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Referendum campaign dynamics : news media, campaign effects and direct democracy

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CHAPTER 3

REVERSED MOBILIZATION IN REFERENDUM CAMPAIGNS: HOW POSITIVE NEWS FRAMING CAN MOBILIZE THE SKEPTICS

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Abstract

This multi-methodological study focuses on risk induced electoral mobilization in referendum campaigns. Positive news framing in a referendum campaign can generate a perception of risk among those voters opposing the proposal and stimulate electoral participation in order to prevent an undesired outcome that would alter a status quo situation. To test this claim, we analyzed the effect of news framing on turnout in the context of the 2005 Dutch EU Constitution referendum campaign and combined a media content analysis of national newspapers and television news (n=6,370) with panel survey data (n=642) and an experiment (n=687). Our experimental findings show that individuals who were skeptical towards the EU and were subsequently exposed to positive news framing about the EU Constitution were mobilized to turn out and vote against it. The results of our content analysis show that during the Dutch referendum campaign news media framed the EU Constitution in positive terms. Building these findings into a measure of news exposure in our panel survey, we find that higher exposure to referendum news had a mobilizing effect on those opposing the proposal. Our experimental and panel data thus show corroborating evidence supporting the central hypothesis about how positive news can mobilize the skeptics to turn out and vote in a referendum.

Introduction

Who gets mobilized in a referendum campaign? In order to understand the dynamics of mobilization in referendums it is important to take into account the nature of the decision making situation as well as theory that explains how citizens decide on their own participation. Previous research has shown that people are more likely to get mobilized in order to avoid risks rather than to achieve potential gains (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; Marcus et al., 2000; Martin, 2004). For the perception of risk to emerge in an election individuals need to be exposed to information on the basis of which perceptions can be shaped and subsequent behaviour can be affected. An assessment of risk depends on the content of the information received in interaction with pre-existing attitudes. The most important information source during referendum campaigns are the news media (e.g., Janssen et al., 1998) and previous research suggests that the way in which a referendum issue is framed in the news can affect voter participation (de Vreese & Semetko, 2002).

Referendum campaigns are unusually influential since they are marked by a higher degree of electoral volatility compared to national elections (Magleby, 1989) and the perceived salience and involvement are oftentimes comparably low (e.g., Franklin et al., 1994). However, the degree to which voters hold pre-existing opinions on the issue at stake varies across referendums and thus the level of uncertainty among voters can vary as well (LeDuc, 2002). Previous research on EU referendums suggests that voters often rely on domestic second-order considerations (such as evaluations of the incumbent government) when deciding on their vote choice because they feel that there is not much at stake (e.g., Franklin, 2002). However, some referendums are perceived as more important by voters, making issue considerations about Europe more salient (Hobolt, 2005). In such a context, the influence of the campaign on vote choice has limits while at the same time the campaign has the potential to raise perceptions of risk among certain parts of the electorate and motivate electoral participation in order to prevent an undesired outcome.

Previous research on campaign effects on voter turnout in U.S. contexts has been primarily concerned with the role of campaign ads (e.g., Ansolabehere et al., 1994; Finkel & Geer, 1998; Goldstein & Freedman, 2002), campaign spending (Cox & Munger, 1989; Dawson & Zinser, 1976), or relied on proxies tapping the intensity of the campaign (e.g., see Geys, 2006 for an overview). In a European context most people perceive a campaign through the news media (e.g., Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999) and EU citizens have repeatedly named the news media as their dominant source of information on EU matters (Eurobarometer 60,61). Szczerbiak and Taggart (2004) developed a base model for explaining turnout in European referendums in which the role of the campaign is addressed only indirectly through the overall level of resources invested in the campaign. This conception focuses solely on campaign efforts undertaken by political actors and not on the actual content of campaign coverage in the news media. Only very

few studies so far have systematically analyzed news media content throughout a referendum campaign and modelled its effect on turnout (e.g., de Vreese & Semetko, 2004; Kriesi, 2006).

Investigations of campaign effects on voter turnout are still missing more compelling links between the actual content of campaign coverage in the news and peoples' decision to participate in referendums. The present study aims to show how positive news framing can mobilize voters who oppose a referendum proposal to turn out and vote in order to prevent an undesired outcome. We first test this claim in an experiment and then also in a real-world setting combining a two-wave panel survey with media content data.

Theoretical framework

Risk induced electoral mobilization

In political communication, studies commonly focus on the effect of frames on political attitudes (e.g., Iyengar, 1991) rather than on actual behaviour. Previous research has shown framing to have the power to influence the evaluative direction of thoughts (Price et al., 1997) or issue interpretations (e.g., de Vreese, 2004). Studies that have linked framing to political behaviour have focused on the effect of campaign news framed in terms of strategy on public cynicism and electoral participation (e.g., Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Valentino et al., 2001). This sort of framing has often been accused of turning voters off (e.g., Patterson, 1993). However, more recent studies show that voters might well become cynical by such framing but not necessarily less engaged (de Vreese & Semetko, 2002). Other research has stressed the mobilizing effects of exposure to certain types of news outlets through political learning and information gains (e.g., Newton, 1999). Finally, in the debate around negative attack advertisements (Finkel & Geer, 1998; Goldstein & Freedman, 2002) and negative campaign tone (Arceneaux & Nickerson, 2007; Martin, 2004; Niven, 2006), recent studies have yielded tentative support for a *mobilization* rather than a demobilization hypothesis (see Lau et al., 2007 for an overview).

The present study investigates the potentially stimulating effect of risk perception in a referendum context. Psychological research has repeatedly shown that people pay greater attention to negative information than to positive information (e.g., Fiske, 1980; Pratto & John, 1991) and negative attitudes are more likely to motivate behaviour than positive attitudes (e.g., Lau, 1982). Most prominently, prospect theory argues that people are more strongly motivated to avoid costs rather than to achieve gains (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; Tversky & Kahneman, 1981). This risk averse mobilizing effect has been studied in various contexts, particularly within health communication and health preventive behaviour (e.g., Rimal & Real, 2003; Rothman & Salovey, 1997), such as the effect of risk appeals on mammography use (Schneider et al., 2001), or the likelihood for people to get HIV testing (Raghubir & Menon, 2001; Kalichman & Coley, 1995). Other studies on the subject focused specifically on the role of media coverage in fostering risk perceptions (Dunlop et al., 2008; Morton & Duck, 2001). All these studies suggest

a causal link between perceived risk and behaviour. Perceived risk is seen as a motivator of self-protective behaviour and induces preventive actions.

The notion that risk perception can have an impact on subsequent behaviour has also been applied to electoral contexts. Hobolt (2006) assumes that in a referendum context “[...] people tend to have a particular aversion to losses that makes them risk averse” (p. 627), making it less likely for voters to support a proposal when uncertainty about the outcome is high. Alvarez (1997) reports empirical evidence for risk aversion of voters in an American electoral context. Kahn and Kenney (1999) stress the potential risks associated with certain electoral choices. They conclude that negative messages, compared to positive appeals, generate more interest and involvement in campaigns (see also Marcus et al., 2000; Martin, 2008; Wattenberg & Briens, 1999). Corroborating this, Martin (2004) has demonstrated how perceived candidate threat mobilized supporters of the other candidate (see also Marcus et al., 2000). Voters who are opposed to a certain candidate are more likely to accept negative information about him or her while at the same time they resist negative information about their preferred candidate. From this perspective, voters are more likely to vote “against” rather than “for” a candidate in an election (see also Key, 1966; Lau, 1985). Previous research on the asymmetric mobilization of ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ also showed how the experience of past negative election outcomes increased turnout in subsequent elections, whereas past positive experiences had no mobilizing effect (Hastings et al., 2007). In the current study context, we may expect that the promotion of a certain referendum outcome in the media can induce a perception of risk among parts of the electorate and stimulate electoral participation in order to prevent an undesired outcome. However, this largely depends on the concrete referendum context and we can only expect voters to be mobilized because of risk perception when stakes are high and the referendum issue is sufficiently salient to voters.

Previous research has pointed out that it is easier to mobilize people against a referendum proposal rather than in favour of it (Kirchgässner & Schulz, 2004). Voters are risk-averse and every new policy proposal involves uncertainty over its consequences compared to the *status quo* (Christin et al., 2002; Ingberman, 1985; Hobolt, 2006). In a referendum context, risk is – *ceteris paribus* – usually higher for an individual who opposes the proposal. Such an individual is, in most instances, faced with potential, undesired change of the status quo in the case of a positive (‘yes’) referendum outcome (Brunetti, 1997). An individual who supports the proposal, on the other hand, is usually not confronted with change in the case of a negative (‘no’) referendum outcome. Therefore, the potential cost is normally higher for those opposing the proposal than for those supporting it. This should result in opposing individuals being more likely to get mobilized in order to avoid such costs.

Although we expect opposing individuals in a referendum to be more easily mobilized in most cases, the risks might not *always* be greater for No-voters. In some referendum contexts the particular consequences of a No-vote may be considerable and the outcome of a rejected ballot may not always equate status quo (see e.g., Hobolt, 2006; Romer & Rosenthal, 1979).¹

Accordingly, the respective referendum context has to be taken into account in order to assess the risk associated with a certain referendum outcome and before making concrete assumptions about possible mobilization dynamics during the campaign.

How then can the contents of campaign news coverage contribute to a perception of risk among certain parts of the electorate and mobilize voters to turn out and vote? Voters can draw different conclusions than indicated by the actual content of campaign messages. Meffert et al. (2006) provide an example of how voters with an initial candidate preference selected and spent more time reading negative information about their preferred candidate, yet ended up with more polarized evaluations in his or her favour. Citizens may “resist” the inherent tone of campaign messages and media content on the basis of their existing opinions, a process that has been coined “motivated skepticism” (Ditto & Lopez, 1992). Potential electoral outcomes are perceived differently by individuals depending on their pre-existing attitudes and outcome preferences. This makes it necessary to determine a reference point in order to judge under which conditions a campaign message is likely to be perceived as either negative or positive. Sigelman and Kugler (2003) have pointed to the importance of voters’ *perceptions* of campaign tone and stressed that it should not be seen as an objective attribute. They showed how perceptions of the same campaign can vary widely between citizens and evoke different images in the minds of certain segments of the electorate. Indeed, framing research has also emphasized the need to incorporate existing opinions as moderators for understanding the effects of frames (Domke et al., 1998). In a referendum context, coverage emphasizing a negative election outcome does not *per se* represent a risk to all voters. Rather, this perception depends on if the negative coverage is in line with or in opposition to voters’ pre-existing outcome preferences. For example, voters who intend to vote ‘no’ in a referendum prior to the start of a campaign and are subsequently confronted with a positive news environment might see more of a risk and thus become mobilized to turn out and vote. In this vein, a positive election outcome (and positive news coverage promoting such an outcome) is perceived as negative, which in turn carries the affective potential to mobilize voters in order to avoid such an outcome.

We develop and test these expectations on the potentially mobilizing effect of risk perception on electoral participation in the context of the Dutch EU Constitution referendum. In June 2005, a majority of voters (62%) rejected the EU Constitution in a national referendum in the Netherlands. Turnout was high (63%), compared to elections for the European Parliament in the Netherlands for which rates dropped from 58% in 1979 to 30% in 1999 and 39% in 2004, and considerably higher than the 30% threshold informally agreed upon by the main political parties in order for the referendum to be considered valid.

For the perception of risk to emerge among parts of the electorate the referendum issue has to be perceived as sufficiently salient. During the Dutch referendum campaign public debate was intense (e.g., Schuck & de Vreese, 2008; Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2005) and issue considerations about Europe as well as attitudes towards further European integration mattered to voters in their decision-making process (see e.g., Aarts & van der Kolk, 2006; Glencross &

Trechsel, 2007; Eurobarometer 63.4; Eurobarometer Special 214), indicating the high perceived salience of this referendum within the electorate (see Flash Eurobarometer 172: 3). In this context, threat perceptions had an impact on voting behaviour. As Lubbers (2008) reports, one of the strongest reasons for ‘No’ voters to go and vote in the referendum was a perceived threat to Dutch culture. At the same time, to many voters the EU Constitution was a symbol for further and faster EU integration and opposition to this development was at the heart of the Dutch ‘No’ (Aarts & van der Kolk, 2006; Baden & de Vreese, 2008; Schuck & de Vreese, 2008).²

The present study aims to show how positive news framing can mobilize people in opposition to a referendum proposal to turn out to vote. In the Dutch referendum, most political elites and almost all mainstream media had campaigned in favour of a positive (‘yes’) outcome. Therefore, individuals opposing the Dutch ratification of the Constitutional Treaty could not have been certain that the referendum would fail. In line with our theoretical reasoning and given the context characteristics of the Dutch 2005 referendum as described above, we argue that the opposition towards further EU integration, which was pronounced and widespread among the Dutch electorate at the time, made it less likely for positive campaign appeals to persuade voters. Instead, we expect that positive news framing during the campaign had the opposite effect and led to higher risk perception and intensified opposition among opponents of the proposal. This, in turn, we expect to have mobilized skeptical voters to turn out and vote against the proposal in order to prevent a positive outcome and to maintain the status quo.

In a first step, we analyze the framing of news during the referendum campaign to see if a successful referendum outcome was framed more in negative or positive terms. Therefore, we conduct a content analysis of news coverage of the Dutch EU Constitution referendum:

(RQ1): What is the degree of positive and negative framing in news coverage about the Dutch EU Constitution referendum?

Next, we report on a media effects experiment and a two-wave panel survey designed to test for a reversed mobilization effect of positive news framing on individuals opposing the EU Constitution both in a controlled as well as in a real-world setting. In the Dutch EU Constitution referendum a positive referendum outcome for many represented a threat whereas it was unlikely that a negative outcome would yield particular repercussions for the Netherlands. In this context, a negative outcome would not have had immediate negative consequences but rather meant to protect the status quo and prevent a development towards further EU integration. Thus, in our study context, risk is higher for an individual who opposes the proposal since s/he is faced with potential, undesired change of the status quo in case of a positive outcome as compared to an individual who supports the proposal and who is confronted with no change in case of a potential negative outcome. In such a context, we assume news promoting a successful referendum outcome to be perceived as negative from the standpoint of a voter who is in opposition. Since

the potential cost is higher for those opposing the proposal, we expect that these voters will become more mobilized to turn out and vote than voters who are in support of the proposal:

(H1): *Individuals who oppose the referendum proposal prior to a campaign and are subsequently confronted with a pro / positive frame, which is promoting a positive outcome, are mobilized, whereas*

(H2): *Individuals who support the referendum proposal prior to a campaign and are subsequently confronted with a con / negative frame, which is promoting a negative outcome, are either not or less mobilized.*

Methods & Results

To test our hypotheses a multi-method research design was employed, combining a content analysis, a media effects experiment, and a two-wave panel survey. First, we assessed the degree to which news media have framed the EU Constitution in either positive or negative terms, second, we tested how such framing affects turnout intention of different kinds of voters, and finally, we investigated the impact news coverage about the referendum had on mobilizing voters.

Content analysis

Design. The content analysis was carried out on news articles of all relevant national Dutch newspapers and national TV news and current affairs programs. Six national daily newspapers were included into the analysis: *de Volkskrant*, *NRC Handelsblad*, and *Trouw* are all broadsheet newspapers and represented the Dutch national quality press. *De Telegraaf*, *Metro*, and *Algemeen Dagblad* represented the national tabloid press. In addition, the most widely watched Dutch public evening news program *NOS Journaal* (Nederland 1: 20.00-20.25), the main private program *RTL Nieuws* (RTL 4: 19.30-19.55), and the main public TV current affairs program *NOVA - Den Haag vandaag* were analysed.

Period of study. The content analysis was conducted for news articles and TV news items published or broadcast within the six weeks prior to the referendum (between April 16th 2005 and June 1st 2005).

Data collection. For the newspapers all articles on the front-page, all articles on one randomly chosen page inside the newspaper and all articles about the referendum were coded. For the TV news programs all news items were coded and for the one TV current affairs program all items about the referendum were coded. In total 5,157 newspaper articles (1,213 TV items) were coded of which 1,146 articles (158 TV items) dealt with the referendum or the Constitution.³

Coding procedure. Coding was conducted by six Dutch native speakers. An inter-coder reliability test was conducted by all six coders on 25 randomly chosen articles and yielded satisfactory results (reported below). The unit of analysis and coding unit was the distinct news story.

Measures. A set of items indicating the presence of positive and negative news frames as introduced by Schuck and de Vreese (2006) was employed in this study after adjustment to the issue specific context of the EU Constitution. The dimensions covered are structurally identical for both frames and cover the following dimensions for the example of the positive frame: (1) rational argument pro EU Constitution (negative frame: rational contra), (2) portrayal of specific advantage of EU Constitution (negative frame: specific disadvantage), (3) positive quote towards EU Constitution (negative frame: negative quote), and (4) promoting positive opportunities or long-term development with a common EU Constitution (negative frame: negative future outlook).⁴ For each news item the binary codes ('yes' = 1 or 'no' = 0 for each question) were added up and divided by the number of frame items, so that two index scales for the average presence of each frame in news coverage could be built ranging from 0 (frame not present at all) to 1 (frame strongly present). A high score on the 'positive frame' scale indicates that a story emphasizes future benefits or any kind of gains from a common EU Constitution, whereas a high score on the 'negative frame' scale indicates a high level of concern expressed in a news item, stressing expected future disadvantages or costs. Inter-coder reliability for the two sets of frame items was assessed by calculating Krippendorff's $\alpha = .74$ (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007). To assess if both sets of frame items build reliable scales we applied Mokken scale analysis (MSA) which is a hierarchical scaling method that can be used for binary and ordered items (Mokken, 1971). Results from the scale analysis revealed a two-dimensional structure with both sets of frame items forming strong and reliable sub-scales (positive frame: scale coefficient $H=0.67$, reliability $Rho=0.83$, scale $Z= 47.78$, $n=1302$; negative frame: scale coefficient $H=0.64$, reliability $Rho=0.80$, scale $Z = 44.22$, $n=1302$).⁵

Results of the content analysis

As Table 3.1. below shows and in response to the first research question, the Constitution was framed more in positive than in negative terms in campaign news coverage (see also Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2005; Schuck & de Vreese, 2008). This positive directional bias is consistent across all outlets. While both frames were present, the overall news environment can be characterized by having put more emphasis on potential advantages rather than disadvantages of a common EU Constitution.⁶

Table 3.1.: Presence of positive and negative frame in news coverage about the referendum

	Positive frame index	Negative frame index	Difference
BROADSHEET newspapers			
<i>NRC Handelsblad (n=371)</i>	0.19 (0.32)	0.13 (0.27)	+0.06
<i>Volkskrant (n=230)</i>	0.23 (0.33)	0.13 (0.24)	+0.10
<i>Trouw (n=161)</i>	0.20 (0.30)	0.16 (0.29)	+0.04
TABLOID newspapers			
<i>Algemeen Dagblad (n=145)</i>	0.18 (0.30)	0.17 (0.29)	+0.01
<i>Telegraaf (n=123)</i>	0.21 (0.35)	0.11 (0.24)	+0.10
<i>Metro (n= 109)</i>	0.19 (0.34)	0.15 (0.29)	+0.04
TV news			
<i>NOS Journaal (n=43)</i>	0.28 (0.35)	0.20 (0.31)	+0.08
<i>RTL Nieuws (n=37)</i>	0.39 (0.41)	0.30 (0.41)	+0.09
<i>NOVA Den Haag vandaag (n= 77)</i>	0.45 (0.39)	0.28 (0.34)	+0.17

Note: Scores in the first two columns represent the average presence of the positive and the negative frame (standard deviations in parentheses) in referendum news coverage on a scale from 0 (not present at all) to 1 (strongly present). Scores in the third column represent the difference between the two frames and thus the relative dominance of the positive frame over the negative frame.

Experiment

Design. To test the possible effects of framing the EU Constitution in either negative or positive terms, we used a single-factor, post-test only, between-subjects experimental design with random assignment to one of two conditions. Within this design the first condition represented the ‘pro EU Constitution / positive’ frame, and the second condition represented the ‘con EU Constitution / negative’ frame.

Procedure. The experiment was conducted in May 2005 by CentERdata at the University of Tilburg (The Netherlands). Participants first completed a pre-test questionnaire asking for demographic details and political predispositions (described below). Next, participants were exposed to one news article establishing either of the two alternative framing conditions. Finally, participants completed a post-test questionnaire, which asked for their turnout intention (and their vote choice intention) and included a manipulation check.

Sample. In total 687 individuals participated in the experiment (47.5% percent females, age = 18-90 [$M = 49.3$, $SD = 15.67$]), 355 in the negative frame condition and 332 in the positive frame condition. Respondents were sampled from the online CentERpanel which consists of a representative sample of 2,000 Dutch households.⁷

Stimulus material. The experimental stimulus material consisted of one news article in two alternative versions (see Appendix F). The news articles were inspired by the media content analysis, but the articles were produced for the study rather than selected from the media sample. This ensured that the stimulus material reflected the frames as they have been conceptualized in this study, it gave full control over the experimental manipulation, and it implied that no respondent has been exposed to the article in advance. In both versions, the core of the story was identical, dealing with a general discussion of the EU Constitution referendum in the Netherlands. Combining an identical core section with factual information and sections establishing alternative frames has been common practice in previous experimental framing analyses (e.g., Iyengar, 1991; Price et al., 1997; Valkenburg et al., 1999). In total, five different parts within the stimulus material varied according to the “against EU Constitution / negative” and “pro EU Constitution / positive” frames.

Measures

Dependent variable: Turnout intention. The intention to turn out and vote in the referendum was measured on a five-point Likert scale (1-very likely not to go and vote, 5-very likely to go and vote) ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 1.16$). We also tapped vote choice but did not expect this to be affected by the experimental manipulation.

Moderating variable: EU support. Before the experimental intervention respondents were asked for their general support for the EU, their support for the Euro, their support for EU enlargement and their support for a possible integration of Turkey into the EU on five-point Likert scales (1-low support, 5-high support).⁸ These four items together build a reliable index scale ($M = 2.67$, $SD = .78$, $\alpha = .76$). In order to discriminate between respondents later on in our analysis we classify individuals as either being EU skeptics (respondents with index scores below the scale midpoint) or EU supporters (respondents with index scores above the scale midpoint).

Manipulation check. A manipulation check revealed successful manipulation. The two experimental conditions were sufficiently strong and recognized by the two groups, allowing the between-group differences in the dependent measure to be ascribed to the experimental manipulation.⁹

Results of the experiment

In line with our expectations, the experimental manipulation did affect participants' turnout intention. Respondents in the positive framing condition ($M = 4.17$, $SD = 1.10$) expressed higher levels of turnout intention than respondents in the negative framing condition ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 1.21$) ($t(675) = 2.40$, $p < .05$). More specifically (see Table 3.2. below), and in line with our first

research hypothesis, EU skeptics in the positive framing condition expressed significantly higher turnout intention ($M= 4.13$, $SD= 1.12$) than EU skeptics in the negative framing condition ($M= 3.81$, $SD= 1.30$) ($t(387)= 2.51$, $p<.01$).¹⁰ The second research hypothesis is supported as well. For EU supporters there was no significant difference ($t(193)= -.291$, $p>.05$) in turnout intention between the positive ($M= 4.35$, $SD= .91$) and the negative ($M= 4.38$, $SD= .93$) condition.

Table 3.2.: Effect of experimental condition on turnout intention for EU skeptics and EU supporters

	Positive frame (n=288)	Negative frame (n=296)
EU supporters	4.35 (.91) (n= 104)	4.38 (.93) (n= 91)
EU skeptics	4.13 _a (1.12) (n= 184)	3.81 _b (1.30) (n= 205)

Note: Cell entries are mean scores on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = very likely not to go and vote, 5 = very likely to go and vote), standard deviations in parentheses. Different subscripts *a, b* indicate significant between-condition difference with $p < .01$ (one-tailed).

In addition, we tested an interaction model in order to test for the significance of the difference in effects across the two groups yielding a significant interaction effect for EU attitudes (being a supporter vs. being a skeptic) and the experimental condition (negative vs. positive) ($b = 0.35$, $p<.05$) ($F(3, 580) = 8.00$, $p<.001$) on turnout intention controlling for main effects.¹¹ Thus, attitudes towards the EU moderate the effect of the experimental condition on turnout intention and framing the Constitution in positive rather than in negative terms had a mobilizing effect only on EU skeptics and not on EU supporters.¹²

Two-Wave Panel Survey

Procedure. Our final data stem from a two-wave panel survey conducted by CentERdata at the University of Tilburg (The Netherlands). Field dates for the first wave were May 6th-May 11th, and, for the second wave, June 3rd-June 8th. The response rate in the first wave was 68% (AAPOR RR1) and 81% of the wave 1 respondents participated in the second wave resulting in a net panel of n=642.

Sample characteristics. The online CentERpanel is reflective of the Dutch adult population on key social-demographics. Our sample consists of 52.3% males, average age is 49.4 years ($SD=15.25$). Most respondents are household heads (62.7%), loan workers (49.4%), work in industrial companies (17.3%), and have a net income of more than 2600,- € per month (34.7%). Compared to census data our sample is representative of the Dutch electorate.¹³ Comparing the reported turnout in our sample with actual turnout, 86.3% of our sample respondents reported to have participated in the referendum compared to the actual turnout of 63%. This difference reflects a well-known bias in self-reported turnout (e.g., Granberg & Holmberg, 1991).¹⁴

Measures

The specific wording of all items and the descriptives for the independent variables listed below can be found in Appendix G. We specified logistic regression models with turnout intention (wave 1) and voter turnout (wave 2) as the dependent variables. In the turnout intention model (wave 1) we included several variables that extant research shows to predict turnout. In the voter turnout model (wave 2) we focused on *change* between our panel waves and include turnout intention (wave 1) and control as well as campaign related variables.

Turnout intention model (wave 1)

Dependent variable

Turnout intention (wave 1). Respondents indicated their turnout intention on a five-point Likert scale reaching from 1-very likely not to go and vote to 5-very likely to go and vote. Respondents who reported being either very likely or likely to participate in the referendum were coded as 1, all others were coded as 0.¹⁵

Independent variables

Political predispositions. Political interest is positively related to turnout (e.g., Markowski & Tucker, 2005). In the present study we combined two questions about general political interest and interest in EU politics in particular. Political knowledge has been shown to result in higher turnout (e.g., Verba et al., 1995) and was measured through the answers to four political knowledge questions concerning national and EU politics. Political efficacy is another factor contributing to political participation (e.g., Bandura, 1997) and was tapped with one item. Furthermore, individual levels of EU support have been shown to be positively related to higher turnout in European elections (de Vreese & Tobiasen, 2007) and were measured with a multiple item index covering individuals' general EU support, support for the Euro, support for Turkish EU membership and support for EU enlargement.

Social-demographics. We controlled for age, gender and education. Findings on gender and age are mixed, but higher levels of education are commonly associated with higher levels of participation (e.g., Dreyer Lassen, 2005). Education was measured in six categories of obtainable Dutch education degrees (from low to high), the respondents' gender was coded as a male dummy variable and age was measured in years.

*Campaign effect model (wave 2)**Dependent variable*

Voter turnout (wave 2). Voter turnout was measured as 1 (voted in referendum) or 0 (not voted in referendum).

Independent variables

Exposure to positive and negative framing in news coverage. The key independent variable in this study is media use. Respondents reported the number of days they turn to different newspapers and TV news shows in an average week. We specifically asked for those media that have also been included into our content analysis. This enables us to build in actual content features into our exposure measure.¹⁶ In particular, we integrated the degree to which news coverage in each individual outlet framed the Constitution in either more positive or more negative terms into our news exposure measure. Therefore, the “against EU Constitution / negative” index score was subtracted from the “pro EU Constitution / positive” index score (representing the relative prominence of the positive frame) for each medium and multiplied with the reported exposure to each respective outlet. These single scores were added up to build an additive index for individual news exposure weighted by the degree of positive vs. negative framing.¹⁷ This results into the following formula to construct our individual news exposure measure (see Appendix G for full formula):

$$((\text{exposure medium 1} * (\text{positive frame index medium 1} - \text{negative frame index medium 1})) + [\dots] + ((\text{exposure medium n} * (\text{positive frame index medium n} - \text{negative frame index medium n})))$$

Moderating variable: Opposing or supporting the referendum proposal. Respondents who expressed being likely or very likely to vote against the referendum proposal before the campaign (wave 1) were coded as 1, respondents who reported being either likely or very likely to vote in favour of the referendum proposal were coded as 0.

Control variables. As in the previous model we control for age, gender and education and also for political interest, political efficacy and political knowledge. Furthermore, we control for the impact of political cynicism which has been shown to depress turnout (e.g., Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Valentino et al., 2001) although this has not been confirmed in all research (e.g., de Vreese & Semetko, 2002). In the present study political cynicism was measured with a two items index assessing the degree of cynicism about the campaign.

Results of the Two-wave Panel Survey

The logistic regression model in Table 3.3. below explains turnout intention three weeks prior to the referendum and thus before the hot phase of the campaign actually started.

Table 3.3.: Logistic regression explaining turnout intention (wave 1)

<i>TURNOUT INTENTION</i>		
<i>Political predispositions and socio-demographics</i>		
Socio-demographics		
EDUCATION	.261*** (.074)	1.299
AGE	.010 (.008)	1.010
GENDER (male)	.053 (.208)	1.054
Political predispositions		
POLITICAL EFFICACY	.185 (.116)	1.203
POLITICAL INTEREST	.993*** (.135)	2.700
POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE	.207* (.084)	1.230
EU SUPPORT	-.087 (.147)	.917
Nagelkerke Pseudo R-Square	.30	
Percentage correctly classified	77.8%	
N	634	

Note: Cell entries are logistic regression coefficients, standard errors in parentheses and odds ratios.

* $p < .05$; *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed)

Controlling for socio-demographic factors and other political predispositions, we find that at this point in time higher levels of political knowledge, greater political interest and higher education levels positively contributed to the intention to participate in the referendum. Other factors such as political efficacy or the level of support for the EU did not show a systematic impact on turnout intention. Thus, at this point in time those most aware and most knowledgeable about political matters were also most likely to participate in the referendum.

In a next step, we are interested in the question who got mobilized *during* the referendum campaign. Looking at the aggregate level first, 77.2% of those opposing the Constitution intended to participate in the referendum before the start of the campaign and 89.6% reported having voted. Compared to voters who supported the proposal (87.9% intended to turn out before the campaign and 90.2% reported having voted), those who opposed the proposal became significantly more mobilized ($t(415)=-2.79$, $p < .01$). Next, we analyse the impact of the

positively framed news coverage during the campaign on actual turnout on the individual level. Therefore, we control for turnout intention prior to the campaign in order to examine *change* between turnout intention and actual turnout. As Model 1 in Table 3.4. below shows, higher levels of news exposure increased the likelihood to turn out and vote among skeptics but not among supporters of the proposal (see Model 2 in Table 3.4.), controlling for other factors. In order to test the significance of the difference in effects between the two groups we specified another model with all voters, including an interaction term between news exposure and vote choice intention controlling for main effects (see Model 3 in Table 3.4.).

Table 3.4.: Logistic regression explaining turnout (wave 2) for NO voters, YES voters and ALL voters

	<i>MODEL 1</i>	<i>MODEL 2</i>	<i>MODEL 3</i>
	<i>NO voters</i>	<i>YES voters</i>	<i>ALL voters</i>
Turnout intention (at time 1)			
Intention to turn out	3.868*** (.764) 47.862	3.246* (1.252) 25.690	3.839*** (.613) 46.475
Not decided about turning out	1.828* (.779) 6.221	1.095 (1.162) 2.990	1.656** (.599) 5.236
Socio-demographic controls			
AGE	.044 (.023) 1.045	.025 (.025) 1.026	.036* (.016) 1.037
GENDER (male)	.057 (.554) 1.059	-.572 (.711) .565	-.060 (.418) .942
EDUCATION	.164 (.222) 1.178	-.227 (.243) .797	-.005 (.152) .995
Political predispositions			
POLITICAL INTEREST	-.164 (.341) .849	-.126 (.487) .882	-.216 (.264) .806
POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE	.280 (.306) 1.323	.658* (.335) 1.932	.399 (.215) 1.491
POLITICAL EFFICACY	-.001 (.297) .999	.321 (.348) 1.379	.138 (.225) 1.148
Campaign variables			
POLITICAL CYNICISM	.302 (.381) 1.353	-.212 (.394) .809	.047 (.266) 1.048
NEWS EXPOSURE	1.511* (.695) 4.530	-.687 (.625) .503	-.779 (.578) .459
VOTE CHOICE INTENTION (0-YES, 1-NO)	--	--	-1.289 (.953) .276
NEWS EXPOSURE x VOTE CHOICE INTENTION (0-YES, 1-NO)	--	--	2.253** (.839) 9.521
Nagelkerke Pseudo R-Square	.47	.34	.40
Percentage correctly classified	92.9%	91.4%	92.3%
N	239	174	413

Note: Cell entries are logistic regression coefficients, standard errors in parentheses and odds ratios.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed)

Consistent with our hypothesis, we find that the mobilizing effect of news exposure on actual turnout is moderated by vote choice intention ($b=2.25$, $p<.01$). Those opposing the proposal were significantly mobilized by exposure to the positively framed news coverage during the campaign

whereas those supporting the proposal were not.¹⁸ These findings corroborate our experimental findings according to which exposure to positive framing resulted in higher turnout levels among EU skeptics.

Discussion

This article investigated how positive news framing has the potential to mobilize individuals opposing a referendum proposal to turn out to vote. Our example of the Dutch referendum campaign in 2005 showed that the EU Constitution was framed in dominantly positive terms, promoting future benefits over potential disadvantages. Our findings suggest that framing the Constitution in positive terms rather than in negative terms mobilized voters. However, this mobilization effect was reversed and mobilized the skeptic, potential ‘no’ voter rather than the ‘yes’ voter.

Previous research has stressed the importance of *motivational* factors with regard to their potential impact on political participation (Marcus et al., 2000; Miller & Krosnick, 2004). In the present study, we have focused on risk aversion as one motivation for voters to participate in an election. Based on prospect theory (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979), theory on the mobilizing role of negative information and attitudes (Lau, 1982, 1985) as well as research pointing to the mobilizing impact of threat perception in electoral contexts (Marcus et al., 2000; Martin, 2004), it was assumed that for voters opposed to a referendum proposal, news promoting a positive outcome would represent a risk that they would want to avoid by turning out to vote. Our data provide support for this hypothesis.

We argue that pre-existing attitudes need to be taken into account when determining the reference point from which a situation is perceived as a risk. A positive referendum outcome does not *per se* represent a welcome scenario for everyone. It can represent a risk to those who hold strong predispositions against the proposal and hope for a negative outcome. Thus, it is the context - being confronted with the prospect of unwanted change - that creates the perception of negativity, which, in turn, carries the potential to mobilize voters to turn out and vote against a proposal. A message does not have to be negative to create the perception of negativity and it is rather the *perception* of information as negative – in the light of existing opinions – that has mobilizing potential and not the message content as such. If there are many voters who hold negative outcome preferences, a positive campaign can mobilize these voters to turn out and vote against the proposal.

Why is there a mobilization effect of positive framing for voters in opposition to the proposal but no effect of negative framing for the supporters? We argue that the notion of prospective *change* is of special importance in electoral contexts. Miller et al. (2006) describe a threat as a future-oriented perception of possibility. Facing threats of unwanted future changes carries the potential to mobilize people in order to protect the status quo (Brunetti, 1997; Christin

et al., 2002; Ingberman, 1985). In our example of the Dutch 2005 EU Constitution referendum we claim that voters who opposed the referendum proposal and who were confronted with a media environment that stressed the advantages of a positive outcome perceived such an outcome as *more* of a risk because it would *change* the status quo in an unwanted way. On the contrary, for supporters of the proposal the prospect of a negative outcome, however inconvenient, represented *less* of a risk since it would at least *not change* the status quo. In a different context (e.g., if the Dutch were the last to vote about the Treaty), however, a No-vote might have had very different consequences and a negative outcome does not always equate status quo (Hobolt, 2006; Romer & Rosenthal, 1979). Thus, we do not make the generalisation that the risks in a referendum are always greater for No-voters and we do not generalise our findings to other contexts in which a negative referendum outcome would have more serious implications. Rather, pre-existing policy preferences and the meaning of outcomes with regard to a potential change of the status quo have to be considered as reference points for the perception of risk as a mobilizing factor in referendum campaigns.

In our data, the initial degree of intended participation was higher among supporters as compared to those opposed to the proposal. However, our findings suggest that the skeptics were significantly mobilized *during* the campaign and by the positive news framing. We cannot fully rule out that some sort of a 'regression-to-the-mean' effect might have taken place among skeptical voters in our survey. However, attitudes towards the EU were unrelated to turnout intention in our first panel wave and our experimental findings corroborate the findings of our panel survey. Thus, in line with our theoretical reasoning and the corroborating evidence from both our experiment as well as our survey analysis, we find support for the hypothesis that positive framing can mobilize skeptical voters to turn out and vote. Nevertheless, more research is needed to further substantiate our findings. We also do not rule out the possibility for supporters who receive positive, affirmative information to get mobilized to some degree. Prospect theory, for example, indeed does not claim that positive information has no mobilizing effect at all, but rather that the effect is smaller as compared to risk inducing negative information. Thus, some sort of mobilization among supporters when exposed to positive, affirmative information is of course possible. However, given the potential ceiling effect in our data, we focus on the main theoretical claim, namely the mobilization of skeptics by positive news framing.

Further exploration is needed and other factors need to be identified and theoretically built into a broader framework that can explain the psychology behind these effects. For example, future studies need to engage in formally testing the mediation dynamics which underlie the effects we report and include measures of risk perception into their design in order to further substantiate our theoretical arguments and corroborate our empirical findings. Given the data we have at hand, we cannot empirically demonstrate, in this paper, how risk perception was the decisive factor accounting for the mobilization of the skeptics. Future research also has to undertake more effort to look at the role and function of information and the way information

is processed under the condition of risk. This also points to the importance for future research to identify and test possible moderating factors of the dynamic we describe. The same information provided during a campaign is perceived differently by voters. Pre-existing attitudes, such as election outcome preferences, have to be taken into account in order to arrive at a better understanding of framing effects on participation. In this way, the complex interaction between information content, risk perception, and actual behaviour can be further disentangled.

Our study also raises the question to what extent the media have the power to affect people's opinions, given the fact that our findings show that the majority of skeptical voters were not persuaded by the positive news framing and rather got mobilized to turn out and vote against the proposal. We argue that while news framing, in general, can have persuasive effects (e.g., Slothuus, 2008), there is less space for the media to affect voting preferences in a high salience referendum such as the Dutch 2005 referendum, when people hold strong attitudes and issue considerations about Europe matter (e.g., Lubbers, 2008; Schuck & de Vreese, 2008), as compared to a context in which involvement and interest in the issue are low. While media can potentially sway public opinion during a campaign, the magnitude depends on the concrete context. Schmitt-Beck and Farrell (2002) argue that if voters hold strong political predispositions, campaigns are less likely to affect opinions and campaign effects are more likely to be found with regard to mobilization. Thus, while the influence of the media on opinion change in such contexts has limits, they are still relevant in *mobilizing* the electorate. As our study suggests, such mobilization can be reversed and mobilize voters when they are confronted with information which is opposed to their own predisposition.

The present study focuses on the impact two particular news frames have on political participation. However, we acknowledge certain limitations of our design. Our experiment and survey tap self-reported turnout (intentions), not actual turnout. This leads us to be cautious about our conclusions and stresses the need for further research to substantiate the patterns we have reported. The limitations notwithstanding, we believe that our study contributes to a better understanding of how news framing can influence voting behaviour in referendums and provides a basis from which future research can advance towards a theory of risk induced electoral mobilization.

NOTES

¹ The consequences of a No vote, for example, in the second Nice referendum in Ireland or in the second Maastricht referendum in Denmark (or also potentially in a possible second Lisbon referendum in Ireland) represented a considerable risk to proponents of the proposal (e.g., exit from the EU) and a negative outcome could have led to a change of the status quo. In such a context, in which voters perceive that there are considerable costs associated with a rejection of a referendum proposal, these voters may experience as much risk as voters who oppose the proposal and fear the consequences of its implementation.

² In their pre-referendum survey the authors asked voters about the most likely consequences of further EU integration. They report that an overwhelming majority of voters (91.7%) expected jobs to get lost in the Netherlands, pointing to a pronounced concern very closely related to peoples' personal lives. Furthermore, they report that many voters assumed that small member states such as the Netherlands would lose influence in the future. Finally, the authors also report fears with regard to a loss of national sovereignty as perceived by many voters (p. 245; see also Flash Eurobarometer 172: 28; Eurobarometer Special 214: 28; Eurobarometer 63.4: 37).

³ Stories were considered to be *about* the referendum if either the referendum or the constitution, or any aspect of either one, were specifically mentioned at least twice throughout the story (for TV items) or mentioned at least once in either the headline, sub-headline or the first paragraph (for newspaper stories). Total amount of coded news stories per media outlet (amount of referendum stories in brackets): *de Volkskrant*: 966 (231); *NRC Handelsblad*: 1143 (373); *Trouw*: 660 (163); *De Telegraaf*: 758 (123); *Algemeen Dagblad*: 893 (147); *Metro*: 737 (109); *NOS Journaal*: 549 (43); *RTL Nieuws*: 586 (37); *NOVA / Den Haag vandaag*: 78 (78).

⁴ Positive frame: (1) Does the story deliver any (substantial) arguments or report any concrete facts that support the EU constitution? (2) Does the story portray the EU Constitution as beneficial for the EU/Europe or the Netherlands in particular? (3) Is there a quote of any kind of actor that is positive in tone towards the EU Constitution? (4) Does the story promote promising future opportunities or long-term development with a common EU Constitution?; Negative frame: (1) Does the story deliver any (substantial) arguments or report any concrete facts that oppose the EU Constitution? (2) Does the story portray the EU Constitution as detrimental for the EU/Europe or the Netherlands in particular? (3) Is there a quote of any kind of actor that is negative in tone towards the EU Constitution? (4) Does the story promote threatening future risks or long-term developments with a common EU Constitution?

⁵ A principal component factor analysis with Varimax rotation confirmed a loading of our items on two distinct factors, producing two consistent and distinguishable frames (Eigenvalues 3.11 and 2.09; total variance explained: 65 percent). *Items loading on the first factor (positive frame)*: 'Rational pro' = .85; 'EU/NL opportunity' = .84; 'Positive outlook' = .79; 'Positive quote' = .76. *Items loading on the second factor (negative frame)*: 'Rational contra' = .83; 'Negative outlook' = .83; 'EU/NL risk' = .82; 'Negative quote' = .66. The items for both frames formed reliable scales, Cronbach's alpha for the positive frame items was .83 and for the negative frame items .80.

⁶ The results reported in Table 3.1. are not based on a sample but rather on the population of all referendum news stories published in the respective media which is why there is no test of statistical significance provided for the difference in positive and negative framing across outlets. Furthermore, the

extreme positive value (+1) on our final scale as well as the extreme negative value (-1) both are merely theoretical possibilities. Only if *all* four indicators for the positive frame in *all* news stories in a particular medium have been coded as “present” (1) and at the same time *all* negative indicators of *all* news stories have been coded as “not present” (0) the final scale measurement in Table 1 would be +1 (or - 1 in the reversed scenario). Thus, extreme values on our scale are highly unlikely to occur considering that not all news is evaluative and the coefficients we report are indicative of a consistent positive bias in news reporting towards the issue. Furthermore, political news in general (Kepplinger & Weissbecker, 1991) and also news about the EU in particular (e.g., de Vreese et al., 2006) usually show a consistent moderately *negative* bias. Thus, it was all the more striking and unusual for recipients that in our context the media have portrayed the issue not in negative terms but with a positive bias.

⁷ Participants of the CentERdata panel are first contacted via telephone and asked if they are generally willing to become regular panel members. If that is the case their socio-demographic information is entered into a database and based on this information a panel of 2000 Dutch households, representative of the Dutch population, has been established which has been used since 1991 for both small and large scale studies (such as the DNB Household Survey). If a household stops with its participation it is replaced by a new household which mirrors the characteristics of the old household. The potential new household then receives a letter and is asked if it is willing to become a new member of the panel. The surveys are filled out by the panel members online. However, if there is no computer or internet connection available in a household CentERdata provides the technical devices to enable participants to fill out the questionnaires at home.

⁸ Looking at the list of pre-treatment measures we see that randomization was successful. There were no significant differences between the experimental groups with regard to any of the individual-level attitude measures: EU support ($t(683)=.164, p > .05$), political efficacy ($t(685)=-.085, p > .05$), political interest ($t(685)=1.702, p > .05$), political knowledge ($t(687)=1.555, p > .05$), education ($t(686)=1.175, p > .05$), age ($t(687)=.645, p > .05$).

⁹ Participants were asked to indicate on a 5-point Likert scale to what extent they thought the presented news article had portrayed the EU Constitution as a threat (1-very much as a threat, 5-not at all as a threat). A *t*-test yielded a significant mean difference between participants in the positive condition ($M= 3.53, SD= .86$) and in the negative condition ($M= 2.86, SD= .87$) in the expected direction ($t(675) = 10.10, p < .001$).

¹⁰ Vote choice intention was not affected by the experimental manipulation, being similar in the “against EU Constitution / negative” condition ($M= 2.74, SD= 1.31$) and in the “pro EU Constitution / positive” condition ($M= 2.85, SD=1.31$) (measured on a five-point Likert scale reaching from 1-very likely to vote against the EU Constitution, to 5-very likely to vote in favour of the EU Constitution) ($t(675)=-1.14, p > .05$). Also within the sub-group of EU skeptics ($t(387)= .62, p>.05$) and within the sub-group of EU supporters ($t(193)= -.82, p>.05$) vote choice intention was not affected by the different experimental conditions.

¹¹ EU attitudes were coded as follows: 0- EU supporter, 1- EU skeptic; experimental condition was coded as follows: 0- negative, 1-positive. Given our theoretical predictions we report one-tailed p-values.

¹² The effect we report remains significant also in a more conservative test when we exclude respondents who are categorized as EU skeptics but express support for the EU Constitution in the post-test and respondents who are categorized as EU supporters but express opposition against the EU Constitution in the post-test (not reported here).

¹³ Compared to CBS census data and with regard to gender, age, and education we report the following slight under- or overrepresentations. There is a slight overrepresentation of men in our net panel (52.3% versus 49.5%). Regarding age groups, 15-24 year olds are slightly underrepresented (4% versus 11.9%), 45-54 year olds are slightly overrepresented (22.7% versus 14%) and 65+ year olds are slightly overrepresented (19% versus 13.7%). And finally, with regard to education, we report a slight overrepresentation of people with higher professional education (HBO) (21.7% versus 16%) and an underrepresentation of people with upper secondary vocational education (MBO) (19.5% versus 32%).

¹⁴ Since the degree of self-reported turnout is higher than the actual turnout rate it reduces the number of non-voters. The over-reporting is acknowledged but not of greater magnitude than in other studies relying on self-reported turnout measures.

¹⁵ In the campaign effects model and in order to explain change between turnout intention and actual turnout we control for the intention to turn out and having been undecided about turning out in wave 1. The first control variable was coded 1 for those who intended to turn out and 0 for all others. For the second control variable those having been undecided about turning out in wave 1 have been coded as 1 (*Not decided about turning out*), and all others have been coded as 0.

¹⁶ We acknowledge existing criticism of self-reported exposure measures, but emphasize, like Zaller (1996) the need for specific exposure measures when trying to establish differential effects of media content. Slater (2004) indeed also argues the necessity to have detailed exposure measures when linking media content to effects.

¹⁷ Furthermore, previous studies in media effect research have stressed the importance to integrate attention measures into news exposure measures (Chaffee & Schleuder, 1986). In an alternative model (not reported here) we multiplied our weighted news exposure index by a score indicating how much attention individuals have devoted to news about the referendum during the campaign (measured on a 10-point scale on which high scores indicate higher levels of attention: $M= 6.97$, $SD= 2.03$) yielding the same significant patterns as we report in the results section.

¹⁸ Voters who have changed their vote choice intention over the course of the campaign and turned out to vote in the referendum would yield unwanted support for our hypothesis. For example, someone who was leaning to vote NO prior to the campaign but was unlikely to turn out and finally ended up voting YES in the referendum, did get mobilized to vote but not out of risk perception and in order to prevent a YES outcome. To provide a conservative test of our hypothesis we therefore exclude these respondents ($n=46$) from the analysis.

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