

In the Pursuit of Democracy: Support for Referendums in Moldova

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Abstract

Support for referendums has often been investigated in new and established democracies. However, we know very little about what drives support for referendums in transition countries. This article addresses that gap and aims to identify the determinants of support for referendums in the Republic of Moldova. The analysis uses individual-level data from a survey in November 2024 based on a nationally representative sample in the aftermath of a divisive popular vote on EU accession. The results indicate that support is rooted both in long-term attitudes, such as democratic satisfaction, democratic values, and high interest in politics, as well as in more immediate situational and strategic considerations. Compared to earlier evidence from democracies, people in Moldova attach more hope to referendums as a way to improve democracy and disconnect them from critiques against politicians.

Keywords

citizens; democracy; referendum; Republic of Moldova; support

1. Introduction

The public support for referendums as decision-making mechanisms and the drivers behind this support have been intensely scrutinized over the past three decades. Most studies have assessed the levels and determinants of support for referendums in new or established democracies (Anderson & Goodyear-Grant, 2010; Bowler et al., 2007; Gherghina & Geissel, 2020; Schuck & de Vreese, 2015). One common finding in this field is that the critical attitudes towards representative democracy and political institutions often favor support for referendums because people consider them as avenues to complement and improve the functioning of democracy. In this context, we know very little about what drives support for referendums in

countries where representative democracy has not yet been fully achieved, and where public institutions face challenges in performing their functions.

Understanding the support for referendums in transition countries is important because it can inform future institutional decisions, such as whether to hold a referendum if or when the situation requires it, or about the public's political behavior, such as their likely turnout when such referendums are organized. Moreover, people's political opinions and attitudes in transition countries are often sensitive to the short-run state of affairs and developments in the country (Grosjean et al., 2013). Observing whether the level of support for referendums is determined by short-term developments or more established attitudes and behaviors can indicate whether referendums can make a difference to the country's institutional setting over the long term. Equally important, understanding whether support for referendums is associated with democratic values can shed light on the ways such direct democracy practices can boost people's views of the current practices of representative democracy and raise the overall quality of democracy in the country.

This article addresses this gap in the literature and aims to identify the determinants of support for referendums in the Republic of Moldova. This country is an appropriate setting for the analysis because it is a transition country with referendum experience at the national level. It organized what turned out to be a divisive referendum in October 2024 about EU accession that would shape the country's foreign policy and political priorities in the following period. The existence of a recent referendum allows the influence of short-term vs long-term determinants on people's support for referendums to be tested. This analysis uses individual-level data from a survey conducted in November 2024 on a national representative sample of 1,031 respondents (for details, see Section 4 on data and method). The research tests the explanatory power of democratic attitudes, attitudes about political institutions and decisions, political interest, and short-term contextual elements such as being on the winning side of a recent referendum. The study controls for critical attitudes towards politicians, conflict-aversity, and socio-demographic variables (age, education, and gender).

The next section provides an overview of the various types of referendums and their aims. The third section reviews the literature on the determinants for support and formulates five testable hypotheses. Then, we discuss the case selection, method of data collection, and data analysis. The fifth section includes the analysis and interpretation of results. We conclude by setting out the main findings and implications for the broader field of study.

2. Types of Referendums

Referendums are direct democratic practices that allow citizens to engage directly in political decisions and address some of the problems faced by many representative democracies (Cheneval & Ferrín, 2018; Smith, 2021). They are usually held based on the principle of two mutually exclusive alternatives, whereby citizens can cast a "Yes/No" vote on a specific issue. They confer legitimacy on a collective decision on the basis of majoritarian rule (Morel & Qvortrup, 2018). In terms of the effects they produce, referendums can be mandatory or non-mandatory. Mandatory referendums are required by the constitution, and their results are binding. Several EU accession referendums organized in the early 2000s in Europe fell into this category because the accession of the countries in question involved either a change of constitutional provisions or of laws on sovereignty-related issues. In contrast, non-mandatory referendums can be initiated by a series of political players or by citizens, and their results do not produce normative effects. Referendums can also be

categorized according to the ways in which they are initiated: they can be top-down when called by political actors such as the country's president, a parliamentary majority vote, or a minority opposition, or bottom-up when citizens initiate them.

Referendums further differ by policy domains, and tend to mainly concern the international system, domestic norms, state welfare, and post-materialist policies. This categorization is relevant because it takes into consideration all the particularities that specific policies hold and explains why and how different actors or campaign strategies are employed to organize a successful referendum (Silagadze & Gherghina, 2020). Referendums also differ according to the reasons why they have been called. One of the main reasons for their initiation is that referendums can be used as problem-solving or mediation devices. They can be initiated by political parties and presidents when there is deadlock between the executive and legislative powers, or when the initiators seek to avoid a split within parties or coalitions (Gherghina, 2019; Sottiolotta, 2017). Another reason why referendums can be called is to outflank the political competition (Durán-Martínez, 2012).

Referendums can also be called for consultative purposes. Still, they are issued by political actors when the population needs to be consulted before taking a specific course of action (e.g., international negotiations; López & Sanjaume-Calvet, 2020). Other reasons why referendums are called involve agenda-setting. In this case, referendums can be initiated by political actors and citizens since their aim is to adopt or reject a specific initiative, law, or policy (Breuer, 2008; Tap, 2023). In addition, referendums are initiated to stimulate the idea of participation and engagement in political processes (Laisney, 2012). By this, the initiators—whether political actors or citizens—may increase the level of participation of individuals who have alienated themselves from other forms of political participation such as voting. Similarly, referendums that are initiated by citizens increase the latter's overall empowerment on the political scene and make them more aware of the socio-political realities within their setting (Morel & Qvortrup, 2018).

3. Support for Referendums: Hypotheses

This section identifies several potential factors that could shape support for referendums. It focuses on stable democratic principles, political attitudes, and the prospect of achieving the desired outcomes. Specifically, the following lines present several arguments about how long-term beliefs and short-term factors can influence support: critical views towards representative democracy, the existence of democratic values, trust in political institutions, the idea that citizens have the ability to decide, political interest, and being on the winning side of a recent referendum.

The low capacity of contemporary representative democracies to represent citizens' preferences and needs has resulted in two categories of citizens. On the one hand, there are people motivated to engage in political action beyond voting to alter the status quo of their communities, to invalidate a vote, or to signal their frustration about the overall functioning of democracy (Doorenspleet, 2012; Norris, 2011; Singh, 2017). On the other hand, citizens who are dissatisfied with representative democracy can alienate themselves from the political sphere and renounce involvement in the practices of representative democracy (Doorenspleet, 2012; Kim, 2010; Webb, 2013). Regardless of the category, critical citizens are likely to support referendums as a feasible alternative to the usual decision-making mechanisms of representative democracy. Referendums are efficient processes that can be deployed to shape decisions and provide

people with opportunities to voice their concerns and express their policy preferences without political or institutional intermediaries (Chollet, 2018). Moreover, dissatisfied and critical citizens who tend to alienate themselves from political action could regard referendums as a suitable avenue for political action (Damore et al., 2012; Singh, 2017). In addition, referendums are known for their potential to empower citizens in decision-making, and this could be a way to address the dissatisfied citizens' perception that they are insignificant on the political scene (Chollet, 2018).

Nevertheless, even if referendums are considered alternative models of democracy or decision-making compared to representative democracy, there is broad scholarly agreement that they are often used as practices within the representative systems or as complements to the standard practices instead of replacing them. By allowing citizens to directly express their will on, or preference for, specific policy issues, referendums increase the legitimacy of decisions and reinforce the principle of popular sovereignty (Qvortrup, 2017). Referendums are integrated into representative systems and can help to enhance regime legitimacy (Gherghina, 2017) or to provide direction to elected representatives by specifying and clarifying their mandate (Trueblood, 2024). In doing so, referendums act as effective checks on elected representatives by ensuring that major decisions reflect the public's preferences and not just elite interests. Referendums bring benefits to representation by fostering representative outcomes and reinforcing accountability and responsiveness without supplanting representative structures (Leininger & Heyne, 2017). Together, all these characteristics indicate that referendums are democratic practices. Evidence shows that people who value democratic practices and ideals are likely to support referendums (Rose & Wessels, 2020; Schuck & de Vreese, 2015). Following these lines of argumentation, we expect that:

H1: Dissatisfaction with representative democracy favors support for referendums.

H2: A high level of democratic values favors support for referendums.

Since political parties are key institutions in representative democracy, people's attitudes towards them may stimulate support for referendums. Political parties are usually key actors in organizing referendum campaigns. They play a central role in helping citizens to shape their decisions regarding what stance should be adopted toward the issue covered by the referendum and, through the latter, citizens can reinforce their relationship with the political parties if the information they receive is accurate and trustworthy (de Vreese & Semetko, 2004; Gherghina, 2019; Hollander, 2019). When political parties engage in referendum campaigns, they send signals to their sympathizers and members in particular and also to the wider citizenry that this political action is important (Sottilotto, 2017; Walker, 2003). Recent evidence shows that many countries around the world have implemented referendum campaign finance regulations (Paulissen & Horncastle, 2024) that facilitate the active engagement of political parties. On a more substantive note, political parties offer cues in referendum campaigns that help voters to make decisions, especially when the issues being considered are particularly complex or when voters lack detailed policy knowledge (Hobolt, 2006; LeDuc, 2002).

Although political parties and other institutions of representation (e.g., parliaments, governments) may have a highly important role in referendum initiation, campaigning, and the implementation of referendum results, ordinary citizens are the key decision-makers in referendums as the latter can challenge the traditional role of politicians/representatives in making decisions and bring forth the idea of the people as relevant non-political decision-makers. Evidence from established democracies shows that when people prefer

politicians as decision-makers, they engage actively in forms of political participation that are suitable to representative democracy, like voting. When people prefer citizens as main decision-makers, they are more likely to engage in participatory processes, including referendums (Font et al., 2015; Gherghina & Geissel, 2017, 2019). Similarly, support for referendums could be higher among those who prefer citizens as decision-makers. Following these lines of argumentation, we expect that:

H3: High trust in political parties favors support for referendums.

H4: High preference for citizens as decision-makers favors support for referendums.

People with high political interest are more likely to support referendums for several reasons. They generally seek further information and follow events and current affairs, which enhances their ability and willingness to engage in various forms of political action (Wolfsfeld et al., 2016). Political interest reflects the high value that individuals place on politics, which leads them to consider political participation as worthwhile and to expect positive outcomes from their involvement (Levy & Akiva, 2019). Political interest also enhances the perceived relevance of electoral participation, making turnout more likely (Söderlund et al., 2011). Specifically, people with high political interest have more information about how the political system works—and thus understand that referendums are an avenue they can use to directly influence the decision-making process—and the policies that require change.

Finally, support for referendums may be driven by practical and outcome-oriented considerations. Citizens are more likely to support referendums when the outcome may reflect their preferred policy, or when they see themselves as part of the majority (Werner, 2020). There is a winner effect in referendums, with those on the winning side likely to be more willing to have more referendums, while those who lose referendums often become less supportive (Marien & Kern, 2018). Since people are unlikely to always be part of majorities, this is a short-term effect that is particularly visible in the aftermath of referendums until a new popular vote is called. Consequently, we expect that:

H5: High political interest favors support for referendums.

H6: Being in the majority in a recent referendum favors support for referendums.

3.1. Control Variables

In addition to these main effects, the article tests for several variables that could influence citizens' support for referendums: critical attitudes towards politicians, conflict-averse attitudes, and age, education, and gender. Regarding critical attitudes towards politicians, referendums are practices of direct democracy that bypass political institutions and politicians' debates. As such, those who are critical of politicians, considering them unfit to rule, corrupt, or unresponsive, could be more supportive of referendums (Bessen, 2020). This control variable is a complement to the main effect of the view of citizens as main decision-makers in society (H4). Some referendums are used to decide contentious questions, and their results can divide a society and amplify the disappointment or dissatisfaction of some groups who feel unheard (Bowler & Donovan, 2019). Referendums provide binary choices that limit opportunities for compromise, increasing the risk that minority perspectives—which may be just under 50% of the total voting population—are

ultimately entirely discarded (Bellamy, 2018). As such, referendums are characterized by a certain degree of conflict.

Age could be an important driver for referendum support since younger people favor participatory procedures more than older people do (Dalton et al., 2001; Gherghina & Geissel, 2020). More highly educated individuals could show more support for referendums in the sense that, as in the case of better-informed and politically active citizens, they are more aware of the benefits of these practices and tend to manifest interest in them (Clark, 2016; Dow, 2011). When it comes to gender, there might be no differences between men and women regarding their attitudes towards referendums, at least in theory, since the latter are inclusive and accessible to everybody. However, men are more likely to engage in conventional forms of political participation in comparison to women (Grasso & Smith, 2022).

Other control variables were considered here but were discarded for methodological reasons. For example, efficacy can have an effect on support for referendums (Schuck & de Vreese, 2015), but in the survey, efficacy correlates highly with political interest. Satisfaction with government performance or trust in the parliament/president can also influence referendum support, but in Moldova, all these correlate highly between themselves and with satisfaction with democracy. Political participation could also influence support for referendums (Bolzendahl & Coffé, 2013), but there is limited variation among the Moldovan respondents because very few had attended rallies, demonstrations, or signed petitions.

4. Data and Method

To test these hypotheses, this article uses individual data from a survey conducted in November 2024 on a national representative sample in the Republic of Moldova of 1,031 respondents (all of whom completed their answers) aged 18 or above. The Republic of Moldova is an exemplary case study to explore how support for referendums works in transition countries. This case is analytically relevant because insights gained from it can inform the understanding of referendums in other transitional post-Soviet settings. The Republic of Moldova is illustrative of struggles with democratization and experience with referendums, but at the same time, it provides a deep contextual understanding of recent referendums that can inform us about public support for them. It also allows the exploration of social realities and the interplay of multiple variables in a real-world context.

Regarding its struggles with democratization, Moldova has faced several consistent challenges since its independence following the collapse of the USSR in 1991: weak institutions and rule of law, systemic corruption, national identity issues, sustained oligarchic collusion in which oligarchs funded and controlled the ruling parties, and a precarious location in the international system (Crowther, 2023; Marandici, 2025). There have been two main periods of democratic regress. The first occurred in 2001, when the Party of Communists emerged as the dominant party in the legislature and used quasi-authoritarian practices to remain in power, including political repression and restrictions, civil society intimidation, media censorship, and the curtailment of political and human rights (Knott, 2018; Marandici, 2025). This lasted until 2009, when, after the elections organized in July, the Communists were pushed into opposition by a group of parties forming a pro-European coalition that initiated several important reforms. The second regression occurred between 2014 and 2019 and was characterized by a period of state capture in which oligarchs gained control over state institutions, including the electoral system and the rule of law. This was possible,

among other reasons, due to the wide presence of systemic corruption in the country (Knott, 2018). The situation ended when the legislative elections under a mixed electoral system did not result in a majority favored by the main oligarch, and the directly elected national presidents in 2016 and 2020 publicly opposed the oligarchs (Marandici, 2025). Maia Sandu's election as president in 2020 and the legislative majority gained by her party (Party of Action and Solidarity) marked a visible positive shift in the country's foreign policy towards the EU and the West, proposing several democratic measures and policy changes (Simanschi, 2025).

The Republic of Moldova has experience with referendums at the national level: it has organized five since its independence. The first of those referendums was initiated in 1994 by the country's president, and asked the people if they were in favor of Moldova remaining an independent nation and an indivisible state, with a policy of neutrality. The referendum had a turnout slightly higher than 75% and almost 98% of those who voted supported the president's initiative (Nohlen & Stöver, 2010, p. 1330). The referendum was initiated by the president against a background of discussions about a potential unification of Moldova with Romania. A second referendum was organized in 1999 to ask the population whether it agreed with changing to a presidential system (Armașu, 2022). Similar to the referendum in 1994, this was also consultative, initiated by the country's president, and approved by the population. Despite the result, one year later, the parliament passed several constitutional amendments that reduced the powers of the president and increased those of the parliament, including the election of the country's president by the parliament with a majority of three-fifths of its members (Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, 2025).

In 2010, a referendum was organized to amend the constitution to return to the direct popular election of the country's president. Although a majority of votes supported this initiative, the referendum was rendered invalid due to the low turnout—slightly more than 30% compared to the required 33% for the referendum to be considered valid (Drabczuk, 2018). In 2019, a consultative referendum initiated by the president of one of the governing parties asked the people two questions about parliamentarians: whether their number should be reduced, and whether parliamentarians should be subjected to recall procedures (Gherghina & Tap, 2024). Although the people voted in favor of both proposals, the results were not discussed or subjected to a parliamentary vote. Finally, in 2024, the country's president organized a constitutional referendum proposing to amend the constitution so that it included the Moldovan citizens' wish for EU membership. Following the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova submitted an application for EU membership. The referendum was organized at the same time as the first round of the presidential election and passed with a narrow victory of almost 50.4% (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2024). The country's president, who supported the referendum, had a pro-European agenda and faced a pro-Russian challenger in the second round of the presidential election. This referendum has broader significance than its predecessors for several reasons. First, its narrow outcome indicated the pro-European orientation of a plurality of voters, as was reflected in the results of the 2025 legislative elections. Second, it was organized at the same time as the first round of the presidential elections, which allowed the pro-European incumbent president to build her campaign around the referendum. Third, it has implications for the regional geopolitical context characterized by the Russia–Ukraine war and EU enlargement debates in the area.

The survey used for the analysis followed a quota sampling method representative of the Moldovan population at the national level in terms of gender, education, age, area of residence, and language. All the quotas were relative to the 2024 census. Since the survey was interested in understanding Moldovan citizens' political

behavior, it purposively recruited more people who voted. For example, the referendum turnout was slightly above 50%, while in the survey, roughly 80% of the respondents declared that they had cast a vote. The survey was conducted three weeks after the referendum and presidential election, so that memories about voting preferences would still be fresh. That consideration was essential to minimize memory bias. The questionnaire was bilingual (Romanian and Russian) and the survey data collection included a combination of in-person (30% of the questionnaires), computer-assisted telephone interviewing (50% of the questionnaires), and online (20% of the questionnaires) to reach a variety of target audiences and ensure optimal sample coverage. A pilot study conducted on 50 respondents before fielding the survey did not reveal any problems with the design.

The dependent variable of this study is *support for referendums*, measured as the answer to the question: “Some people believe that referendums are useful for decision-making, while others oppose them. Where would you position yourself on the following scale between 0 (completely against) and 10 (completely in favor) regarding the use of referendums in Moldova?” The answers were recorded on the ordinal 10-point scale indicated in the question wording. The first independent variable is *satisfaction with the functioning of democracy* (H1), which was measured through the answer provided to the question: “On a scale from 0 (not at all) to 10 (very much), how satisfied are you with the functioning of democracy in Moldova?” *Democratic values* (H2) were measured through an index including two variables: opposing the results of elections and universal voting. The respondents answered the following questions: “To what extent do you believe that the results of elections should be respected no matter who won?,” and “To what extent do you believe that the universal vote should be reconsidered in the Republic of Moldova since many voters are uninformed and disinterested?,” with answers on a five-point ordinal scale ranging between *very little* (coded 1) to *very much* (coded 5). The answers to the second question were recoded so that they ranged from nondemocratic to democratic values and we created a cumulative index comprising values between 2 (opposing both the results of elections and the universal vote) and 10 (respecting the results of elections and agreeing with the universal vote).

Trust in political parties (H4) was measured through the answers given to the following straightforward question, which is a local version of those used in many international surveys: “On a scale from 0 (not at all) to 10 (very much), how much trust do you have in the political parties in Moldova?” The preference for *citizens as decision-makers* (H4) was measured via the following question: “In your view, who should take the major decisions that affect the society in the Republic of Moldova?” The available single-choice answers included citizens, politicians, and experts. The answers are coded 1 for citizens and 0 for any of the other two categories of decision-makers. *Interest in politics* (H5) was measured through the answer given to the following question, which was a variation of one posed in many international surveys: “How interested are you in general in the politics of Moldova?” The available answers were recorded on a four-point ordinal scale ranging between *not at all* (1) and *very much* (5). *Belonging to the majority in a recent referendum* (H6) was operationalized through the vote in the 2024 referendum. The available options included “against the EU accession” (coded 0) and “for the EU accession” (coded 1). The latter meant belonging to the majority. Respondents who declared that they had not voted in the referendum were excluded from the analysis (see Appendix 1 in the Supplementary File).

Among the controls, critique against politicians is an additive index (Cronbach's alpha = 0.89) of five items in which the respondents were asked to indicate on a 0 (*not at all*) to 10 (*very much*) scale how well prepared, responsive, oriented towards the general good, close to citizens, and non-corrupt their national politicians are. Low values indicate a critique of them, while high values indicate an appreciation of the politicians.

Conflict-averse attitudes are measured with the help of a vignette giving the respondents a fictional scenario about a work environment, to which most of the respondents could meaningfully relate, as indicated by the pilot conducted before the survey was fielded. The vignette had the following wording:

You get along very well with a colleague at work. Three days ago, your boss gave you a very important task to complete with that colleague within a maximum of a week. If you don't complete it, you will both lose your jobs. For three days, you were the only one working on the task, the colleague did nothing even though you asked him nicely several times to contribute. If you argue with your colleague and tell him in a harsh tone to do his part, it may have an effect. Position yourself on a scale from 0 (which means conflict with your colleague about the task every day until he completes his part) to 10 (avoid conflict with your colleague and do the entire task yourself, including your colleague's part).

Age was measured as an ordinal variable distinguishing between cohorts, from 18–29 years old (1) to over 60 years old (4). Education is an ordinal variable that measures the respondents' highest level of education, using values between primary school (1) and university degree (5). Gender is a dichotomous variable coded 1 for male and 2 for female.

For the statistical analysis, all the variables were standardized by subtracting the mean and dividing by the standard deviation for each value. All “do not know/no answer” options were removed from the analysis. The statistical analysis uses multivariate ordered logistic regression (due to the measurement of the dependent variable) with two models: one with the main effects and another including the controls. The test for multicollinearity shows that the independent variables and controls are not highly correlated: the highest value of the correlation coefficient is 0.30 (between political interest and education) and all the values of the variance inflation factor are lower than 1.80.

5. Analysis and Results

The survey asked the respondents about referendums in Moldova in general. Figure 1 displays high support for referendums, in line with earlier findings about the popularity of this direct democracy practice in new and established democracies (Rose & Wessels, 2020; Schuck & de Vreese, 2015). Two-thirds of the respondents are overall in favor of referendums, i.e., at point 6 or above on the scale. Only a few respondents (roughly 12%) oppose referendums. At the other extreme, slightly more than 40% of respondents are in favor of referendums with no reservations. This distribution is not surprising since the turnout in four out of the five referendums organized to date in Moldova was above the threshold required for validation. This appetite for referendums could also be linked to the fact that all five nationwide referendums in Moldova were organized on salient policy issues such as independence, the system of government, the structure of parliament, and the EU-oriented future of the country.

Figure 2 presents the effects for the two ordinal regression models (the full results are presented in Appendix 2 of the Supplementary File). There is empirical evidence for almost all the hypothesized effects. Higher satisfaction with democracy (H1) increases support for referendums, which goes against the theoretical reasons outlined in the second section of this article. One possible explanation for this positive and strong effect of government satisfaction relates to the backing of the referendums in Moldova in general and of the 2024 referendum in particular by the national presidents and/or the parties in government.

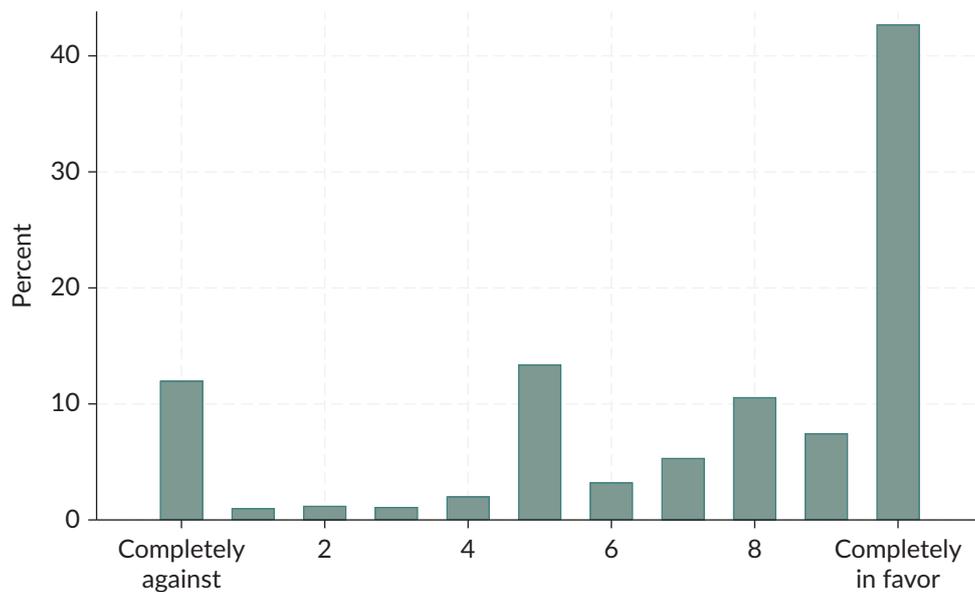


Figure 1. The distribution of support for referendums among the Moldovan respondents.

Policies adopted through referendums can complement the mechanisms of representative democracy; in this case, people may associate the referendums with policies desired by institutions of representation that may not have been adopted in parliament, especially since the main party in government backed the popular initiative. The high correlation between satisfaction with democracy and satisfaction with government performance or trust in the country president (higher than 0.7)—although these two variables were not included in the analysis—reinforces the belief that many respondents associate the democratic process in the country with the office holder. It is quite likely that the presidential election’s proximity to the 2024 referendum played a role in this association.

People with democratic values (H2) and those with high trust in political parties (H3) support the referendums, which strengthens the idea that many Moldovans see the referendums as complementary to representative democracy, with the aim of improving rather than replacing the institutions of representation. The effect of trust in parties is likely linked with the cues that they often provide in referendum campaigns, especially in those on EU-related topics (Gherghina & Tap, 2024; Hobolt, 2006). There is strong empirical evidence for the remaining three hypotheses: people who see citizens as main decision-makers in society (H4), those who have high political interest (H5), and those who belong to the winning side in the most recent referendum (H6) all support referendums considerably more than respondents without these attitudes or characteristics do. Being on the winning side in a highly-disputed referendum like that held on EU accession (2024), which brings change—since it was a constitutional referendum—could enhance people’s idea that they were part of a majority that produces meaningful results with the help of referendums. An argument could be made about the risks of conflating support for referendums in general with support for EU membership or with the political actors supporting the EU membership in this specific referendum in Moldova. This may particularly be the case since the major opposition parties advocated for a boycott of the referendum, mostly because they considered the 2024 referendum to be a strategy used by the ruling party and the incumbent national president, Sandu, to mobilize support. It was partially possible to disentangle referendum boycott strategies as expressions of partisan politics versus principled opposition to referendums by controlling for the political party to which the respondents feel closest. In the specific case of the 2024 referendum, political parties matter because parties

in Europe often develop rhetoric about the EU (Mitru & Tap, 2026). There was an explicit question about party closeness in the questionnaire: the respondents could choose between parties, choose the “other” option and insert the name of the party, or choose the “none” option. The correlation between support for referendums and party closeness to political parties supporting them is moderate (correlation coefficient 0.28), and the variable has very little effect in the multivariate statistical models. This variable is not reported in the analysis because of the large number of missing values (because many people do not feel close to a political party), which would affect the number of respondents in the analysis.

These effects hold when running the regression models with controls. Among the controls, only conflict-averse attitudes have a statistically significant effect on the support for referendums. Some referendums have a divisive component, and the binary choice they offer pushes people into different camps, with the 2024 referendum on EU membership being a good example of this. Nevertheless, the findings show that Moldovans who avoid conflicts are more oriented to support referendums, although the effect size is relatively small. One possible explanation is that people can see referendums as legitimate and peaceful ways to resolve disputes or contentious issues. As has previously been outlined in the literature, referendums can provide a sense of fairness, inclusiveness, and shared decision-making, especially in deeply divided or post-conflict societies, as is the case in Moldova, by allowing various groups in society to have a voice in important decisions (Germann, 2022; McEvoy, 2018).

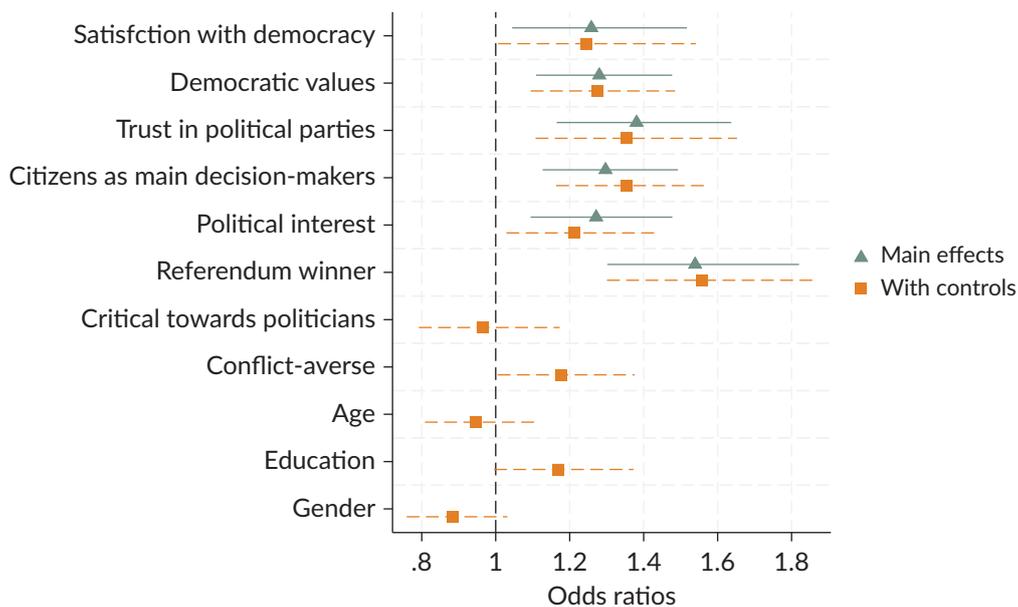


Figure 2. The effects on support for referendums.

There are three main takeaways from these findings. First, the Moldovan people who support referendums have a democratic orientation and a high interest in politics. This contrasts with evidence from an increasingly illiberal regime in Hungary, where the support for referendums is driven by anti-democratic attitudes (Gherghina et al., 2024). In a country like Moldova that has not yet completed its process of democratization, referendums are associated with democracy and seen as a step forward in improving the quality of democracy. Second, the support for referendums is a combination of long-term or more stable political attitudes, such as satisfaction with democracy, democratic values, or political interest, and short-term factors like whether individuals were on the winning side in a referendum and/or were aligned

with the majority opinion. This confirms earlier evidence from democratic regimes (Marien & Kern, 2018; Rojon & Rijken, 2021), by indicating that Moldovans follow a similar attitudinal pattern. Third, support for referendums in Moldova is connected to both politics and society. While in other cases, people who were critical towards representative institutions or politicians favor referendums (Bessen, 2020; Schuck & de Vreese, 2015), the evidence here shows that positive attitudes towards institutions of representative democracy drive support, while criticism of politicians does not play a role. The importance of trust in political parties confirms that these remain highly valuable and unique for the functioning of the political system (Vandamme & Lucardie, 2025), including an influence on people's preferences about referendums. These observations are accompanied by an orientation toward society in which people are considered the main decision-makers and the respondents are conflict-averse.

6. Conclusion

This article has aimed to identify the determinants of referendum support in a transition country. The results indicate that support is rooted both in long-term attitudes and more immediate instrumental considerations. The positive public attitudes towards representative democracy, its institutions, and democratic values are strong explanations for support. Equally important, people in Moldova do not see referendums as a practice solely in the hands of ordinary citizens or as intended to bypass political institutions or politicians. In that sense, the survey respondents take a more integrated view of referendums in a representative system of government than people in several new or established democracies.

The present findings have two broader implications for the empirical discussion about support for referendums, which go beyond the case study examined here. First, views about referendums in transition countries are largely similar to those held in democracies. One important particularity is that people in transition countries may attach greater hopes to referendums as a way to improve what is already going well in democracy in their view. Another particularity is that support for referendums in Moldova is disconnected from critiques against politicians, very likely because people consider that politicians initiate the referendums and will implement their outcomes. Second, the instrumental and contextual factors, such as positive experience with referendums, can shape support, but the long-term attitudes appear to be its foundation. This could be relevant for policy makers such as political parties who could shape people's attitudes through their performance in office, and for civil society or international organizations, which could develop information campaigns about the use of referendums.

One limitation of the study was that the survey was performed so close to the 2024 referendum, so its timing could have augmented the importance of the situational and strategic considerations. The survey was deliberately scheduled at that time to gauge the short-term effects, but some other explanations may have been obscured by such effects. Further research could use a similar questionnaire after a future referendum to check the robustness of these findings or to identify new explanations. For example, the perception of insecurity explains vote choice in referendums elsewhere (Bilbao & Navia, 2025) and may be a relevant driver of preference for referendums in Moldova, especially due to the proximity of the war in Ukraine. Another venue could be the extension of research to other transitional countries that face similar threats from Russia (e.g., Georgia), to observe the role of disinformation and foreign information manipulation and interference in shaping public opinion on referendums. Such a comparative analysis would favor a fine-grained understanding of the process of attitude formation in various political contexts.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available upon request.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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