grounded in the idea that citizens base their political choices on ‘cues.’ However, the so-called ‘dual processing models’ propose that there are two routes by which people can form their opinions (e.g., Smith and DeCoster 2000; Kam 2005). The least effortful route (also referred to as the ‘peripheral’ route) is the one we just proposed, in which citizens rely on cues. However, the more effortful route is by directly seeking information about the topic at hand, which is also referred to as ‘central route processing.’ At the start of the campaign, when hardly any information is yet available about the issue at stake, we expect most voters to rely on external cues. However, while many citizens can be expected to be following this ‘peripheral route’ route throughout the campaign, others will follow the other route. As a consequence, we may expect that, as the referendum nears, voters become better informed about core issue at stake, i.e., the arguments in favor and against each side in the debate. The validity of these arguments matters less than their appeal during the campaign (Elkink and Sinnott 2015). We would expect referendum-specific considerations to become more important, as other studies have shown (e.g., Siune et al. 1994; Svensson 2002; Hobolt 2005; Colombo and Kriesi 2016). The rather straightforward hypothesis is that:

**H3** As the campaign proceeds, vote intentions are increasingly driven by referendum-specific considerations.

Yet, not all of the arguments that are proposed by the different sides will be equally convincing to all voters. For one thing, we would expect Eurosceptics to be more likely to be convinced by the arguments of the ‘no’ camp than Europhiles. So, over the course of the campaign, the initially strong effect of EU-attitudes will be increasingly mediated by referendum-specific arguments. In other words, the effect of EU-attitudes on vote intentions in the referendum will remain to exist, but the effect will be decreasingly a direct effect and increasingly an indirect effect running through referendum-specific considerations. So, we expect that:

**H4** As the campaign proceeds, the direct effect of EU-attitudes on vote intentions decreases in strength.

The same is true for national considerations. Recent studies have shown that the ways in which people process information is affected by partisan attitudes (e.g., Bartels 2002; Slothuus and de Vreese 2010; Taber et al. 2009). So, we might expect that supporters of mainstream parties will be more likely to be convinced by the arguments of the parties they support, while supporters of populist parties will be more likely to be influenced by the messages from politicians of ‘their’ parties. In the context of referendum studies, a recent study by Colombo



and Kriesi (2016) demonstrates that this is indeed the case. Therefore, the effect of national party preferences will be increasingly mediated by campaign-specific considerations, so that the direct effect decreases in strength as well. So, we expect:

**H5** As the campaign proceeds, the direct effect of national party preferences on vote intentions decreases in strength.

We know from much previous research that political campaigns do not exert the same effects upon all groups of citizens. Citizens differ not only in their capacity to process information, but also in their likelihood to be exposed to campaign information in the first place (Alvarez and Brehm 2002; Converse 2000; Hobolt 2005; Zaller 1992). In this study, we focus on attentiveness to the campaign as the most obvious moderator of campaign effects. After all, campaign messages can only influence citizens who pay attention to the news.

As we argued in the introduction, the Ukraine-referendum dealt with a highly complex multi-faceted issue. So, in order to pick up the different arguments and let them play a role in one's voting decision, one would need to follow the campaign rather closely. At the very least, we would expect these referendum-specific issues to play a larger role among the more attentive than among less attentive citizens, simply because more attentive citizens are more likely to be exposed to these types of arguments. Moreover, as dual-process theory tells us, it requires less cognitive effort to rely on cues than to acquire direct information about the referendum issue itself (e.g., Kam 2005). The more attentive citizens can thus be expected to be more likely to pick up referendum-specific arguments during the campaign. Hence, our final two hypotheses are:

**H6** The effect of referendum-specific considerations is strongest among the most attentive citizens (interaction effect).

**H7** As the campaign proceeds, the interaction effect between attentiveness and campaign-specific considerations become stronger (second-order interaction effect).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> While we expect to find support for H6 and H7, we realize that there are also theoretical reasons to expect another pattern. In order to use the partisan cue, one needs to be aware of the positions that parties take on the issue. Very inattentive citizens will therefore not use this 'peripheral' route, while this route is 'easy' for attentive citizens. Moreover, without a certain pre-existing body of knowledge, new information is unlikely to be remembered (Zaller 1992). So, there are reasons to expect the effects predicted by H6 and H7 to be actually reversed.



## Data and methods

For the reasons outlined above, the April 6 referendum is a unique test case for our hypotheses. A test of these hypotheses requires panel data during and after the campaign, with multiple waves measuring three sets of determinants (party preference, EU-attitudes, and referendum-specific opinions) as well as moderators (particularly campaign attentiveness). The Dutch National Referendum Survey 2016 was actively designed to meet all these demands.

### Data

The National Referendum Survey was organized by the Dutch Foundation for Electoral Research (SKON), a collaboration of Dutch political science departments and the Netherlands Institute for Social Research. The panel survey was embedded in the panel of the Longitudinal Internet Studies for the Social Sciences (LISS). A major strength of the LISS panel is its investment in the quality of the sample. The LISS panel consists of 7000 individuals that are drawn randomly from the population register by Statistics Netherland and regularly refreshed to deal with panel attrition. While the LISS panel is an online panel, individuals that otherwise could not participate are provided a computer, an internet connection, and assistance. Participants receive financial compensation for their involvement in the LISS panel.

Dutch campaigns tend to be relatively short (Van Praag 2005), and the 2016 referendum campaign was no exception. The National Referendum Survey took place in weeks 10 and 12 (before the referendum) and week 14–16 (after the referendum).<sup>2</sup> The first wave had a response rate of 74%, leading to a total of 2422 respondents. While the second wave ( $n=2340$ ) and third wave ( $n=2525$ ) had similar sample sizes, the setup of the National Referendum Survey was such that part of each subsequent survey wave was a fresh sample compared to the earlier wave. Hence, the number of respondents that participated in all three waves was 1856 (77% of the first wave).

A strategic complication in the April 6 referendum was the choice citizens had to make whether or not to turnout. Parliament had included a turnout threshold of 30% before the results of any (non-binding) referendum were required to be formally responded to by the government. Hence, particularly voters who wanted to vote in favor of the association treaty between the EU and Ukraine were faced with a strategic dilemma, as turning out would make it more likely that the threshold would be met. The choice to turnout is thus intrinsically linked to the vote choice. To the extent that respondents switch from voting yes to not voting at all (or vice versa) for strategic reasons, the test of our longitudinal hypotheses (H3–H5, H7) becomes ambiguous. We therefore limited the sample to those respondents who had intended

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<sup>2</sup> Specifically, the first survey wave commenced on March 7th, 1 month before the referendum on April 6th, and closed on March 13th. 43% of the respondents took part in the first 2 days; another 11% on the third. The second wave commenced on March 21st, more than 2 weeks before the referendum, and closed on March 27th.



to cast their vote in both of the first two waves, limiting the sample to 1149 respondents. Respondents who in the final wave reported not to have voted were asked their choice if they would have voted. Additional analyses show that their in- or exclusion did not affect our conclusions.

Finally, we performed listwise deletion on respondents with missing values on the central measures, leading to 1099 respondent in our net analysis. With three waves of responses, this leads to 3297 observations in our analyses.

## Dependent variable

The dependent variable in this study is *vote intention* (wave 1 and wave 2) and *vote choice* (wave 3) at the April 6 referendum. We distinguish between voters who voted pro (in favor of ratification of the association treaty), those who voted con (against ratification), and the others (blanc, undecided, refused to share). This information is available for all three waves. While the inclusion of the group of 'others' in our models does not affect our estimates of the pro vs con voters, it does provide a more complete picture of the vote choice process among a consistent group of voters throughout the three panel waves. Over time, this group of voters has become very small, shrinking to 4% in the post-referendum wave.

Descriptive information on this (and other) variables can be found in the appendix.

## Determinants

Our hypotheses identify three main sets of independent variables.

First, we assess *party preference* via the question 'If Lower House elections were held today, which party would you vote for?' As all parties in parliament had voted on the treaty, we are able to reduce the number of answer categories (16, including 11 parties mentioned by name) to three categories: parties that had voted in favor of the association treaty in 2015 (VVD, PvdA, CDA, D66, ChristenUnie, GroenLinks, SGP, and 50Plus), parties that had voted against the association treaty in 2015 (PVV, SP, PvdD), and other (including, most notably, undecided voters). This information is available in every wave.

Second, we tap into respondents' *general attitudes towards the European Union* by measuring their trust in the EU. We rely on the question: 'How much trust do you personally have in the European Union,' with answer categories that range from 0 (no trust at all) to 10 (complete trust). Earlier research shows that trust in the EU taps into a more generalized form of political trust (cf. Harteveld et al. 2013; Muñoz 2017). To eliminate any confounding influence, we therefore control for trust in national government. Both measures are included in every panel wave.

Third, *referendum-specific attitudes* are measured by support for four statements: (1) 'The association treaty is good for the Dutch economy,' (2) 'The association treaty will lead to tensions with Russia,' (3) 'The association treaty helps counter bribery in Ukraine,' and (4) 'The association treaty will lead to EU membership of Ukraine.' Statements 1 and 3 were arguments raised by the pro-camp,



and statements 2 and 4 were arguments raised by the con-camp. Respondents could respond to these statements on a five point scale (ranging from 1 fully disagree to 5 fully agree). These questions, too, were included in every panel wave.

## Moderators

We focus on two main moderators. The first, *wave*, is simply the wave in which the answers were given and the outcome (vote choice) was measured. The second moderator is *media attention*. Media attention is measured using the question ‘How often in the past few weeks did you read or view anything about the referendum on the association treaty with Ukraine?’ to which participants were allowed to respond on a five point scale (ranging from never to very often). Although the question had been included in each wave, we only rely on the question asked in the third wave for two reasons. First, by fixating media attention to the final wave, we only focus on the between-person differences that are central to hypotheses 6 and 7. Second, voters have the best overview of their media attention post hoc. While technically possible, we do not measure media attention for each respondent in each wave separately; that would conflate the between-person effects (that we theorize about) with within-person effects (of individuals’ changing attention over time).

## Control variables

Finally, we control for three background characteristics: gender, level of education (finished, according to the categorization of Statistics Netherlands), and age (in categories). In line with the Michigan model of voting behavior (Campbell et al. 1960), these variables are causally prior to the attitudes and behaviors central in this contribution. Yet, they are known to affect support for European enlargement (e.g., Nelsen and Guth 2000; De Vreese and Boomgaarden 2005), as well as voting behavior in referendums on the European Union in a.o. the Netherlands in 2005 (Lubbers 2008) and the United Kingdom in 2016 (Hobolt 2016).

## Methods

Our hypotheses distinguish between two levels of analysis: Respondents (level 2) and the responses given by them in different waves (level 1). To deal with variances at these multiple levels of analysis, we employ multilevel modeling. We eliminate the (linear) trend across waves by controlling for wave number.

Because the dependent variable is categorical, we employ multinomial regression analysis. We use the largest group—those who voted against the ratification of the association treaty—as the reference category. All determinants and moderators are centered to ease interpretation of the interaction effects in our models. We estimated our multilevel multinomial models in Stata using the GSEM command.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Analyses in MLWin and via Stata’s `gllamm` command came to similar conclusions.



**Table 1** Vote choice by three sets of determinants (moderated) Source: National Referendum Survey 2016

|  | Pro<br>b  | SE      | Other<br>b | SE      |
|--|-----------|---------|------------|---------|
| <i>Level 1</i>                             |           |         |            |         |
| Wave                                       | - 0.71    | 0.30*   | - 1.14     | 0.29*** |
| Party preference: in favor of ratification | 2.33      | 0.38*** | 1.66       | 0.32*** |
| Party preference: other                    | 1.20      | 0.41**  | 1.36       | 0.32*** |
| Trust EU                                   | 0.43      | 0.09*** | 0.15       | 0.07*   |
| Trust government                           | 0.16      | 0.09†   | 0.11       | 0.08    |
| Treaty: Dutch economy                      | 3.19      | 0.22*** | 1.47       | 0.18*** |
| Treaty: tensions Russia                    | - 0.86    | 0.17*** | - 0.73     | 0.15*** |
| Treaty: Ukraine bribery                    | 1.69      | 0.17*** | 0.84       | 0.14*** |
| Treaty: Ukraine EU member                  | - 1.52    | 0.15*** | - 0.66     | 0.13*** |
| <i>Interaction effect (*Wave)</i>          |           |         |            |         |
| Party preference: in favor of ratification | 0.82      | 0.32*   | 0.38       | 0.32    |
| Party preference: other                    | 0.86      | 0.38*   | 0.54       | 0.35    |
| Trust EU                                   | - 0.16    | 0.09†   | - 0.15     | 0.08*   |
| Trust government                           | 0.26      | 0.09**  | 0.21       | 0.08    |
| Treaty: Dutch economy                      | - 0.33    | 0.19†   | 0.03       | 0.17    |
| Treaty: tensions Russia                    | - 0.60    | 0.18*** | - 0.25     | 0.16    |
| Treaty: Ukraine bribery                    | 0.01      | 0.17    | - 0.23     | 0.15    |
| Treaty: Ukraine EU member                  | - 0.30    | 0.15*   | - 0.14     | 0.14    |
| Intercept                                  | - 4.39    | 0.99*** | - 1.99     | 0.68**  |
| n  | 3297      |         |            |         |
| - 2LL                                      | - 1361.69 |         |            |         |

Multilevel, multinomial regression analysis, Models additionally control for gender, age, and education

† $p < 0.10$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

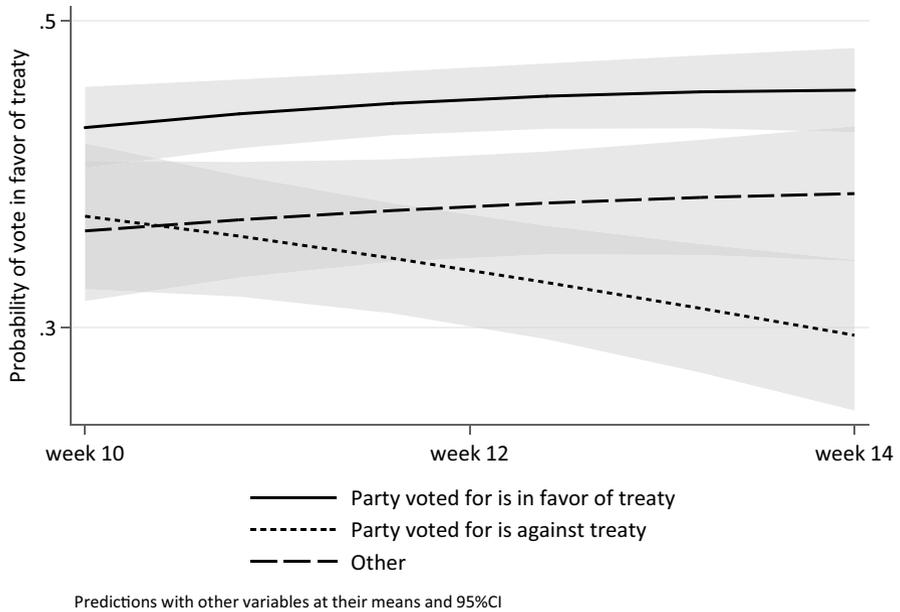
## Results

We carefully built up our models in a stepwise fashion. Yet, on all hypothesized relationships the effects were robust against various permutations of the model. Our three sets of independent variables give no signs of harmful collinearity. Therefore, Table 1 parsimoniously presents the most crucial test of hypotheses 1–5.

### *In favor versus against*

The first column in Table 1 shows the likelihood of a vote in favor of ratification of the association treaty. The negative wave effect shows that this likelihood diminished during the campaign. More relevant from a theoretical perspective is the effect of party preference.





**Fig. 1** Predicted probabilities of voting in favor of ratification, by party preference and wave

Respondents whose preferred party voted in favor of ratification in Parliament are more likely to vote in favor of ratification in the referendum ( $b=2.33$ ). When we elaborate on the size of the interaction effects, we find that this positive effect existed already in the first wave. This supports hypothesis 1. Yet, contrary to what we theorized above, this effect did not decrease but increase during the campaign ( $b=0.82$ ). We therefore need to reject hypothesis 5. The predicted probabilities in Fig. 1 second this. In the first wave (on the left of the figure), voters whose party favored the treaty were already significantly more likely to vote in favor, but as time went on (more towards the right) the gap between these voters and those whose party was against the treaty widened substantively.

Next, Table 1 shows a positive effect of having trust in the EU on voting in favor rather than against ratification. This supports hypothesis 2. This effect became somewhat weaker as the campaign progressed ( $b=-0.16$ , significant at 0.05 in a one-sided test). It appears that the general attitude towards the EU became a somewhat less important heuristic during the campaign. This supports hypothesis 4. The relationship is graphically displayed in Fig. 2, which shows that the lines of voters with high trust and voters with low trust in the EU moving towards each other over time.

Finally, Table 1 provides information on the effects of referendum-specific considerations. All direct effects are in line with expectations. Respondents who agree that the association treaty is good for the Dutch economy and/or that it undermines bribery in Ukraine are more likely to vote in favor of the treaty. Respondents who agree that the association treaty increases tensions with Russia and/or will lead to EU membership of Ukraine are less likely to vote in favor of the treaty.





Moreover, the effects of the negative arguments—on the tensions with Russia ( $b = -0.60$ ) and on EU membership of Ukraine ( $b = -0.30$ )—have become significantly stronger during the campaign. This can also be seen in Fig. 3, with the upper-right panel showing the probability of voting in favor of the treaty over time depending on the tensions-with-Russia argument, and the lower-right panel showing those depending on the argument on EU membership of Ukraine. For both of these arguments, voters who agree and disagree diverge more as the campaign progresses in their probability of voting in favor. This would support hypothesis 3. Yet, we do not find a similar interaction effect on the bribery argument, and even find a relatively small decrease in the effect of the economic argument ( $b = -0.33$ ) during the campaign. This can also be seen in Fig. 3, where those on different sides of the economic argument move somewhat towards each other (upper-left panel), and the different sides of the bribery argument show no movement over time (lower left panel). This would counter hypothesis 3.

Table 2 provides a test of our final two hypotheses. The first column of Table 2 shows to what extent the effect of referendum-specific considerations are stronger among those respondents who were more attentive to the campaign. We find weak evidence for hypothesis 6. The only consideration that had a stronger effect among more intensive media users was the consideration that the association treaty would diminish the problem of bribery in Ukraine ( $b = 0.38$ ). This interactive effect is graphically displayed in Fig. 4.<sup>4</sup> As the figure shows, for low media users it hardly mattered whether they thought the treaty would help combat bribery in Ukraine, while for high media users it made a serious difference for their likelihood of supporting the treaty. This is somewhat surprising, as the anti-bribery argument does not seem to have been dominant in the media. Because all other interaction effects were non-significant, hypothesis 6 finds very little support.

The final model in Table 2 provides a test of the hypothesized three-way interaction effect that referendum-specific considerations would not only be more relevant among attentive media users, but also that this interactive effect would grow more important during the campaign. The right panel in Table 2 shows that this is not the case. There is one single, significant interactive effect. Yet, this effect is negative, suggesting that the differential effect of the bribery consideration (stronger among attentive media users) becomes weaker as the campaign progressed. This is graphically displayed in Fig. 5, and in direct opposition to hypothesis 7. The upper part of the figure shows that—as expected—the bribery argument became more important over the campaign for low media users. However, hypothesis 7 posited that the increase in importance over time would be even larger for attentive media users, but the lower part of Fig. 5 shows that at the start of the campaign, high media users were already polarized on this argument, and if anything they grew closer over time.

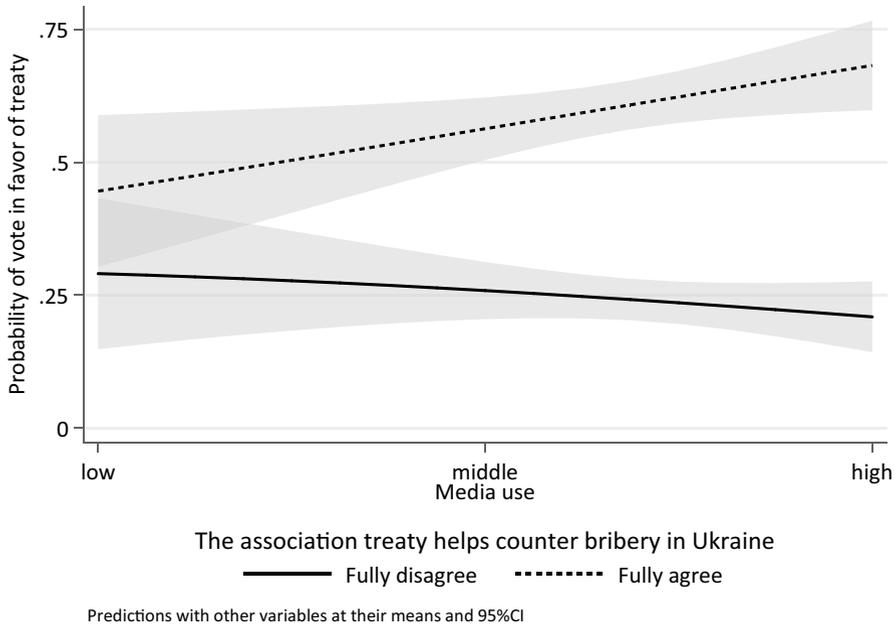
<sup>4</sup> To assess whether the polarization in Fig. 4 was more pronounced among citizens with different levels of political sophistication, we tested a three-way interaction between the anti-bribery considerations \* campaign attentiveness \* education (we consider education to be the best proxy for sophistication in this data set). This three-way interaction was not significant, however ( $p = 0.20$ ).



**Table 2** Vote choice and referendum-specific considerations, by media attention and wave

|   | Pro<br>b | SE      | Other<br>b | SE      | Pro<br>b | SE      | Other<br>b | SE      |
|---|----------|---------|------------|---------|----------|---------|------------|---------|
| <i>Level 1</i>  |          |         |            |         |          |         |            |         |
| Wave  | -0.34    | 0.12**  | -0.86      | 0.11*** | -0.70    | 0.33*   | -1.07      | 0.31*** |
| Treaty: Dutch economy                                       | 3.26     | 0.27*** | 1.50       | 0.21*** | 3.43     | 0.29*** | 1.61       | 0.23*** |
| Treaty: tensions Russia                                     | -0.72    | 0.21*** | -0.56      | 0.17**  | -0.83    | 0.24*** | -0.62      | 0.19**  |
| Treaty: Ukraine bribery                                     | 1.33     | 0.20*** | 0.66       | 0.17*** | 1.41     | 0.22*** | 0.64       | 0.18*** |
| Treaty: Ukraine EU member                                   | -1.40    | 0.19*** | -0.60      | 0.16*** | -1.41    | 0.21*** | -0.59      | 0.16*** |
| <i>Level 2</i>  |          |         |            |         |          |         |            |         |
| Media attention   | 0.33     | 0.22    | 0.04       | 0.17    | 0.32     | 0.23    | 0.03       | 0.18    |
| <i>Interaction effect Wave)</i>                             |          |         |            |         |          |         |            |         |
| Treaty: Dutch economy                                       |          |         |            |         | -0.41    | 0.28    | -0.12      | 0.24    |
| Treaty: tensions Russia                                     |          |         |            |         | -0.51    | 0.26    | -0.27      | 0.22    |
| Treaty: Ukraine bribery                                     |          |         |            |         | 0.46     | 0.23    | 0.02       | 0.20    |
| Treaty: Ukraine EU member                                   |          |         |            |         | -0.40    | 0.21†   | -0.28      | 0.18    |
| <i>Cross-level interaction effect (*Media attention)</i>    |          |         |            |         |          |         |            |         |
| Treaty: Dutch economy                                       | -0.24    | 0.22    | -0.17      | 0.18    | -0.22    | 0.24    | -0.15      | 0.20    |
| Treaty: tensions Russia                                     | -0.10    | 0.19    | -0.16      | 0.16    | -0.10    | 0.21    | -0.15      | 0.18    |
| Treaty: Ukraine bribery                                     | 0.38     | 0.18*   | 0.27       | 0.15†   | 0.33     | 0.19†   | 0.25       | 0.16    |
| Treaty: Ukraine EU member                                   | -0.12    | 0.16    | -0.10      | 0.14    | -0.17    | 0.17    | -0.11      | 0.14    |
| Wave  |          |         |            |         | -0.02    | 0.20    | -0.14      | 0.18    |
| <i>Three-way interaction effect (*Wave*Media attention)</i> |          |         |            |         |          |         |            |         |
| Treaty: Dutch economy                                       |          |         |            |         | 0.06     | 0.25    | 0.17       | 0.23    |
| Treaty: tensions Russia                                     |          |         |            |         | -0.16    | 0.23    | 0.05       | 0.21    |
| Treaty: Ukraine bribery                                     |          |         |            |         | -0.61    | 0.21**  | -0.31      | 0.19    |
| Treaty: Ukraine EU member                                   |          |         |            |         | 0.12     | 0.18    | 0.22       | 0.17    |
| Intercept   | -4.12    | 0.96*** | -1.78      | 0.66**  | -4.70    | 1.03*** | -1.98      | 0.69**  |
| N   | 3297     |         |            |         | 3297     |         |            |         |
| -2LL  | -1378.28 |         |            |         | -1349.28 |         |            |         |

†  $p < 0.10$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ 



**Fig. 4** Predicted probabilities of voting in favor of ratification, by referendum-specific attitudes and media attention

**‘Other’ versus against**

Although we did not theorize about the reasons why respondents would vote other than yes or no (i.e., undecided, blanc, or refusal), our models provide information. Generally, Table 1 shows that the direct effects of the three clusters of explanations go in the same direction, although the effect sizes tend to be smaller. For instance, trust in the European Union stimulates an ‘other’ vote rather than a vote against the treaty, yet not as much as it stimulates a vote in favor of the treaty.

The moderating effects of wave tend to be non-significant, suggesting that the effect of party preference and referendum-specific considerations do not become more important explanations of the ‘other’ vote as the campaign progressed. We do find a significant moderating effect of trust in the EU, suggesting that it became a more important consideration to vote ‘other’ (rather than against) as the campaign progressed. Table 2 conforms to the pattern: None of the interactions have a significant moderating effect on voting ‘other’ rather than against.

**Robustness check: exclusive focus on actual voters**

Finally, we performed an additional robustness check to assess whether our conclusions are driven by the inclusion of respondents who ultimately decided not to vote





(despite reporting that they would in the first two waves). This check shows that our conclusions and nearly all effect sizes are highly robust against the in- or exclusion of ultimate non-voters. The only substantive change is that the three-way interaction effect in Fig. 5 is non-significant when we only focus on respondents who actually turned out to vote. Hypothesis 7 remains rejected, though.

## Conclusion

This study focused on the drivers of vote decisions in the referendum on the association treaty between the EU and Ukraine that was held in the Netherlands on April 6, 2016. More specifically, we focused on the ways in which the considerations of voters changed over the course of the campaign. We argued that this referendum was ideal for observing campaign effects, because very few voters had firm knowledge about the association treaty before the start of the campaign. As expected, we found that, in the beginning of the campaign, voters relied heavily on partisan preferences (c.f., Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Arceneaux 2008; Bowler and Donovan 1998; Boudreau and MacKenzie 2014; Franklin 2002) and on their general attitudes towards the EU (c.f. Svensson 2002; Aarts and Van der Kolk 2006; Glencross and Trechsel 2011).

Over the course of the campaign voters referendum-specific considerations became increasingly important as determinants of the vote (e.g., Colombo and Kriesi 2016; Kam 2005). Even though we do not directly measure knowledge about the issue, or levels of information, our interpretation of this finding is that people obtained information about the specific aspects of the actual issue at stake. The campaign-specific considerations which we measured in the survey matched the arguments that were most frequently used during the campaign by both sides. The fact that agreement with these statements increasingly predicts the vote in the referendum strongly suggests that people became increasingly aware of these arguments which were specifically related to the referendum issue.

More precisely, we find that the arguments that became more relevant as the campaign progressed are the two arguments raised against the treaty, i.e., those by the no-camp. Two-sided polarization occurred on the argument that the treaty might increase tensions with Russia and that it might lead into a future Ukrainian membership of the EU: those in agreement with both arguments became more likely to vote against the treaty, those in disagreement more likely to vote in favor. While it is tempting to relate the increasing relevance of these particular arguments to the nature of campaigns in referendums that aim to overturn decisions made by parliament, we may also point to the steady lead of the nay-camp in the opinion polls in the months leading up to the 2016 referendum that might have given more weight to their arguments. Here, we can only speculate.

In line with our expectations, we found that, as voters picked up referendum-specific information, they relied less strongly on general EU-attitudes as a cue (see also Hobolt and Brouard 2011). However, an unexpected finding was that at the end of the campaign, the direct effect of partisan cues was even stronger than it was at the start of the campaign. This suggests that the strong (and increasing)



effect of referendum-specific considerations did not weaken the direct effect of the partisan cue.

A possible explanation is that party leaders, especially those from the 'yes'-side, were highly invisible during the campaign. So, while citizens picked up the arguments from the 'yes' and especially the 'no'-side, these arguments were not offered to them by the party leaders. This makes the Dutch Ukraine-referendum different from the cases studied by Colombo and Kriesi (2016), who found evidence for 'partisan-biased processing of arguments' in two Swiss referendums. For Dutch voters, it was probably clear which parties were in favor or against the Ukraine treaty, so that they could use this information as a cue. However, since parties did not really campaign, there was little possibility for 'partisan-biased processing of arguments': The partisan cue remained rather independent from the substantive arguments during the campaign. The increasing direct effect of party preference may reflect homogenization (citizens' bringing their party preference and vote choice in line with each other).

We found very little evidence for our expectation that the more attentive citizens were most likely to base their decision on referendum-specific information, and no evidence that the campaign effects were strongest among the most attentive citizens. Again, we suspect that these findings are campaign specific. The topic was very complex, but the arguments provided during the campaign were relatively simple. All voters were probably in need of simplification, but one did not have to pay very close attention to the campaign to pick up on the most relevant arguments that were made, valid or not (cf. Elkind and Sinnott 2015 on the 2008 referendum in Ireland). Referendum research shows that campaign effects are highly dependent upon the information context that the campaign provides (e.g., Hobolt 2005, 2009). Since the Ukraine-referendum provided a very specific information context, these types of effects may have been quite specific as well. Our study suggests that the way in which referendum campaigns affect different groups of citizens is itself conditional on the information context.

The technicality of the topic of the Dutch referendum of April 6th—the association treaty between the EU and Ukraine—set it apart from other national referendums on the European Union and its predecessors across Europe. Earlier referendums generally dealt with more fundamental issues such as EU membership, the European currency, and treaties with an almost constitutional function. In recent years, we have seen an increase in the number of referendums on more technical issues, such the Irish referendum on the European Fiscal Compact, and the Danish referendum on the Unified Patent Court. A comparison between different (EU) referendums on issues that differ in their degree of technicality and complexity might shed light on some of the more counterintuitive effects found in this paper.

All in all, the results also point to an optimistic conclusion about referendums as democratic instruments. Even though this was a highly complex and technical issue, citizens became familiar with the arguments pro and con and decided on the basis of these arguments. Even if they were relying still on partisan cues, the fact that citizens familiarized themselves with the pros and cons should be seen as active engagement.



## Appendix: Descriptives main variables

See Appendix Tables 3, 4 and Fig. 6.

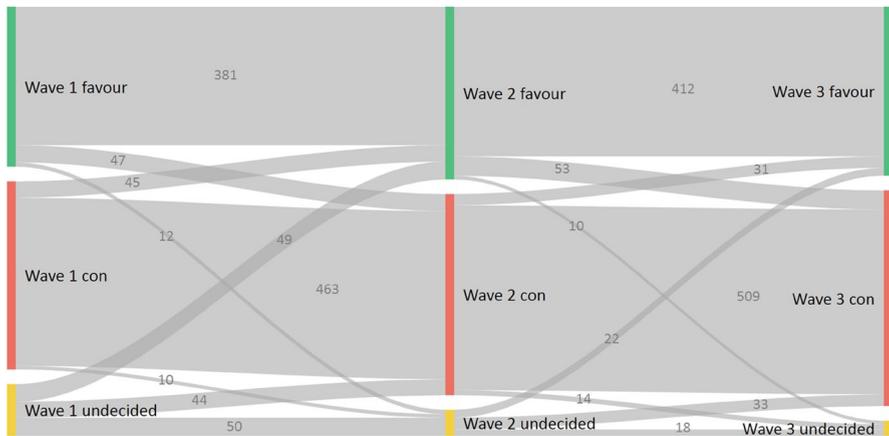
**Table 3** Descriptives of individual-level variables

|                           | <i>N</i> | Mean/share (%) | Min | Max |
|---------------------------|----------|----------------|-----|-----|
| Gender                    |          |                |     |     |
| Man                       | 593      | 53.86          | 0   | 1   |
| Woman                     | 508      | 46.14          | 0   | 1   |
| Age                       |          |                |     |     |
| 15–24 years               | 54       | 4.90           | 0   | 1   |
| 25–34 years               | 97       | 8.81           | 0   | 1   |
| 35–44 years               | 114      | 10.35          | 0   | 1   |
| 45–54 years               | 192      | 17.44          | 0   | 1   |
| 55–64 years               | 233      | 21.16          | 0   | 1   |
| 65 and above              | 411      | 37.33          | 0   | 1   |
| Education                 |          |                |     |     |
| Elementary school         | 52       | 4.73           | 0   | 1   |
| Lower vocational          | 238      | 21.66          | 0   | 1   |
| Secondary school          | 129      | 11.74          | 0   | 1   |
| Middle-level vocational   | 268      | 24.39          | 0   | 1   |
| Higher level vocational   | 276      | 25.11          | 0   | 1   |
| University                | 136      | 12.37          | 0   | 1   |
| Media use (retrospective) | 1101     | 3.79           | 1   | 5   |

**Table 4** Descriptives of individual-wave variables

|                                     | Wave 1 | Wave 2 | Wave 3 | Min | Max |
|-------------------------------------|--------|--------|--------|-----|-----|
| Referendum vote                     |        |        |        |     |     |
| In favor of treaty ( <i>n</i> )     | 440    | 475    | 465    | 0   | 1   |
| Against treaty ( <i>n</i> )         | 518    | 554    | 594    | 0   | 1   |
| Other ( <i>n</i> )                  | 143    | 72     | 42     | 0   | 1   |
| Position of party voted for         |        |        |        |     |     |
| In favor of treaty ( <i>n</i> )     | 613    | 624    | 599    | 0   | 1   |
| Against treaty ( <i>n</i> )         | 288    | 289    | 288    | 0   | 1   |
| Other ( <i>n</i> )                  | 200    | 188    | 214    | 0   | 1   |
| Trust in EU (mean)                  | 5.00   | 5.05   | 4.73   | 0   | 10  |
| Trust in national government (mean) | 5.37   | 5.40   | 5.31   | 0   | 10  |
| Treaty: Dutch economy (mean)        | 2.93   | 2.93   | 2.98   | 1   | 5   |
| Treaty: tensions Russia (mean)      | 3.78   | 3.79   | 3.55   | 1   | 5   |
| Treaty: Ukraine bribery (mean)      | 2.70   | 2.74   | 2.70   | 1   | 5   |
| Treaty: Ukraine EU member (mean)    | 3.18   | 3.13   | 3.02   | 1   | 5   |





**Fig. 6** Flow of voters between waves

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