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# Cleavage Referendums: Ideological Decisions and Transformational Political Change

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EDITORIAL

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# Cleavage Referendums: Ideological Decisions and Transformational Political Change

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## Abstract

Referendum use has been increasing around the world. In some cases, referendum devices are incorporated into the institutional architecture of the state while in many others, referendums are used in an *ad hoc*, and often consultative manner, to determine positions on contentious and divisive political questions. Many of the divisive referendum questions are what we term "cleavage referendums" in this thematic issue. These referendums ask questions that draw from underlying cleavages or fault lines in politics. Voting in these referendums will often exhibit first-order effects, as voters make decisions that align with their fundamental values and beliefs. The articles in this issue make three important contributions to enrich existing work on referendums: The first contribution lies in the development of new conceptual models for analysing referendums, such as new forms of classifying cleavage referendums, presenting a predictive model for the outcomes of referendum votes, and documenting and applying methodological approaches and frameworks that can provide the foundations for further future comparative work. The second contribution builds on the burgeoning literature that sits at the intersection of deliberative and direct democracy. In this sense, the articles interrogate examples of deliberative and participatory innovations in combination with referendum votes, while also examining their further potential, especially in one of the most contentious referendum contexts, secession. Finally, the role of cleavage structures in shaping voter decision-making is explored thoroughly in comparative analyses and single case studies.

## Keywords

cleavage referendums; ideology; political cleavages; referendum campaigns; referendum voting; referendums

## 1. Introduction

Referendums can be viewed through the prism of a hierarchy, some ask voters to decide on minor matters of policy and administrative design while others are deeply consequential and require voters to make decisions on questions of high politics, such as sovereignty and the boundaries of the state, on the nature of citizenship, and on the fundamental values and beliefs which underpin society and politics. These latter referendums share an important unifying feature, they draw from deep ideological divides and can be classified as "cleavage referendums" in the vein of Lipset and Rokkan (1967). Referendums that intersect with political cleavages often define and transform politics for long periods of time, they exhibit first-order effects in voting (Garry et al., 2005; Suiter & Reidy, 2020), and voters make decisions that align with their fundamental values and beliefs. Often, these are the referendum votes that "go global": Brexit in the UK, independence votes in Scotland, Quebec, and Catalonia, and votes on issues like migration, abortion, divorce, and same-sex marriage in Poland, Ireland, and Australia.

Political science has developed several "grand theories" of voting at elections and these have been used to great effect to build a global base of understanding of why people vote, who they vote for, and for what reasons. One of the challenges that besets the study of voting at referendums is that there is a more modest conceptual toolkit available to underpin comparative research but we could also make greater use of the central concepts of political behaviour to form more integrated strands of research on the conduct of, and voting at, different types of referendums. This editorial makes the argument that cleavage dynamics manifest in many of the most consequential referendums that take place within states and using this lens to approach the study of referendums allows us to expand the explanatory power of our research, building connections and identifying differences across time and cases. Cleavage structures provide the predictable bedrock of voters in many referendums and oftentimes we do not pay enough attention to this in our voting models.

The argument in this editorial builds from, and isolates, a central element of LeDuc's (2002) model on the determinants of stability and change in referendum voting. Social cleavages, ideology, and core beliefs, overlapping and interconnected concepts, were identified by LeDuc as the core features that should lead to stability in voting patterns at referendums. It is this corner of his referendum classification system that is the focus of this thematic issue.

The literature on the declining relevance of cleavages to election outcomes is well-developed and does not need to be traversed here. In many respects, some referendums draw in much more direct ways from cleavages than elections ever did. Referendums ask a single question that often explicitly arises from a major political fault line or cleavage. Elections in the 21st century rarely draw exclusively from a single contested political space even taking account of expanded social divisions and "new cleavages" (Kriesi, 1998). This thematic issue presents a collection of articles that seek to unpack many of the dynamics that are particular to cleavage referendums rooted in the deep value and belief divisions in a polity.

## 2. This Thematic Issue

### *2.1. Grand Theories*

Quinlan et al. (2025) provide the first article in the collection and the research is notable in two important respects: First, the authors take up the challenge of expanding the conceptual toolbox of referendum research to facilitate more robust cross-national and longitudinal analysis of referendum outcomes. Their referendum forecasting model includes historical, institutional, and economic factors to predict referendum outcomes. Secondly, the research is valuable because the forecasting model works! It has strong predictive power, and as the authors argue, rivals opinion polls in its ability to predict referendum outcomes. This finding is especially important as the model was tested on 42 constitutional referendums in Ireland, which covered a wide variety of topics and was not confined to cleavage referendums alone which, as some of the later articles in this issue argue, are among the more predictable in terms of referendum outcomes.

### *2.2. The Deliberative Turn*

Turning to the second strand of research in this issue, it is widely acknowledged that the connection of direct and deliberative democratic traditions has immense potential to enhance citizen voice in politics (Reidy & Suiter, 2023). This point is picked up in several articles which advance the argument that the deliberative turn is especially relevant for cleavage referendums. These types of referendums frequently address fraught and intensely contested matters of politics, culture, and society and, as Levy (2025) argues, deliberative innovations have considerable potential to moderate the intensity of the contestation.

Secession referendums are perhaps the most typical example of cleavage referendums drawing as they do from beliefs about state sovereignty and the boundaries of the state. Levy (2025) begins by asking the most fundamental question: When should secession referendums be triggered? The author argues that the answer lies not in legal theories of "primary right" and "remedial right" but in the burgeoning potential of deliberative approaches to political decision-making. Levy interrogates roles for mini-publics, deliberative negotiation, and ultimately deliberative referendums to deliver more thoughtful and inclusive mechanisms for making secession decisions.

Paredes et al. (2025) ask the question: What is the best procedural combination to take when approaching constitutional change? The article directly compares the routes to, and the conduct of, referendums in Chile and Ireland. In the Chilean case, participatory tools were connected with constitutional referendums while the Irish case involved the integration of citizens assemblies into the early stages of discussions on whether a referendum should be triggered. Using a three-part analytical framework, the article concludes that successful procedural combinations must create deliberative space which enhances the potential for consensus decision-making and mitigates against elite polarisation. It also argues that one of the critical advantages of a deliberative assembly lies in its generation of topic resources that reflect the different strands of the arguments on the issue and the views of citizens representing the public. Although the article does also acknowledge that in the Irish case, some recent referendums have been unsuccessful so the deliberative turn is a work in progress.

### 2.3. Explaining Voter Decision-Making

How cleavages underpin voting behaviour is a theme in four of the articles. Secession is again to the fore in Rivera Otero et al.'s (2025) examination of the role of emotions in shaping voter decision-making at the controversial 2017 referendum on Catalan independence. The authors persuasively connect the underpinning nationalist cleavage structure of the referendum to distinct emotional profiles among pro-secession and anti-secession voters. Those who favoured Catalan independence were motivated by pride and hope in the political leaders on their side, while anti-secession voters expressed anger, concern, fear, and anxiety towards those leaders. Importantly, emotion was a more significant factor in shaping decisions on the pro-Catalan independence side.

Referendums on abortion, same-sex marriage, and other issues that draw from deeply held values and belief systems have become more common in recent decades. Most particularly, some populist nationalist leaders have sought to use these types of referendums to mobilise conservative voter groups. Musiał-Karg and Casal Bértoa (2025) explore elements of this specific dynamic using the case of the 2023 referendums on sovereignty, retirement, and migration in Poland. They present "populist polarizing referendums" as a new referendum type and one that sits at the intersection of cleavages, populism, and partisanship. Their argument is convincing. They demonstrate that the Polish government sought to use the 2023 referendums to polarize public opinion by holding referendums on emotive issues that connected into deep political cleavages which intersected in important ways with the dynamics of party competition. While this strategy had been successfully deployed by other populist regimes, notably Hungary, they further demonstrate that strategic positioning by opposition parties and depoliticization delivered an important defeat for the government. Ultimately, they conclude that it is not a given that referendums that draw from cleavages are guaranteed to polarise and divide.

Using valuable cross-national data, Hutter (2025) also argues that referendums do not always drive cultural conflict and lead to more polarised or identity-focused debates. The author demonstrates that referendums expand actor participation in debates on major issues and that they also serve to increase the salience of the issue being decided. The article also makes an important methodological contribution in that it has a comparative focus on European integration referendums and, in its use of "text as data" techniques, provides a model for future cross-national analyses.

Cunningham et al. (2025) delve also into referendums on moral and social issues in their examination of the Irish abortion referendum in 2018. This referendum has been much discussed in the literature as an early example of the success of the deliberative turn in referendums (Elkink et al., 2020) but, in this instance, the authors temper the potential deliberative claims as they demonstrate that the outcome reflected the longer-term inversion of the conservative–liberal cleavage in Ireland. The referendum campaign was important in that it mobilised voters to cast their ballots, but opinion formation was rooted in the underpinning cleavage structure and there was limited evidence of opinion change during the referendum campaign or even in the long lead into the referendum decision.

The 2018 Irish abortion referendum runs in a somewhat contrary direction to the global trend, in that the outcome of the referendum was a major liberalisation of abortion provision on the back of a large majority and a comparatively high turnout of voters. The importance of religious and other value cleavages lies also at

the core of Morales and Pérez-Cosgaya's (2025) examination of the 2022 constitutional referendums in Chile. They demonstrated that the "reject" decision was substantially rooted in the socio-structural and socio-political cleavages which define Chilean politics. In particular, they point to the salience of abortion for Evangelical voters. The insertion of a liberal clause on abortion in the proposed new constitution was an important mobilising factor against the constitutional draft for the comparatively large cohort of religious voters in Chile.

Finally, given that the EU has been a central driver of referendums in Europe for many years, it is unsurprising that EU integration referendums feature in several of the articles in this thematic issue. Paulissen et al. (2025) take up the question of how a referendum on a cleavage-related topic can affect the definition of that cleavage within a polity. Using a case study of the 2022 Danish defence referendum, the authors provide decisive empirical evidence that the pro-side sought to depoliticise the European integration cleavage aspect of the Danish defence opt-out during the campaign. Undoubtedly, heavily influenced by the Russian war in Ukraine, campaigners were able to mobilise majority support in favour of the abolition of the opt-out, in an outcome that ran contrary to the longstanding trajectory of that political fault line. The article is also notable for its important methodological contribution and use of social media advertising data to look inside the black box of digital campaigning and its connection to referendum outcomes.

## 3. Conclusions

The articles in this collection have contributed to three important threads of referendum research: First, in the development of new theories which can be used further in comparative and longitudinal analyses. Second, by exploring the growing combination of deliberative institutions with referendums, especially on cleavage style issues. And, third, by exploring how cleavages shape voter decision-making. In some respects, this thematic issue has demonstrated that cleavages retain potentially greater explanatory power at referendums than they do at first-order elections. Finally, although cleavage referendums are infrequent, when they are held, they can have system-defining impacts.

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## Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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ARTICLE

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# Forecasting Referendums: A Structural Model Predicting Adoption and Support in Irish Plebiscites 1968–2024

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## Abstract

Election prediction flourishes among pollsters, the media, academics, and political anoraks, with four significant prognostic paradigms: opinion polls, markets, structural models, and hybrid approaches. Structural models, inspired by political science theory and based on so-called "fundamental" indicators, have a long pedigree in predicting government performance in elections cross-nationally. Despite their prevalence and prowess in forecasting contests for government, these structural models have not been applied to predict referendums, where the prognosis game, as far as it exists, primarily relies on polls. Perhaps this is unsurprising given that plebiscites can be especially hard to forecast given that citizens often vote on complex subjects not always salient in public discourse, partisan cues are sometimes lacking, and late opinion shifts are arguably more common than in elections. In this contribution, we break new ground by fusing two strands of political science literature—election forecasting and referendums—and devise a prediction model of plebiscites based on economic, institutional, and historical variables, thereby providing the first structural forecasting model to account for referendum adoption and support levels. We apply this model ex-post to 42 national referendums in Ireland between 1968 and 2024 to test its applicability ex-ante. In Europe, Ireland stands third only to Switzerland and Italy as polities that regularly employ referendums to decide public policy issues. With reasonable lead time, ex-post estimates of our model offer solid predictions of the referendums' outcome, with out-of-sample estimates calling the outcome correctly 68%–79% of the time, a remarkable feat given that the issues up for decision are varied. Moreover, we demonstrate that our model's predictions are competitive with opinion poll estimates of these contests, illustrating that while our model is not a panacea, it provides a reasonable starting point for predicting the outcomes of referendums in Ireland and, importantly, plants a vital seed for future work on forecasting plebiscites using model approaches.

**Keywords**
forecasting; Ireland; referendums; structural models

## 1. The Research Problem

As Qvortrup (2017, p. 7) puts it "one is tempted to say that we live in the age of referendums." The use of the plebiscite as a tool to determine public policy is on the rise cross-nationally, even featuring in many representative democracies where public policy conventionally delegates this task to elected parliamentary representatives (Bjørklund, 2009; LeDuc, 2002b). Much ink has been spilled on typologizing these referendums (e.g., Carboni, 2018; Qvortrup, 2013; Silagadze & Gherghina, 2020). Research on what motivates voters in these contests flourishes, from attitudes toward and longevity of the incumbent government (e.g., Franklin, 2002; Franklin, Marsh, & McLaren, 1994; Garry et al., 2005; Qvortrup, 2016), economic conditions at the time of the vote (e.g., Bornstein & Thalmann, 2008; Elkink et al., 2019; Hobolt & Leblond, 2009), utilitarian economic benefits (e.g., Gabel, 1998; Hobolt & de Vries, 2016; Nadeau et al., 1999), voter approaches to the policy issue people are voting on (Blondel et al., 1998; Svensson, 2002), supposed connected perspectives on issues like globalization and migration (Clarke et al., 2017), knowledge among voters of the plebiscite issue (e.g., Elkink & Sinnott, 2015; Hobolt, 2005), where political elites stand (e.g., Darcy & Laver, 1990; Quinlan, 2012; Silagadze & Gherghina, 2018) to the campaign dynamics that take root (de Vreese, 2004; Pammett & LeDuc, 2001; Suiter & Reidy, 2015).

Our article on plebiscites takes a different and novel direction by investigating whether referendum outcomes can be forecast *before* they occur, fusing literature on referendums and election forecasting. An extended academic literature exists on election prediction (for overviews, see M. S. Lewis-Beck, 2005; M. S. Lewis-Beck & Tien, 2016), and four broad election forecasting paradigms can be identified. The first is market investor sentiment in the form of stock buying or betting on outcomes with turf accountants—known as market approaches. Within the market-based approach, there are two subfields. Stock-based market forecasting operates like financial markets where participants buy and sell shares in an electoral outcome, with the share price determined by the market's consensus on the probability of that electoral outcome coming to pass. The Iowa Electronic Market, devised by academics in 1988 to study trading markets, is the most renowned election forecasting market (for an overview, see Gomme, 2003; and more recently, Berg et al., 2023; Gruca & Rietz, in press). Predictions with a turf accountant operate differently as they are conventionally associated with entertainment, while betting is more often associated with sporting events. Participants interact with a bookmaker, who sets odds informed by public sentiment and expert judgments of the bookmaker. Odds offered by the bookmaker on the electoral outcome conventionally balance bookmaker risk and sentiment about the outcome and may not always reflect the most likely outcome. Moreover, participants' influence on the odds can be mixed and usually only occurs if the bets significantly alter the bookmaker's risk exposure. Some literature explores this in Britain and Ireland, where political betting is plentiful (e.g., Gallagher, 2008; Rosenbaum, 1999). The second broad approach to forecasting is opinion polls, which are the most renowned. It has three subbranches. The first is likely the most well-known method. It involves asking a supposedly representative sample of voters how they intend to vote, which serves as the prediction (e.g., Fisher et al., 2011; Traugott, 2014). The second is an aggregation of the vote intentions from various polls, with the averages then used to predict the election (FiveThirtyEight, n.d.; Pasek, 2015). The third subbranch is inspired by the wisdom of the crowds, where

opinion poll respondents are not asked how they intend to behave but who they think will win. These citizen forecasting forays have been shown to have predictive capacity (e.g., M. S. Lewis-Beck & Skalaban, 1989; Murr, 2016). The third forecasting paradigm bases itself on political science theory and is applied primarily by academics. Sometimes called the structural approach, it relies on so-called political fundamentals. Here, political, historical, and economic indicators are fused into a regression equation and then used to forecast the outcome. There is a strong pedigree of literature that shows that these forays have power, especially in predicting the fate of incumbent governments in elections cross-nationally (e.g., Abramowitz, 2020; Bellucci, 2010; Dassonneville et al., 2017; M. S. Lewis-Beck & Tien, 2004, 2012; Nadeau & Lewis-Beck, 2020; Quinlan & Lewis-Beck, 2021). The final paradigm fuses elements of the three described approaches and is known as a hybrid model (see M. S. Lewis-Beck & Dassonneville, 2015a, 2015b).

Our contribution is in the vein of the political science modeling tradition as we posit that, known in advance, structural factors can help us predict referendums. We focus on forecasting referendums in Ireland, an ideal test case as besides Switzerland and Italy, Ireland stands out as having had the most national referendums of any advanced democracy, mainly because any change to the Irish Constitution, *Bunreacht na hÉireann*, requires a plebiscite of citizens. Ireland has also held more EU referendums than any other member state, as it is a political imperative, if not a constitutional necessity, to hold a referendum on matters related to EU integration (Sinnott, 2005). Moreover, Ireland shares many of the hallmarks of other advanced democracies—a multi-party parliamentary system, coalition governments the norm, and increasing electoral volatility—making it a familiar case. It also has a burgeoning literature on election forecasting (e.g., Quinlan & Lewis-Beck, 2021, 2024).

Opinion polls have been used almost exclusively to predict the outcome of referendums. However, given that the lead-in time for these estimates frequently comes very close to the referendum, the predictions are arguably too late, perhaps even bordering on the trivial (see M. S. Lewis-Beck, 2005 for a broader discussion of lead time). Moreover, the forecasting prowess of opinion polls, at least in Ireland, is questionable. Take the two most recent referendums in spring 2024, where opinion polls a week out from polling day predicted both the Family and Care referendums would be endorsed by the voters (Leahy, 2024; Thomas, 2024), but both were overwhelmingly defeated in the most significant rejections of any plebiscite proposals in Irish history. Thus, our goal is to offer an alternative means of prognostication without recourse to opinion polls and, ideally, an approach that can compete with polling forecasts in accuracy and lead time.

Beyond nourishing the gut desire to know something in advance and break new ground in the systematic study of referendums, there are other reasons for forecasting voting in referendums. For one reason, predictions can signal to political actors how to shape their campaign messages and where to allocate their resources (M. S. Lewis-Beck, 2005; Linzer, 2014). For another reason, predictions generate much media copy, which can be crucial in referendums since sometimes media coverage can be lackluster. Additionally, forecasts based on transparent methods and theory make it more challenging for political actors to mislead the public about the potential outcome. Academically, these contests offer a valuable tool for testing assumptions about voter behavior in political science. Overall, forecasting referendums can advance our understanding of political dynamics and, more generally, our sense of politics (although for a skeptical view of election forecasting in academia, see van der Eijk, 2005).

We recognize that formulating a prediction model for referendums is a challenging task. Elections often fall into the category of plebiscites on the incumbent government, where voters play the vengeful gods, rewarding or

punishing governments based on their office records (Key, 1966). Referendums, conversely, are theoretically, at least, on issues and not on actors per se (although see research highlighting the role of the incumbent government in shaping referendum outcomes—e.g., Franklin, 2002; Franklin, Marsh, & McLaren, 1994; Franklin et al., 1995; Quinlan, 2012). Moreover, voters are often confronted with unfamiliar partisan configurations in referendums. Take the 2009 Lisbon Treaty referendum in Ireland, where traditional political opponents Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael were on the same side, arguing for ratification of the Treaty. Such unfamiliar terrain can lessen the heuristic pull of partisan cues, complicating theoretical assumptions (Quinlan, 2009). Additionally, not all the issues subject to plebiscite are salient in politics, meaning voters do not necessarily have ready-made views on the topic, for example, the 1996 referendum in Ireland on the country's bail laws. This particular issue was not divisive, and there was no significant opposition from any major political players, nor was the topic a central preoccupation of voters. Little wonder that only 29.3% of eligible voters cast a ballot in the referendum.

Another complication for our task is there are two aspects to referendum forecasting: foreseeing the winner/loser of the contest and, more challenging, calling the percentage of the vote either side will obtain. The base criterion for a forecast is that a model will correctly call the winner of the referendum and that the approach will, on average, perform better than a 50:50 coin toss (i.e., a guess). For the above reasons, estimating the percentage share of the vote each side will obtain is anticipated to be more complex. Thus, we acknowledge that the point estimates for the extent of support for a proposal will likely be subject to greater error. In sum, we recognize that a structural forecast of referendums is likely to have less precision than such predictions of government or party performance due to the issue-specific nature of plebiscites, the diverse cross-cutting coalitions in support or against the proposal, the arguably more significant potential for campaign effects to take hold and thus "late swings," and the fact that voters are often confronted with voting on issues that are complex, and/or have little salience. Therefore, our goal with this article is undeniably ambitious and requires grappling with intricate and unpredictable dynamics. Yet, precisely the complexity and challenge of this endeavor make it worthwhile.

As we shall demonstrate, our forecasting model offers credible and competitive ex-post estimates about how key Irish referendums between 1968 and 2024 turn out, with out-of-sample tests showing the model calls the referendum winner between 68–79% of the time. The model's parsimony, replicability, and good lead-in time are all pluses (M. S. Lewis-Beck, 2005). We demonstrate that the model is competitive with opinion poll forecasts of the referendum outcome as far as possible, illustrating that it has some value. While not a panacea, the prediction model advanced in this contribution does have value in predicting the outcomes of referendums in Ireland. Furthermore, it plants a seed for further research.

## 2. Theory

Our model has its foundations in literature from election forecasting and research on referendums. From this, we devised a political history and economy-inspired model. We draw on four broad features of the Irish case to devise a forecasting model: economic conditions leading up to the referendum, support for the incumbent government, campaign dynamics, and Ireland's political history.

A political economy perspective has traditionally inspired model forecasts of elections. It has been argued that elections represent a referendum on the incumbent administration's handling of the economy and other issues. Thus, the Iowa model of election forecasts was born based on the premise that prior aggregate

assessments of the economy and government popularity would go a long way to predicting how governments would perform in a forthcoming election (M. S. Lewis-Beck et al., 2008). Indeed, the Iowa model, with some local tweaks, has been plentiful in the US forecasting scene and has also proved fruitful in offering prognoses on how incumbent governments will fare in elections elsewhere (e.g., Bellucci, 2010; Dassonneville et al., 2017; M. S. Lewis-Beck, 1995; Nadeau & Lewis-Beck, 2020; Quinlan & Lewis-Beck, 2021). Economic conditions and voters' economic perceptions have been shown to correlate with referendum outcomes too (Clarke et al., 2004; Nadeau et al., 1999), especially notable in EU referendums (Aylott, 2005; Clarke et al., 2017; Jupille & Leblang, 2007; Tverdova & Anderson, 2004). Previous research has established that economic growth is among the most potent economic variables in explaining government election performance (Duch & Stevenson, 2008; M. S. Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier, 2000). Hence, our starting point is to suppose economic conditions at the time will correlate with referendum support.

The lockstep theory of referendums posits that the outcomes of the contest align with the electoral cycle and context of a polity. Central to this view is that voters in referendums are not solely motivated by the issue but can use these ballots to express satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the incumbent government. This second-order framework, inspired by work from European Parliament elections (Reif & Schmitt, 1980), suggests that attitudes to the incumbent government influence the vote. There is an ongoing debate, especially in European referendums, as to how government popularity influences referendum outcomes (Franklin, Marsh, & Wlezien, 1994; Garry et al., 2005; Quinlan, 2012; Svensson, 2002). Focusing on government support is also a central tenet in election forecasting models, with countless models exploring government popularity in the run-up to an election or from the previous contest to foretell the results of the next. Evidence exists that government support in the last general election correlates with referendum support (Altman, 2002; Silagadze & Gherghina, 2018), partly driven by partisan loyalties, enhancing our supposition. Consequently, we suppose the more support the main party of government won in the previous general election, the more potential for a heuristic cue from the government, which in Ireland usually supports the referendum proposal. Ireland's largest party in government has chiefly provided the prime minister (*Taoiseach*) and is the most visible actor within the government, making it the primary focus of public opinion. We know the main government party tends to gain more blame (or credit) in elections (Plescia & Kritzinger, 2017). Additionally, the largest party tends to have a more significant say in setting the course of government policy. Using the largest government party's support as a variable allows for more parsimony, avoiding unnecessary noise from coalition partners.

A plethora of literature shows that referendum campaign dynamics have a solid role in shaping the outcome of plebiscites (e.g., LeDuc, 2002a; Quinlan, 2012; Sciarini & Tresche, 2011; Silagadze & Gherghina, 2018). A prediction model may need to account for the campaign. We identify two relevant potential dynamics. The first feature concerns the type of referendum proposal. We argue that referendums that impact the way democracy operates and involve potential changes to the rules of the game stand out, as these contests impact the architecture of political institutions or the rules by which power is distributed and exercised. Plebiscites proposing significant changes to the game's rules may run into *the status quo* dynamic. Advanced democracies are known for conventionally having (and arguably promoting) institutional steadiness. Consequently, voters can be cautious about changing long-standing conventions because they fear the loss of familiarity or worry about unintended consequences. Alongside, building a consensus on these kinds of changes is challenging. Few wonder why these contests frequently engender polarization. Take the example of changing the electoral system in Britain in 2011, where the Conservatives, in government with the Liberal

Democrats, put the electoral reform issue to the public. They campaigned against a switch to the alternative vote from the first-past-the-post system, partly for fear it would electorally disadvantage them, in opposition to their Liberal coalition colleagues, with the proposal unsurprisingly going down to defeat. Moreover, game rule changes often involve technical details and complexity. This requires significant engagement from citizens to understand the proposal, which is not always forthcoming. Recall the adage: "If you don't know, vote no." In sum, we anticipate that support for referendum proposals involving fundamentally amending the structure or mechanisms of democratic decision-making or the eligibility conditions for participation within the electoral process will be less likely to be supported, ceteris paribus.

The second campaign feature of relevance is the extent of support for the proposal in the political system. In a recent comparative analysis of plebiscites, Silagadze and Gherghina (2018, p. 905) identified that "referendums proposed by a large parliamentary majority" will likely prevail, while an earlier study (Williams & Hume, 2010, p. 244) concluded that "bipartisan support has proven to be essential to referendum success. Referendums need support from all the major parties." The mechanisms driving this association are threefold. First, in these circumstances, a broad swathe of political actors in favor of the proposal signals to the electorate that the issue is less divisive, at least in regular political competition, thus potentially reducing the likelihood of a divisive campaign. Second, heuristic cues from political actors to voters are potentially more robust as the electorate faces a more united message. Further, strong parliamentary support for the proposal suggests implicitly that the proposal resonates with a broad slice of the electorate. Third, the more political actors support a proposal, the more resources are available, meaning a more robust campaign. Consequently, we assume that the more parliamentary support for a proposal, the more public support there will be. However, from a forecasting perspective, we must proceed with caution. A sine qua non in the forecasting literature is that referendums are predicted in advance to avoid charges of triviality. Predicting ex post is a contradiction in terms. But showing that results are capable of being predicted requires us to use older data. In any case, a balance needs to be struck. Conventionally, the position of actors in a referendum campaign is certainly evident by the campaign's outset, meaning a forecast incorporating this variable is possible at least four weeks in advance. Even more, bipartisanship often becomes clearer earlier, meaning an estimate may be possible earlier than the four-week expectation.

The final two features of our forecasting model are inspired by political history. Using political history as a foundation for election forecasting is a growing enterprise (e.g., M. S. Lewis-Beck & Quinlan, 2024; Quinlan & Lewis-Beck, 2024). The inspiration for this model is that events and patterns can recur—as ABBA (1974) said, "The history book on the shelf is always repeating itself." Structural patterns lock in certain types of repetitive behavior. Alternatively, game-changing events or unique occurrences can impact things, sometimes long-term or sometimes temporarily. Incorporating these aspects in a model is crucial as it acknowledges the contextual realities and real-world phenomena, but it also helps us avoid biased estimates and systemic prediction errors.

The 1998 referendum on the Good Friday Agreement in Ireland stands out from all other referendums held. It involved changing Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution to lift the Republic's long-standing claim on Northern Ireland and to acknowledge the new political beginning the Agreement would bring. The referendum stands out on many aspects. Principally, it addressed a quarter of a century of conflict arising from The Troubles in Northern Ireland. Thus, it was centrally about reconciliation and peace (McGarry & O'Leary, 2004; Mitchell, 1999). Little wonder there was no significant opposition in the Republic to the referendum. Another reason this referendum stood out was that the plebiscite's success was linked to a referendum on the Agreement in

Northern Ireland, which was held on the same day (Coakley, 2002). The vote was also a unique redefinition of Irish identity with a new political dispensation (Laffan, 1998). In sum, we classify this referendum as a unique event about a particular subject, and we incorporate this into our model.

The 1970s in Ireland could be described as a watershed decade, permeated by the profound impact of The Troubles in Northern Ireland and the beginning of economic and social modernization, predominantly driven by Ireland's entry into the EU (e.g., Garvin, 2004; Lee, 1989). The country experienced notable population growth, reversing decades of emigration, and increased urbanization. The impact of the Church, while remaining prominent, did begin to wane (Ferriter, 2005; Inglis, 1998). Unlike later decades, the political landscape in the 1970s featured strong cross-party support for referendum issues, with these topics, besides arguably entry into the EU in 1972, having substantially greater consensus than issues that permeated plebiscites in other decades. With these contextual features and the issues on the agenda, we anticipate that referendums held in the 1970s are exceptional regarding the consensus among elites about the topics on the ballot and the fact that the country was starting to embrace modernization, increasing the likelihood of openness to constitutional change. Consequently, we anticipate that referendums held in this decade will, on average, have a higher vote share in favor of the proposal.

In sum, our model to forecast the referendum outcome and the share of the Yes support takes the form of:

$$\begin{aligned}\text{Referendum Outcome} = {} & \beta_0 + \beta_1 \times \text{GDP Growth}_{t-6} + \beta_2 \times \text{Main Governing Party Support} \\ & + \beta_3 \times \text{Electoral Reform Referendum} + \beta_4 \times \text{Bipartisan Support for Referendum} \\ & + \beta_5 \times \text{Good Friday Agreement} + \beta_6 \times \text{Referendum 1970s} + \text{Error}.\end{aligned}$$

## 3. Research Strategy

We have compiled data for 42 plebiscites in Ireland between 1968 and 2024. Our data come from the Department of Environment in Ireland (the organizers of these elections). We focus on the Yes share of the vote as, historically, more plebiscites have been passed (31, ~74%) than rejected in Ireland.

We use ordinary least squares (OLS) regression, with our dependent variable being the proportion of voters voting to adopt a constitutional change. In measuring our six independent variables, we follow the forecasting principle that variables must be measured in advance (ex-ante). We codify our five independent variables as follows. Concerning the economy, the leading measure has become economic growth. We measure this using the standard quarterly GDP growth, which we measure two quarters before the referendum. These data are sourced from the World Bank. We measure support for the main governing party in the previous general election by codifying the party with the largest share of cabinet portfolios and taking the first preference vote share in the last referendum. In contrast, bipartisanship is codified as a dichotomy, coded 1 if at least one party in the parliament besides parties serving in government support the proposal, and 0 in all other cases. We classify referendum topics by dichotomizing referendums focused on significant changes to the rules of the electoral game as 1 and all other plebiscites as 0. To classify the exceptional nature of the Good Friday Agreement 1998 referendum and polls held in the 1970s, we codify these contests as applicable as 1, and all others as 0. In Appendixes A–C in the Supplementary File, we provide summary data, variable classifications, and ancillary analyses.

Before advancing to the results, we highlight three robustness checks. First, using Cook's distance, we tested whether any observations were especially influential in our analysis. Naturally, the Good Friday Agreement referendum in 1998 was discovered to be highly influential, and we have included a model (see Table C2, Appendix C, Supplementary File) without this observation. Our results broadly remain in line with what is reported in the results. We also identified four other observations exceeding the threshold values and devised a model excluding these operations (see Table C3, Appendix C, Supplementary File). Their removal did not significantly impact the results reported, although there is an improvement in the root mean square error (RMSE) to 11.0. Second, we tested whether inflation captured by the Consumer Price Index at T−6 months from the referendum correlates with referendum outcomes and improves the model. As Table C4 (Appendix C, Supplementary File) shows, this substitution does not improve the model performance. Third, some might consider that EU referendums are different given their internationalized dimension and that Ireland has been among the most supportive of EU membership and integration for much of the country's membership of the EU. To test this, we included a dichotomous variable in our models capturing EU referendums (see Table C5, Appendix C, Supplementary File). We discovered that EU referendums do not stand out in any meaningful way.

## 4. Model

### *4.1. Within-Sample Analysis*

In Table 1, our slope estimates broadly align with theoretical expectations. GDP growth two quarters before the referendum positively relates to the Yes vote in referendums. For every one percentage point of economic growth, the Yes side in the referendum can expect to win 2.9 points more ceteris paribus. The referendum issue at hand also matters, with referendums on electoral reform, as anticipated, on average, resulting in a lower Yes vote share, speaking to the challenge of changing electoral or institutional parameters. Bipartisan support for a referendum proposal increases the Yes vote share on average, although the variable only reaches statistical significance at $p < 0.1$. The stronger the performance of the main governing party in the previous general election, the higher the Yes vote share, although this variable only attains statistically significant at the 0.1 level. As expected, referendums in the 1970s and the Good Friday Agreement plebiscite ceteris paribus both see a higher Yes vote share.

M. S. Lewis-Beck (2005) outlined four criteria for classifying a model's prediction capacity: parsimony, replication, lead time, and accuracy. In the first two, our model cuts muster—it has six variables and is easily replicable, all based on publicly available data that are readily calculable. As we previously alluded to, the lead time for a referendum forecast may be less than a conventional general election due to campaign dynamics not becoming apparent until closer to the contest. Yet, our model can be estimated once partisan configurations for the campaign become clear. All other variables are known even earlier.

The *Shangri-La* of forecasting is accuracy. There are several means of investigating this. First, the model's fit to the data. It is reasonable—an adjusted $R^2$ of 0.56, meaning over half the variance is accounted for. But notably, the fit is much less than we would expect in a conventional election forecast model, highlighting the challenge of forecasting referendums we alluded to earlier. Second, we examine the within-sample mean absolute error (MAE), which treats all errors equally and provides a yardstick of the conventional prognostication error. It comes in at 8.9. Third, the RMSE is a stricter test of average error as it gives more weight to more significant errors from the model. Unsurprisingly, it is greater than the within-sample MAE

**Table 1.** Political-economy model: OLS regression models exploring the percentage share of the Yes vote in Irish referendums 1968–2024.

| | Unstandardized coefficients $\beta$ | S/e |
|---|---|---|
| GDP growth $^{t\text{-}6\ months}$ | 2.896** | (1.051) |
| Referendum issue: Electoral reform | −18.961** | (5.924) |
| Bi-partisan support for a referendum | 9.584$^{+}$ | (4.890) |
| Main governing party performance in prev. general election | 0.633$^{+}$ | (0.330) |
| Referendum issue: Good Friday Agreement | 27.002* | (12.757) |
| Decade: 1970s | 21.259** | (7.878) |
| Constant | 28.005$^{+}$ | (13.925) |
| Model summary | | |
| *N* referendums | 42 | |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | 0.56 | |
| Durbin-Watson statistic | 2.37 | |
| RMSE | 12.2 | |
| Within-sample diagnostics | | |
| $\overline{x}$ MAE | 8.9 | |
| Median $\overline{x}$ MAE | 8.1 | |
| Largest absolute prediction error (% share Yes vote) | 22.9 | |
| Correctly calls referendum outcome | 86% | |
| Out-of-sample diagnostics: Jackknife | | |
| $\overline{x}$ MAE | 9.4 | |
| Largest $\overline{x}$ MAE | 10.0 | |
| Largest absolute prediction error (% share Yes vote) | 24.2 | |
| Correctly calls referendum outcome | 79% | |
| Out-of-sample diagnostics: One step ahead | | |
| $\overline{x}$ MAE | 11.1 | |
| Largest $\overline{x}$ MAE | 14.3 | |
| Largest absolute prediction error (% share Yes vote) | 57.6 | |
| Correctly calls referendum outcome | 68% | |

Notes: $^{+} = p < 0.1$; $^{*} = p < 0.05$; $^{**} = p < 0.01$; $^{***} = p < 0.001$; MAE = mean absolute error; RMSE is also called standard error of estimate (SEE); the Durbin-Watson statistic is a measure of autocorrelation in the time-series data.

at 12.1, again much higher than conventional election forecasting models. On average, we can expect the point forecast for the Yes share of the vote to be within 12 points. Fourthly, we decipher how often the model correctly predicts adoption/rejection—the ultimate test of the model's accuracy. Encouragingly, the within-sample analysis predicts the winner of the referendum on 86% of occasions. Figure 1 plots the estimates for each referendum generated from the model and compares them to the official results. The visual confirms there is no noteworthy deviation for the required assumption of linearity and that for

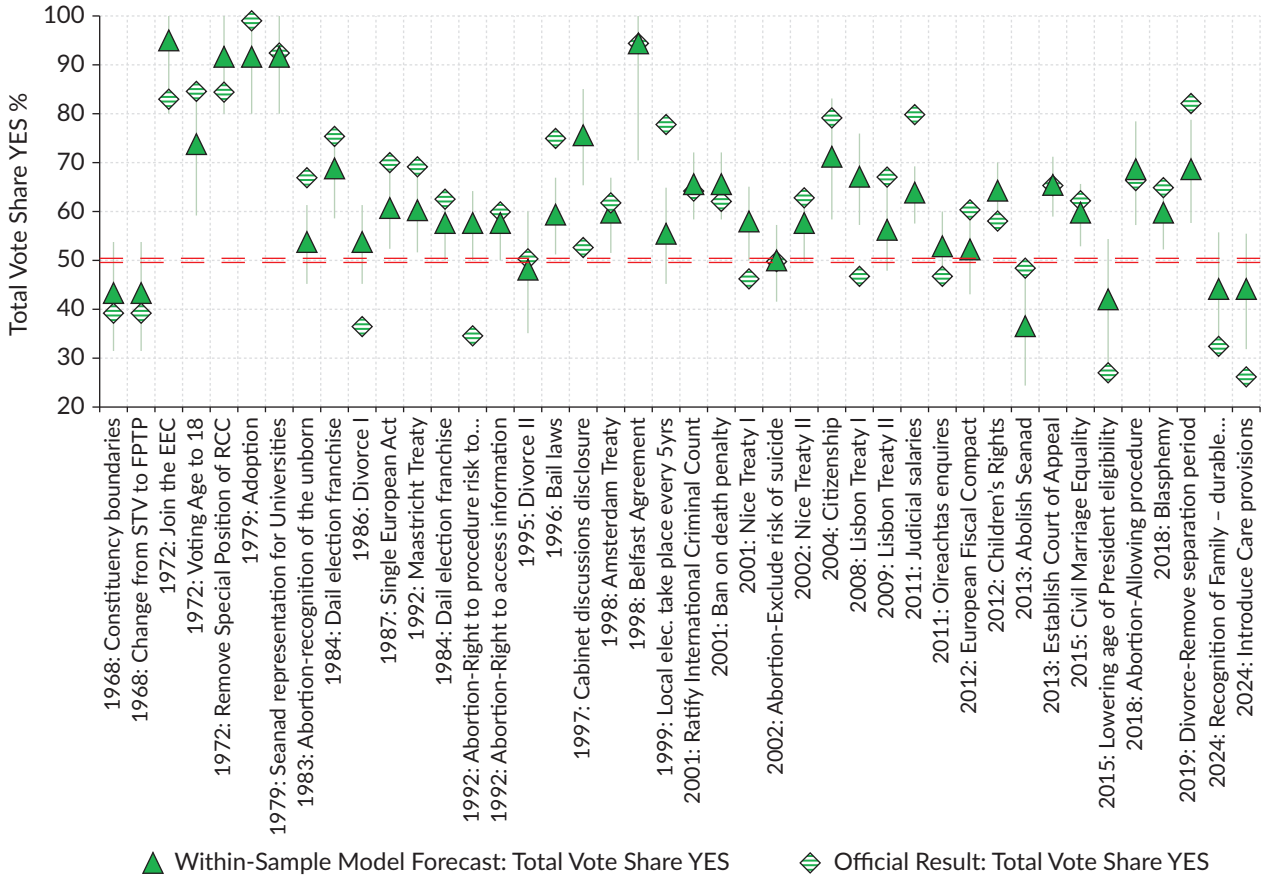


**Figure 1.** Within-sample forecasts (triangles) of the percentage share of the Yes vote yielded from the model compared with official results (diamonds) for 42 Irish referendums 1968–2024. Notes: Within-sample estimates based on the model in Table 1; vertical bars from triangles are 95% confidence intervals associated with estimates; STV = Single transferable vote; FPTP = First past the post; EEC = European Economic Community.

some contests, the within-sample forecasts are close (2013 Court of Appeal contest spot on; 2002 and 2018 abortion referendums within 2pts of the result). However, there are some notable misses, too (one of the 1992 abortion referendums and the Lisbon Treaty 2008, both of which were incorrectly called by the model).

### *4.2. Out-of-Sample Analysis*

While within-sample estimates give us a solid idea of the accuracy of a model and the extent to which it fits the data, they are known to be optimistic, for they rely on information available retrospectively. Out-of-sample estimates are firmer tests as they involve prognosticating and excluding data about the contest in question, either temporally or spatially, better mimicking the situation forecasters encounter. Under these conditions, we can expect more significant residuals. The RMSE mentioned above offers a valuable baseline measure of forecasting beyond the sample, as it has more demanding assumptions for inference (C. C. Lewis-Beck & Lewis-Beck, 2015). Here, as expected, we see it is greater than the within-sample MAE (8.9) at 12.5. This result clarifies that forecasting referendums can be challenging, especially in close contests.

The most common out-of-sample diagnostic in election forecasting is the jackknife method, especially helpful for small-*N* datasets, as often is the case with election prognosis, due to its simplicity and the fact it maximizes the use of available data for model "training." This approach involves leaving out one observation from the dataset and then making a prediction of the excluded case based on the remaining data. This process is repeated iteratively to compute an aggregate MAE estimate based on the projections of all the excluded instances, indicating how well the model generalizes to unseen data. Under this procedure, promisingly, the model's MAE is 9.4, only marginally above the within-sample estimate, while the largest MAE is slightly higher at 10. Soberingly, the most significant vote share error is 24.2 points, illustrating the error band can be high. But more comfortingly, the referendum outcome is correctly called 79% of the time based on the point estimates.

The one-step-ahead method is arguably the strictest out-of-sample test as it evaluates predictive accuracy by forecasting results iteratively chronologically, based solely on data that would have been available to the forecaster for an ex-ante prediction. For example, the prediction of the 2024 referendums would be based on data from all referendums *before* these plebiscites. We apply this procedure to referendums from 1992 onwards (i.e., $N = 31$; ~74% of data). As we might expect, the MAE for the model is higher than the within-sample estimate, coming in at 11.1 (compared to 8.9). The largest MAE is 14.3, above the RMSE. Disappointingly, the most significant absolute error is 57 points, which is a huge miss. But more promisingly, this model specification accurately calls the result of the referendum in 68% of instances, admittedly lower than the within-sample and jackknife estimates, but reasonable given the complexity and complexion of the issues we are trying to model, and 18 points better than a random guesstimate, indicating the model has some predictive capacity beyond chance.

### *4.3. Comparison of Model With Opinion Polls*

How does this model compare to another standard method of forecasting—opinion polls, where vote intention in the referendum is aggregated and used to forecast the result? Before diving into that, it is worth noting that while opinion polls close to an election (i.e., one month or two out from polling day) in Ireland have been shown to correlate with the election result positively (Quinlan & Lewis-Beck, 2021), polls are not designed to be predictive tools but are rather snapshots of opinion at a particular time point. It is little wonder that there is also evidence that poll forecasts of elections with longer lead times (i.e., more than three months) are often much less solid (Quinlan & Lewis-Beck, 2021). Moreover, a serious drawback of poll forecasts is their lack of theoretical underpinning. And when it comes to referendums, there is some academic evidence that opinion polls tapping referendum vote intent are sometimes wide of the mark. In Irish plebiscites, it has been noted that the polls sometimes perform poorly, with the 2024 referendums cases in point. It's not hard to see why polling plebiscites is perhaps even more challenging than polling vote intent for parties or candidates, given that with referendums, voters are often asked to decide upon issues they are unfamiliar with or of great complexity, meaning many voters make up their minds very close to polling day. Consequently, polls conducted with sufficient lead-in time could be more likely to be wide of the mark. That said, as polls are the only comparative predictive method, we must establish if our model is competitive with this.

We collected data available on opinion poll predictions of the Yes vote one to two months before the election and contrasted it with our prediction model for the same 21 plebiscites where polling data were available. We conclude that opinion poll estimates of the Yes vote share in Irish referendums, whether excluding Don't

Know or including them in the forecast, do not perform better in predicting the referendum outcome or the Yes vote share than our complete model. Take the opinion models first, where we specify the dependent variable in two ways—Yes vote share including Don't Know, and Yes vote share excluding Don't Know (see Table C6, Appendix C, Supplementary File). The MAE for both the opinion poll models (13.3 for the model including Don't Know; 14.2 for the model excluding Don't Know) is higher than the MAE for our complete sample or direct observation comparison (see Table 1, or Table C7, Appendix C, Supplementary File). Moreover, the RMSE for our models is smaller than the RMSE for the opinion poll models. And looking at correct calls, our model calls at least as many referendums correctly as the opinion polls. It is more evidence that our model has predictive capacity, at least to the same extent as other standard prediction methods.

## 5. Conclusion

"If life were predictable, it would cease to be life and be without flavor." The words of Elanor Roosevelt could capture the predictability of plebiscites, which are known to sometimes buck the trend and produce unexpected results, often with late swings to one side or the other. Perhaps there is no surprise that forecasting referendums is something political science has largely ignored thus far, instead preferring to offer ex-post analysis of these contests. Here, we break new ground by exploring whether referendums are potentially forecastable in advance, using Ireland as our laboratory's ideal test case, given its vast experience of plebiscites. We show there is some cause for optimism. Applying a political history and economy-inspired model, informed by theory from both the election forecasting and the referendum literature, we demonstrate that our parsimonious model has some promise in Ireland. When applied ex-ante using out-of-sample tests, the model correctly calls the referendum outcome in 42 contests between 68–79% of the time. At face, skeptics might charge that such precision is lackluster and is well short of the accuracy of traditional model forecasts of general elections. We recognize this shortcoming, but we should not lose sight of the Herculean task of formulating a model to forecast referendums, let alone a model that tries to do so on plebiscites covering various topics. Furthermore, readers should not lose sight of the fact that the model's accuracy level is reasonable and competitive, considering it aligns with and sometimes exceeds the reliability of opinion polls, which presently serve as the dominant approach for forecasting referendum outcomes in Ireland. As such, we contend that this model advances the literature on forecasting, albeit modestly, and offers a credible alternative to opinion poll methods in Ireland.

Evidently, we accept that the model does not capture the whole story, and there are some notable misses. Hence, there is scope for improvement, which future research endeavors should consider, including whether the intuition applied here can be used in other jurisdictions. But we assert that as referendums are issue votes held on various topics and arguably do not have the same glue as national elections, specifying a model that gets us this far is no mean feat. The model gives us a starting picture of the potential outcome, which has value, especially for actors going into a referendum campaign, as our model can be specified once we know the contest date and the partisan configuration of actors in favor or against the contest.

Hitherto, referendum research has generated more heat than light in scholarly writings about elections (and other institutions). Given the increasing importance of referendums and how this institution of semi-direct democracy is being used in cases ranging from the Brexit vote in Britain to constitution issues in Bolivia (and other cases besides), a model that can potentially predict the outcome of contests has value. The forthcoming challenge for this model will be to apply it ex-ante to a future contest, see how it performs in "real-time," and

extend this beyond Ireland. In sum, we see this work as merely a seed for future work and encourage scholars to build on this and finesse the model.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

## Supplementary Material

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

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# Right to a Referendum, or Duty to Deliberate? Rethinking Normative Entitlements to Secession

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## Abstract

When should groups within a state be owed a process, such as a referendum, that can enable their secession or greater internal autonomy? Much of the prior normative literature has overlooked the constitutional theory context of this question. Autonomy movements raise a "constitutional legitimacy crisis" in which the core question is what a constitution's normative foundations are or should be. Firm answers remain elusive. The parties tend to make selective and circular ("normative bootstrapping") claims, which are neither sound nor practically persuasive to the other parties to a dispute. Thus this article, firstly, relies on the constitutional legitimacy crisis lens to explain why disputes over autonomy movements are largely intractable under existing approaches; and, secondly, identifies a promising species of solution to the problem. Departing from both "primary right" and "remedial right only" theories, the article endorses a duty to deliberate. This duty relies on deliberative democratic procedures (e.g., "mini-publics," "deliberative referendums," and "deliberative negotiation"), applied to autonomy movements' various phases, to decide how and whether autonomy movements should progress. Such an approach may offer a sounder and more practically effective approach to resolving autonomy-related constitutional legitimacy crises.

## Keywords

autonomy; deliberative democracy; duty to deliberate; referendum; secession

## 1. Introduction

When should groups within a state be owed a process, such as a referendum, that can enable their secession or greater internal autonomy? When the literature on this normative question first arose, a polarity emerged. One camp endorsed the primary right of a group to pursue autonomy so long as a majority within the group

desires it (Gauthier, 1994; Glaser, 2003; Margalit & Raz, 1990; Wellman, 1995). Another camp, concerned with the stability of the international state system, promoted the more restrictive "remedial right only" approach, whereby groups may only seek autonomy to "defend themselves from serious injustices, as a remedy of last resort" (Buchanan, 1997, p. 136; see Buchanan, 2003).

These debates proceeded, however, against an unrecognised background of constitutional practice and theory. Autonomy movements raise a "constitutional legitimacy crisis" (Appleby et al., 2023). In this type of crisis, the core question is what a constitution's normative foundations are or should be. Firm answers remain elusive, particularly under the dominant pattern of constitutional argumentation, which I will call "normative bootstrapping." In this pattern, a given value is said to be at the foundation of a constitutional order, and the constitutional order in turn is said to presuppose this foundation. Kelsen (1945/1961) among others endorses such an approach. Yet external support for its selective and circular claims is often limited. The soundness of the approach is thus doubtful (Shivakumar, 1996), and bootstrapping claims may struggle in practice to persuade the other parties to a dispute. Many constitutional legitimacy crises indeed remain intractable for some time (e.g., a period of decades).

This constitutional background is important for understanding disputes over autonomy claims. As we will see, the parties are often unaware of how the background frustrates efforts at resolution. Most scholars, too, overlook the constitutional overlay as a complicating factor and fall into standard bootstrapping patterns. Some recognise versions of the problem (Moore, 2019; Weinstock, 2000, 2001). However, their contributions stop short of unpacking the problem or detailing a solution. My aims in this article are, firstly, to use the constitutional legitimacy crisis lens to explain why disputes over autonomy movements are largely intractable under existing approaches; and secondly, to identify a promising species of solution to the problem.

Departing from both primary right and remedial right only theories, I endorse a duty to deliberate. This procedural duty eschews any single set of substantive guiding principles and adopts, instead, a deliberative democratic approach to questions of how and whether autonomy movements should progress. All putative constitutional values should be weighed and considered on a basis of equal inclusion and adequate information in a process of collective deliberation. By largely avoiding normative bootstrapping, this approach may offer a sounder and more practically effective approach to resolving autonomy-related constitutional legitimacy crises.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 shows how constitutional legitimacy crises prompt distinct forms of normative bootstrapping. Section 3 applies this analysis to prior academic debates about autonomy entitlements. Section 4 then outlines the duty to deliberate. The argument presented in this part is ambitious and generally made in broad terms, leaving some particular strands and implications to be explored in future research. However, the section considers certain key details, such as how to deploy deliberative democratic procedures (e.g., "mini-publics," "deliberative referendums," and "deliberative negotiation") at autonomy movements' various phases. It also addresses objections, including the suggestion that a duty to deliberate may revive worries about instability in the state system, and that the duty itself may be subject to the bootstrapping objection. Section 5 concludes.

## 2. Constitutional Legitimacy Crises and Intractability: Normative Bootstrapping

This section considers the structural features that tend to make constitutional legitimacy crises intractable under standard approaches. In a constitutional legitimacy crisis, the parties' claims are "bootstrapping" if the claims assert a foundational normative value, which once asserted purports to provide the basis for the assertion. This becomes problematic when two or more parties in the crisis each view the values underlying a constitution markedly differently, and where there is no single practically authoritative view of how the disagreement should end. Each party to the dispute cites a single foundational value or set of values as dispositive of a substantive constitutional dispute and excludes reasonable alternative claims to normativity.

Some claims of this type are relatively straightforward. For example, constitutional "contract" theory might be asserted as the singular foundational value leading to a conclusion that Catalonia may not currently seek independence unilaterally (Bar, 2019, pp. 976–977; Williams et al., 2017, pp. 51–53). That is, Catalans who voted in the referendum to endorse the post-Franco 1978 Constitution implicitly may have consented—by a contract with other Spanish citizens, who also voted—to remain part of the unitary state. However, leaders of the Catalan independence movement dispute that contract theory provides the only normative guide to the case, citing for instance the democratic right of self-determination as an alternative basis (Guibernau, 2014, pp. 7–9).

Indeed, constitutional theory and practice in a given jurisdiction may incorporate an array of competing or overlapping values as foundational to the constitution (or constitutions). These may include:

- Formal enactment of the constitution by a body understood by many as legitimate (Weber, 1921/1972, p. 130).
- Constituent power and similar theories conceiving of states or peoples as entities with entitlements and existences in their own right (Colón-Ríos, 2020).
- Collective security against internal and external threats (Hobbes, 1651/2010).
- Contracts, real or hypothetical, among groups (Bar, 2019, pp. 976–977; Bossacoma Busquets, 2024, p. 125).
- Socialism (Bui, 2023).
- Confucianism (Bui, 2023).
- Longstanding practice, creating an entitlement to its continuation (Livingstone, 2023).
- Prior occupation, especially by an Indigenous group (Appleby et al., 2023).
- Divine enactment, cited even in broadly liberal constitutions (e.g., Australia's Constitution and Parliament of the UK, 1900, preamble).
- Popular sovereignty (or "democratic constitutionalism"; Blokker, 2016).
- Stability (Buchanan, 1997, 2003).
- Rights and freedoms (Bossacoma Busquets, 2020, p. 126).
- Peace (Buchanan, 1997, 2003).

Rather than stake out a position on Catalan or other autonomy movements, by highlighting the normative ambiguity of constitutional foundations I aim to illustrate constitutional legitimacy crises' core problem. Simple, selective answers deny constitutions' foundational complexity. In the Catalan case, unresolved matters include how well contract theory applies to the facts. After dictator Francisco Franco's death in

1975, and before voting to endorse the 1978 Constitution, did Catalans have sufficient opportunity to deliberate about secession? Was consigning Francoism to the past their more immediate priority (López Bofill, 2019, pp. 952–954)? And should a contract in any event rigidly bind future generations (Williams et al., 2017, p. 132)? In a marriage contract, for instance, the parties each enjoy ongoing autonomy to dissolve the union (at least after a period of deliberation; Gauthier, 1994, p. 371).

Some forms of normative bootstrapping are more difficult to discern. These involve two or more steps of argumentation. In these forms too, however, ultimately a given value or set of values is selectively asserted, unsupported, as the constitution's foundation. Some complex bootstraps rely on empirical arguments: that a given constitutional value should dominate in light of particular tangible benefits subject to proof. For instance, in Bougainville, New Caledonia, Québec, Scotland, and other societies, opponents of autonomy frequently mounted economic arguments against autonomy, seeming to view these as dispositive, or nearly so (e.g., Young, 1999, pp. 47–50).

However, authors of empirical works occasionally forget that constitutional choices are empirico-normative: they have mixed empirical and value aspects, the latter of which involve subjective choices and valuations. Arguments from economic value can omit or obscure questions about which values should matter in the first place, and how much. In Bougainville, despite the economic risks involved, 97.7% of ballots cast favoured secession (Regan et al., 2022, p. 68). Voters simply may have valued independence more than economic performance. In such a case, as Gauthier (1994, p. 366) puts it, "cultural [benefits] outweigh the productive losses."

Other forms of multi-step bootstrapping rely on authoritative institutions to settle the value contests underlying a constitutional legitimacy crisis. However, this may only shift the locus of the crisis. No single institution may be viewed as authoritative by all sides, nor as able to issue an effectively binding resolution. In circular fashion again, the approach relies on itself for support: only a legitimate body can determine which body can legitimately answer the question. For example, in 2000, the Parliament of Canada purported to use the Clarity Act to impose fair rules on Québec leaders' use of sovereignty referendums. The unilateral assertion of legitimate authority attracted reasonable criticism, not least from separatist leaders (Monahan, 2000, p. 6). Governments in the UK and Spain made similarly one-sided decisions to disallow referendums outright in Scotland and Catalonia, respectively.

Domestic courts have also purported to serve as umpires of disputes over autonomy movements, for instance in the Supreme Court of Canada's Reference Re Secession of Quebec (1998). The Court declared that "any attempt to effect the secession of a province from Canada must be undertaken pursuant to the Constitution of Canada, or else violate the Canadian legal order" (Reference Re Secession of Quebec, para. 104). However, the Court was not firm on this point, noting that a clear affirmative vote in Quebec for secession "would call on the participants to work to reconcile" (Reference Re Secession of Quebec, para. 104) their positions via negotiation. Indeed, given its authorisation by the state and under the extant Constitution, it is uncertain that the Court's decisions alone should count—or that they could settle a constitutional legitimacy crisis effectively. A crisis may fester if a court purporting to serve as an umpire lacks credibility among members of the autonomy-seeking group. In many cases, only a third party (domestic or, more likely, international) trusted by each of the parties can serve as an effective umpire (Moore, 2019, p. 635).

A key reason why normative bootstrapping enjoys at best weak validity or persuasive capacity is that, by referring to itself for support, a bootstrapping argument arbitrarily ignores a broad range of potential normative alternatives. Any value that a party cites must first be "public," in the Rawlsian sense of being reasonably open to endorsement by differently situated groups (Rawls, 1996). However, in a constitutional legitimacy crisis, an additional burden arises: any argument about constitutional value foundations is unsound, and might not be heeded by others, if it fails to explain why this value and no other should dominate the constitutional order. In Reference Re Secession of Quebec (1998, para. 32), for example, the Court took it upon itself to identify four values as foundational to the Canadian constitutional order (federalism, "constitutionalism and the rule of law," democracy, and respect for minorities), omitting any number of alternatives.

To be sure, a selective claim may be persuasive in effect if dissent seems futile against a state whose authority appears beyond challenge. On the other hand, historically such appearances (e.g., in pre-independence colonies such as India, Ireland, Kenya, and "Rhodesia") turned out to be mistaken. The durability of purely power-based persuasion is often uncertain. A central government's actions to suppress an autonomy movement may fail to change group members' beliefs in the movement's justice or desirability, and may indeed prompt even some lukewarm supporters to join the autonomy movement (López Bofill, 2019, p. 956).

In sum, in a constitutional legitimacy crisis, the usual divisions and disputes that we find among groups are aggravated and rendered more intractable. The structure of a constitution, the foundations of which are ambiguous and open to contestation, prompts—or even appears to necessitate (Kelsen, 1945/1961)—self-supporting arguments of questionable validity or persuasive capacity.

Importantly, however, the fact that a constitution's foundations are ambiguous does not mean that questions about foundations must be avoided. Indeed, they cannot be avoided; constitutional structures entail foundations. The challenge is how to acknowledge the complexity of such foundations and maintain a sense of humility, which also acknowledges the legitimacy and foundational place of other values. Section 4 will outline the proposal for a duty to deliberate about constitutional foundations via inclusive deliberative democratic processes. Yet first, in Section 3, we see that bootstrapping value claims, so common in public rhetoric, also feature in academic theories of autonomy rights.

## 3. Normative Bootstrapping in the Remedial/Primary Right Debate

Both poles in the longstanding debate over secession tend to overlook the need for inclusive deliberation to provide an answer. A number of authors in the field nominate their own substantive value selections that, they argue, should determine the recognition of group autonomy movements. Miller (1997), for one, focuses on criteria including group distinctiveness, avoidance of deleterious impacts on third-party minority groups, and distributive justice. Bossacoma Busquets (2024, p. 121), in turn, outlines substantive factors underpinning a qualified right to secede from the EU, including stability, accommodation of plural nationalisms, and promotion of compromise. Let us focus, however, on Buchanan's seminal remedial right only theory as a first main example.

### *3.1. Remedial Right Only Theory*

This theory, again, recognises a right of people to secede to protect themselves from serious injustices, such as threats to the "physical survival of [group] members" and "violations of other basic human rights," or the "unjust" taking of "previously sovereign territory" (Buchanan, 1997, p. 36). In support of the remedial right only position, Buchanan applies four normative criteria to try to show its superiority as compared with the primary right to secede. The criteria are "moral realism" (i.e., the claim is both realistic in practice and "morally progressive," meaning that it improves on the status quo); "consistency with well-entrenched, morally progressive principles of international law"; "absence of perverse incentives"; and "moral accessibility" (i.e., suggestive of public reason, the claim "should not require acceptance of a particular religious ethic or of ethical principles that are not shared by a wide range of secular and religious viewpoints"; Buchanan, 1997, pp. 41–44).

Another of Buchanan's over-arching concerns, although not clearly identified with any of these criteria, is societal stability. Buchanan (1997, pp. 44–45) is impressed that the remedial right only theory:

> [P]laces significant constraints on the right to secede, while not ruling out secession entirely….Given that the majority of secessions have resulted in considerable violence, with attendant large-scale violations of human rights, and massive destruction of resources, common sense urges that secession should not be taken lightly.

Thus after noting that "there is … considerable confusion about what sorts of considerations ought to count for or against a theory of the right to secede" (Buchanan, 1997, p. 32), he sets out to resolve this confusion for us. The criteria he adopts are each plausible. Yet why these and no others are adopted is unsaid. Buchanan's criteria are subject to the usual ambiguity: the normative criteria to be applied to resolve a constitutional legitimacy crisis are the very matters in dispute.

For example, the stability criterion establishes a hierarchy of this value over others, such as the affective importance of "encompassing groups" to self-identity, as cited for example by Margalit and Raz (1990, pp. 444–450). Buchanan ultimately makes a value choice that overlooks the insoluble normative ambiguities at the roots of constitutions. He justifies the remedial right only approach as posing less of a threat to the existing international state-based order—a value rooted in claims about stability's benefits, which in turn may better protect individual rights and political participation (Buchanan, 1997, pp. 40, 47). Whether it is stability, democracy, or rights that chiefly animate Buchanan's view, we may question whether these value choices ought to be set in stone for all future cases.

Part of the problem is that the choices are couched in the language of statistical regularities. But, as noted in Section 2, the implicit normative content in tendentious empirical work may be subtle, hidden behind assumptions about appropriate data use—such as when it is appropriate to generalise. Even if Buchanan's summary of past cases of secession resulting in violence is generally accurate, important contrary cases have arisen in places such as Québec, Scotland, Catalonia, and Bougainville, where autonomy-seeking activities have been largely free of violence for decades or longer (Dzutsati, 2022; Moore, 2019, pp. 635–636). Buchanan's generalisation yields a rule that would deny primary autonomy rights across the board, despite the marked dissimilarities among societies with autonomy movements.

The fault in retrospective, one-size-fits-all reasoning is further evident in Buchanan's useful, yet questionably applied, principle of avoidance of perverse incentives. Perverse incentives, he writes, will tend to "hinder the pursuit of morally progressive strategies for conflict resolution" (Buchanan, 1997, p. 43). For example, under the primary right approach, "a state that wishes to avoid fragmentation [might] resist efforts at federalization" (Buchanan, 1997, p. 43), since provinces and autonomous regions may have the power to hold referendums. In Buchanan's hands, the principle of avoidance of perverse incentives becomes another plank in support of a remedial-right only rule.

Yet this same principle can point the other way. For instance, during the referendum campaign for an Indigenous "Voice" in Australia (a constitutionally enshrined advisory body securing a measure of Indigenous autonomy), some Indigenous people expressed a concern that the reform would foreclose more robust forms of Indigenous sovereignty or even secession. This claim had arguable merit (cf. Lino, 2023) in light of the remedial right only approach, which international law apparently adopts (Bossacoma Busquets, 2024, p. 123). That approach potentially incentivises substate groups to scuttle internal measures that would ameliorate their own disadvantage, if they reason that such measures would lower their chances of achieving the larger prize of outright independence.

Thus in Buchanan's work we see how generalised, retrospective, and empirically-based argumentation can sometimes yield inflexible substantive principles that are perhaps driven by the author's own value selections. Of course, many empirical studies usefully suggest (if only approximately, without any ironclad guarantees) how and whether a given normative rule may function in practice. My aim here is not to malign empirical work, but only to cast doubt on the use of tendentious empirical premises that—for example, by overlooking wide exceptions or overgeneralising—seem to promote a given, selective set of values.

Buchanan's work may usefully suggest value options and lines of argumentation. However, claims to have identified all relevant normative or empirical factors—across all future cases of secession, no less—are difficult to support. Given the deeply ambiguous and contentious nature of constitutional legitimacy crises, such work may fail to acknowledge other pertinent foundational values, or to understand the depth of sentiment that people attach to these assorted values under particular circumstances.

Values have contexts, conditions, and effects that can be ascertained and informed by rational debate and empirical investigation. Yet at root, their valuation (the degree to which people should care or be swayed by a given value) is subjective, not a matter for either authors or empowered elites to approach unilaterally and wholly technocratically. Moreover, a single-answer rule based not on deliberation over the case at hand, but on a collective and retrospective reading of historical cases, should be avoided. Deliberations in which public values are applied to cases at hand may lead to distinct outcomes in assorted cases. Deliberations must remain prospective and be undertaken on the basis of case-specific details.

### *3.2. Primary Right Theory*

Primary right theorists, as we saw, accept the democratic principle of a right to pursue autonomy without significant reservations. In some versions of the primary right view, if a majority wishes to see the group achieve autonomy, this can be tested and expressed in a referendum (López Bofill, 2019, p. 950). More generally, primary right theories embrace principles of self-determination or democracy as preeminent or "central" constitutional value foundations (Moore, 2019, p. 624).

Some primary right theorists acknowledge a version of my criticism above, in Section 2, of arguments that nominate just a limited selection of substantive values as constitutionally foundational. Moore opposes one-size-fits-all substantive answers to autonomy problems; her "gesture [toward a] pluralist understanding of the fundamental normative values" involved leads her to focus on democratic procedures for settling autonomy disputes (Moore, 2019, p. 624). Weinstock (2000) also criticises certain substantive theories and favours a "procedural" solution. Bofill (2019) identifies a type of hubris in seeking to set out a limited and rigid set of substantive factors that should apply in the Catalan case. All of these authors embrace ongoing procedures in lieu of (or in addition to) a fixed constellation of substantive criteria.

However, these authors have not engaged with the legitimacy crisis overlay that aggravates autonomy crises and frustrates the search for a settlement. Each too, perhaps as a result, does not explore solutions beyond broad procedural and democratic approaches. Not every process, and not every form of democracy, is suited to solving constitutional legitimacy crises. Aggregative democracy—the kind of democracy we usually think of—prioritises power by relying on rule by a group that happens to be in the majority. However, leaning on such power alone may only aggravate, rather than solve, an autonomy crisis: in this model the dominant group may simply push for its preferred substantive solution to the crisis.

Democratic solutions to constitutional legitimacy crises fall into the usual pattern of bootstrapping in a broader sense, too, by embracing a process that elevates democracy above other values. Granted, democracy cannot be omitted from any reasonable account of contemporary governance in liberal societies. One cannot balance values through armchair reasoning, nor by consulting narrow bands of colleagues; value choices require a process of genuine input from those affected in the wider public. This means that we must ask what the people in a democracy actually think—which values they select as preeminent, and under what circumstances. On the other hand, as stressed above, democracy is not the only foundational constitutional value. Even democracy has a degree of importance relative to other values, and dependent on the circumstances.

The process of value selection therefore requires, in addition to democracy, deliberation that is structured to be informed, wide-ranging, flexible, and inclusive of wide identities or viewpoints and their distinct related values. There are hints of this idea in past works. Bossacoma Busquets (2017, pp. 117–122), while focusing on substantive factors determining the right to secede, gestures briefly toward deliberative procedures of negotiation and references "sincere cooperation" and "reflection" in the post-referendum negotiating process. Moore (2015, pp. 129–134) writes of the need for "ongoing reciprocal cooperation over time," invoking Rawlsian language of public reason—albeit chiefly as a limit on the kinds of substantive reasons that autonomy debates should raise. Bossacoma Busquets (2020, 2024, p. 122) also relies on Rawls, yet not to outline a process of secession, but rather to ground the qualified right to secede in the first place.

There remains no developed account of deliberative democratic procedures suited to managing autonomy movements. Building on broad references to democratic and procedural solutions in other works, the next part outlines the duty to deliberate in response to concerted autonomy movements. A deliberative democratic process is democracy plus other values. In principle, therefore, it may be suited to avoiding normative bootstrapping and addressing the constitutional legitimacy crises that autonomy movements present.

## 4. The Duty to Deliberate

In response to a group autonomy movement, all affected parties have a normative duty to deliberate. As we saw, in a constitutional legitimacy crisis the parties should acknowledge and contend with values and reasons other than their own. This requires a deliberative democratic process that engages members of the putative autonomy-seeking group and the state (and any other groups significantly affected) in ordered contestation over the values underlying the constitutional order(s). The process may be used to work out which particular values are the most salient and also the weightiest in a particular constitutional context.

I will turn to some institutional possibilities to achieve these broad ends shortly. First, however, note the range of specific deliberative democratic procedural requirements that follow from the broad duty to deliberate:

- Inclusivity: All affected parties, and in turn all (public) values that the parties view as relevant, should be included in deliberations (Levy & Orr, 2016, p. 22).
- Reason-giving: Mutual reason-giving is required of participants (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004, p. 100).
- Consequentiality: Deliberations should influence final decisions (Dryzek, 2010).
- Specific application: Deliberations should consider "actual conditions on the ground" (Levy et al., 2021, p. 167) and how or whether any broad values asserted apply to the context at hand.
- Well-informed: The process should also provide participants with relevant information (e.g., basic features of mooted reforms; Levy & Orr, 2016, p. 22).
- Facilitation and umpiring: Facilitators and umpires are each notionally independent third parties (e.g., from a disinterested country or a trusted international organisation) empowered to oversee deliberations. Trained facilitators are critical to "setting the discussion tone and establishing ground rules that shape how participants talk and share ideas during deliberations" (Dillard, 2013, p. 218). An umpire has farther-reaching powers and functions, more like those of a court. When needed, the umpire may, after hearing from the parties, issue an authoritative decision in a dispute (Levy & O'Flynn, 2024).

Notice the significance of the duty to deliberate as an alternative to both the remedial only and primary right theories. The duty implies no presumption either against or in favour of holding a referendum. As we saw, both presumptions are problematic. The remedial approach arbitrarily limits the path to autonomy since it is triggered only when severe abuses occur. Conversely, the primary right theory focuses on democratic majoritarianism as the trigger to a referendum. Yet as we also saw, on its own democratic majoritarianism may omit a range of further relevant values.

In addition to this, the primary right theory leaves open how we might know when the popular appetite for autonomy is sufficiently widespread and deep to trigger a referendum. Fleeting expressions of majority sentiment may be insufficient. As we will see, in the absence of deliberative institutional support, such expressions may be inaccurate or may lack the deliberative rigour that should be a prerequisite for constitutional change.

In place of a blanket rule either in favour of or against a referendum, then, the duty to deliberate requires a deliberative democratic process in which multiple relevant constitutional values, as well as factual details, are considered and weighed in the instant case to decide whether the path to autonomy should be followed.

Importantly, however, how these broad guidelines apply in practice depends on the various sequential phases of an autonomy movement.

### *4.1. Deliberative Duties at Each Phase*

#### 4.1.1. First Phase: Community Mobilisation

The function of the first phase should be to gauge whether popular support for autonomy is prima facie sufficient to proceed toward a referendum. A key complication is that the capacity for institutionally-supported deliberation is limited at this phase, which is decentralised across the public sphere. Hence the term "prima facie sufficient": later steps will be needed to test the breadth and depth of popular support.

Although the capacity for institutionally-supported deliberation is limited here, the duty to deliberate still has important implications. The duty requires state actors to avoid unduly curtailing the breadth of discussions regarding autonomy. States have often suppressed expressive and associational freedoms relating to autonomy movements. Group leaders have in turn exerted social pressure and even violence to suppress internal dissent against autonomy movements. The duty to deliberate in the first phase entails non-coercion. Popular expression, discussion, and associational activities (e.g., party meetings) by which group leaders peacefully seek to mobilise support for autonomy reforms must be protected. The forms in which these activities ultimately manifest must also be protected (e.g., votes or public consultations carried out by substate legislatures, whether in a binding fashion or otherwise; and informal alternatives such as large-scale petitions, peaceful mass protests, or repeated and reputable opinion polls indicating apparent support for autonomy).

However, preserving expressive and associational freedoms does not in itself amount to promoting deliberative democracy. Expression and association alone—absent specific institutional grounding and support for deliberation—are "pre-deliberative" (Elstub, 2006, p. 313). As yet unknown is how widely held and deeply committed support for autonomy is within the group. An apparent movement for autonomy may principally be an elite project, rather than a wide popular mobilisation. Both empowered elites in government and group leaders often hold markedly more maximalist, polarised, and entrenched policy positions than do ordinary citizens (Colombo, 2018). Such elites also tend to dominate public discourses, possibly leading to overestimations of the popular support for autonomy (Levy et al., 2021).

Also importantly, indications of support for autonomy in the first phase still provide little genuine sense of the variety of arguments for or against autonomy. A chief insight of deliberative democracy theory is that the mere aggregation of individual views into bare majorities does not exhaust the requirements of democracy. Asked to consent to a constitutional change, citizens must at a minimum be able to consider the costs and benefits of the decision, including its impacts on others. Deliberation is thus necessary to ensure that any apparent popular consent for autonomy amounts to considered and informed consent. For instance, polls often gauge, at best, top-of-the-mind positions rather than considered, informed, and inclusive views of policy problems (Fishkin & Luskin, 2005, p. 287).

Hence, in the first phase popular expression and association should be guaranteed in order to provide an initial sense of whether or not an autonomy movement should proceed. But any prima facie indications of popular support for autonomy must be tested in a more rigorous deliberative democratic setting in the next phase.

#### 4.1.2. Second Phase: Deliberative Democratic Consultation

In the second phase, deliberative democratic processes should take on board, test, and weigh assorted views and values of the autonomy movement, and of the constitution(s) more broadly, to form a more reliable picture of the scope, depth, and nature of support. After such consultation, the support may appear to be more or less widely shared, and more or less strongly held. Moreover, understandings of the substantive contours of such support (e.g., values and other reasons group members cite in favour of or against autonomy) may become more comprehensive. In this process, even the prior question of how to determine whether a value is foundational (e.g., as a purely normative matter, or as a descriptive inquiry about prevailing practices in the jurisdiction) may be considered.

While a range of institutional models for deliberative democratic consultation are available, it will be useful to keep the mini-public model in mind to concretise the current discussion. Mini-publics are randomly selected, demographically representative assemblies of lay citizens who undergo extensive learning and undertake mutual deliberation before issuing policy recommendations. Mini-publics are increasingly common globally and have been evaluated in extensive and largely (though not uniformly) laudatory empirical and normative literatures (see Curato et al., 2021, for an overview). Notably, in comparison with partisan legislators, mini-publics tend to avoid polarisation (Fishkin & Luskin, 2005, p. 109), and in comparison with leadership by expert elites, they attract significant popular trust (Germann et al., 2024). Mini-publics can also help to crystalise a sense of the "underlying values" that citizens wish to see instantiated by constitutional reforms, as well as how such values interact with each other and with the reforms (Curato et al., 2021, pp. 73–79, 88).

A main reason for their extensive global use is the potential for mini-publics to combine, in the same body, deliberative rigour with democratic representation (albeit of a particular, descriptive kind). As noted in relation to phase one, non-elites generally hold less fixed or forceful sentiments toward constitutional reform projects than do elites of various kinds. However, and importantly, relying on deliberative democratic consultation in phase two means that we need not rely on such blanket generalisations. A main objective of deliberative democratic consultation is to determine, with a higher degree of confidence and detail, whether or not popular opinion in a given case clearly favours taking steps toward autonomy; and if so in what ways, under what circumstances, and to what ends.

Phase two deliberative democratic consultation can be tasked with deciding whether or not to commence phase three—the holding of a referendum—and if so, what constitutional options should be put to referendum voters. If the consultative process declines to recommend an autonomy referendum, it may yet recommend new constitutional or legislative arrangements short of autonomy. In an important variation on standard designs, a mini-public at phase two might include only members of the putative autonomy-seeking group among its deciding members. If we take rights to autonomy seriously, then the people whose choices should matter most are members of the autonomy-seeking group (Gauthier, 1994, pp. 361–362). This

modification sets up a theoretical dilemma, however, and a practical difficulty as it may limit the normative breadth of the body's deliberations (I return to this dilemma in Section 4.2.3).

Since the duty to deliberate may not culminate in a referendum, we see here again that the duty differs significantly from many primary right theories' implicit guarantees of a referendum. The duty provides that only considered and clear majority support for autonomy should trigger a referendum. The duty does not take the notion of support lightly and instead focuses on the quality and degree of support and on the interests of all parties—including citizens outside of the autonomy-seeking group (subject to conditions to be discussed).

### 4.1.3. Third Phase: Deliberative Referendum

If a referendum runs, it too must be significantly deliberative. Referendums are often viewed as poorly deliberative and at best superficially representative of societal views. However, while such criticisms are broadly accurate, they overlook the burgeoning literature on "deliberative referendum" design (Levy et al., 2021; see Chambers, 2018, pp. 305–306), which outlines a range of improved referendum procedures and a promising (if still mixed) emerging record of practice. Deliberative referendum design methods may include:

- Public information: A number of proposals suggest how to make trusted and balanced information widely available to voters (e.g., el-Wakil, 2017, pp. 71–72; Renwick et al., 2020). One demonstrated option uses a mini-public to provide a prominent source of information about substantive referendum issues; when trusted, such information may counter low knowledge and misinformation about complex reforms (Chambers, 2018, pp. 309–310; Knobloch et al., 2014). Voters may even be asked to complete tutorials written by a mini-public (Levy et al., 2021, p. 80).
- Regulation of speech: A number of jurisdictions limit manifestly untrue or divisive speech (e.g., hate speech), especially during election or referendum campaigns. Well-tailored laws curbing misinformation have generally avoided judicial invalidation (Levy et al., 2021, p. 82).
- Ballot design: Preliminary ranked-choice questions may require voters to nominate which values should drive the reform debate, and multi-option questions can indicate the costs and benefits of distinct reform options. These models aim to prompt purposive, informed, and holistic reasoning while avoiding simplistic policy binaries (Levy et al., 2021, pp. 69–71).
- Special voting requirements: Supermajority (e.g., 55%) or timed-double majority (i.e., two successful majority votes across a set interval) voting may avoid constitutional changes based on weak or ephemeral popular support (McKay, 2019; Weinstock, 2000, p. 261).

Deliberative interventions cannot yield perfect deliberation; they aim, instead, toward incremental improvement (Bächtiger et al., 2018, pp. 2–3). Whereas some referendums have clearly been poorly deliberative (e.g., Brexit; Offe, 2019), others have benefitted from deliberative designs (e.g., Scottish independence; Tierney, 2013). Importantly as well, despite the usual complexities of constitutional reform, at the core of autonomy debates are values such as cultural distinctiveness, independence, and group or individual equality—intuitive matters that often resonate with and are broadly understood by voters (Levy et al., 2021, p. 81).

#### 4.1.4. Fourth Phase: Deliberative Negotiation

After a clear affirmative vote for autonomy, a duty to negotiate is already an established expectation. In Reference Re Secession of Quebec (1998, para. 92), the Court referenced duties of the federal and provincial governments to negotiate with Québec following a clearly affirmative outcome in a future secession referendum. Apart from some of the suggestive language from Bossacoma Busquets (see the following bullet points), however, this duty is yet to be conceived as deliberative. The duty of deliberative negotiation is a critical innovation at this phase.

Deliberative requirements are distinct in the fourth phase, firstly because negotiations after a referendum must engage at a sustained level with wide technical arcana. Final negotiations must cover new constitutional arrangements, bilateral and multilateral international agreements, financial and resource distribution, and much else. In this late phase, then, a main task is to apply and accommodate previous value choices in technically sound ways, relying on developed expertise (e.g., in constitutional design and economics). Without entirely excluding the possibility, mini-publics may generally be ill-suited to such negotiations. They may be unable to address the multiple, "overly technical" (Beswick & Elstub, 2019, pp. 960–961) matters often running in parallel during final negotiations.

A second complication is that in the fourth phase, the other main objective is to reach a mutually acceptable final agreement, yet the capacity for such agreement is often limited. Leading an emerging literature on "deliberative negotiation," Warren and Mansbridge (2013, p. 86) observe that zero-sum clashes of preferences or interests are often inevitable. Applied deliberation addresses complexities such as distributions of wealth, resources, armed forces, and debts. In these areas, the parties' positions are often rivalrous rather than amenable to "win-win" accommodation (Mansbridge et al., 2010, pp. 69–72).

Theories of deliberative negotiation respond by recognising that even though substantive disagreement is inevitable, institutional mechanisms can potentially promote civil, other-regarding, and flexible reasoning. Importantly, such deliberative desiderata (to the degree they are met) may help to create conditions in which substantive deliberations do not merely reflect the parties' respective power positions, but rather the parties' needs. Deliberative negotiation procedures should encourage the parties to make representations to each other about their distinctive histories and how various negotiation outcomes may affect their interests. It is in this main sense that the post-referendum duty to negotiate should be recast as a duty of deliberative negotiation. Several design features may incrementally improve the deliberative quality of negotiations:

- Umpiring and facilitation: These are again necessary to ensure that negotiations address the parties' diverse viewpoints. If the parties cannot agree on a substantive outcome, an umpire should ultimately provide one while seeking to accommodate the parties' perspectives.
- Link to prior phases: The parties or umpire should expressly advert to value preferences endorsed earlier in the deliberative democratic consultation and deliberative referendum phases.
- Closed-door meetings: To minimise grandstanding by party representatives, meetings should intermittently run without the media or public in attendance (Kostovicova & La Lova, 2024).
- Consequences for breach of duty: There should be incentives to comply with the duty to deliberate (or to follow the directives of the umpire). If either party to a conflict significantly breaches the duty to deliberate, that party should not gain a benefit from doing so. For example, Bossacoma Busquets (2024,

> p. 117) argues that autonomy-seeking groups should be able to achieve their ends unilaterally if central governments will not negotiate in good faith. Equally, an autonomy-seeking group's aspirations should be blocked if group leaders substantially stymie deliberative negotiations.

The institutional options at each phase raise numerous further questions that no single article can address; work to elaborate more fully on institutional prescriptions, and key problems and questions, should be ongoing. However, in the next section, I discuss several key objections.

### *4.2. Objections*

#### 4.2.1. Autonomy Bias

The first key difficulty is that states may resist a deliberative duty if they think it will help groups achieve autonomy more readily. This echoes Buchanan's worries above (see Section 3.1). However, on the whole, it is not clear that the duty to deliberate would advantage either autonomy-seekers or extant states, nor therefore that the duty's effects on autonomy movements would be other than neutral. To explain, recall that phase two tests prima facie indications of support for autonomy. This phase imposes hurdles that autonomy movements must clear, which only relatively widespread, informed, and durable movements may achieve in practice. Hence, though the duty to deliberate is not limited to remedying severe abuses of substate groups, neither does it equate to an unfettered primary right. At each phase, the duty may in principle improve the capacity of autonomy's supporters and opponents to present distinct arguments about autonomy. This is an important answer to Buchanan and others concerned with state instability.

Another way to see why deliberative democratic processes may not bias outcomes toward autonomy is to recall that the usual bootstrapping claims in autonomy-focused constitutional legitimacy crises are often unpersuasive and thus unable to arrest such crises anyway. As we saw, in some places where central governments have suppressed autonomy movements, backlash and increased support for autonomy resulted. Deliberative democratic claim-making may offer a means to bring a crisis to a stable, mutually agreed end—whatever that end may be.

#### 4.2.2. Deliberative Democracy as Bootstrapping

An important conceptual question is whether deliberative democratic procedures are open to the same criticisms that I directed at bootstrapping claims above (see Section 2). As we saw, bootstrapping claims about constitutional foundations rely on themselves for support. Such claims may be unpersuasive partly for this reason. Another reason may be their arbitrary selectivity: they provide no rationale to explain why this value and no other should be foundational. Yet, a process that identifies many putative value foundations might also be open to charges of bootstrapping: rather than a single foundation, the duty to deliberate might generate many foundations, each simultaneously open to charges of bootstrapping.

A first possible rejoinder is that in the process of deliberation about value foundations, participants are meant to articulate how the multiple values discussed interact, interrelate, and mutually support (akin to Dworkin's, 1996, p. 119, metaphor of the geodesic dome, relying in turn on Rawls's, 1971, p. 49, notion of reflective equilibrium). Thus arguably the value foundations lean on each other, rather than on any single further value that is more foundational than each of them.

However, a second and more satisfactory response is that, as deliberative democratic procedures broaden discussions of constitutional foundations, the duty to deliberate addresses the key problem, noted in Section 2, of arbitrary selectivity. Deliberative democratic procedures, properly designed, do not arbitrarily exclude any values important to a given group (e.g., the prior occupation value supporting Indigenous claims). This normative feature of deliberative democracy procedures potentially has pragmatic implications. As we saw, repeated studies have shown that deliberative democratic procedures are more likely to attract the social legitimacy needed to bring a legitimacy crisis to an agreed end (e.g., Germann et al., 2024). One reason for this seems to be that their inclusive procedures are perceived as relatively impartial and fair, rather than as serving or reinforcing the power of a single societal faction (Levy, 2010, p. 834).

To be sure, the literature has long acknowledged that deliberative democracy is not value-free (Bächtiger et al., 2018, pp. 2–8; Chambers, 2018, p. 306). However, the essence of deliberative democracy is, as we also saw, its commitment to accommodating, weighing, and vetting an almost open-ended list of normative values. While the process itself affects value choices, its objective is consistent with the aim of this work: to approach disputes over constitutional normativity in as capacious a manner as possible.

#### 4.2.3. Inclusion of Non-Group Members

Finally, as we saw, mini-publics have extensive and generally strong track records. Including members from multiple groups is central to the bodies' effectiveness. Mini-publics have seen diverse lay and expert participants tackle matters of common concern, even in deeply divided societies (Pow & Garry, 2023). Yet a mini-public that deliberates about autonomy must be of a rarer type populated by members of the autonomy-seeking group alone. An authentic right to pursue group autonomy should not be subject to veto by other groups, as may be the result if members of other groups are directly included in the mini-public. Of course, there will usually be a diversity of views within the group itself (e.g., about the wisdom of pursuing autonomy). Yet the difficulty is that if a mini-public includes members of only one group, this may stymie inter-group deliberation.

Some mini-publics and similar bodies have addressed this dilemma by taking account of diverse groups' views, even while investing final voting power (i.e., the power to endorse a given policy recommendation) only in members of the autonomy-seeking group. An example is the series of Regional Dialogues leading to the Voice referendum in Australia. These deliberative democratic consultations allowed only Indigenous people to vote on a final recommendation. The Dialogues heard, however, from a diversity of perspectives, developing and evaluating a set of reform recommendations that clearly engaged with the concerns of the wider, non-Indigenous Australian public (e.g., calling for legally and politically feasible reform; Appleby & Davis, 2018). A similar model of diverse consultation beyond an autonomy-seeking group, yet with consequential voting limited to that group, can feature in the duty to deliberate about autonomy movements more generally. Additionally, a parallel, non-binding deliberative democratic body (e.g., a separate mini-public) could be composed of members who are (mostly) not part of the autonomy-seeking group; this additional body may aid deliberation across the wider population.

Referendum voting poses similar dilemmas. In some cases, both the autonomy-seeking group and the wider population have been permitted to vote in autonomy referendums. Yet this has led to the inevitable defeat of some proposals (e.g., Australia's Voice referendum and New Caledonia's independence referendums). Again,

taking autonomy rights seriously, referendums should not permit a binding vote by people from outside the autonomy-seeking group. But since such people are affected, they must be entitled to participate in some way—for example, as expert advisors at phases two and three, and through the noted parallel advisory process.

## 5. Conclusion

In this article, I have used the constitutional legitimacy crisis lens to explain why disputes over autonomy movements are often intractable under existing approaches. Constitutional legitimacy crises aggravate deep divisions and may last for decades, or longer. Neither primary right nor remedial right only theories seem adequate to resolve such crises. I have set out an alternative: the duty to deliberate. This duty relies on deliberative democratic procedures to govern the progress of autonomy movements across several phases. The approach appears to promise a sounder and more practically effective way to manage autonomy-related constitutional legitimacy crises.

Of course, no single academic commentary can lay out every contour of a novel normative requirement. The duty to deliberate raises many questions, beginning as we saw with whether the parties to a constitutional legitimacy crisis will choose to deliberate. A reasonable sceptical position would have it that powerful parties in particular are unlikely to do so. To be sure, setting out a normative duty is not meant to describe current practice, but to set out "a standard toward which to strive" (Bächtiger et al., 2018, p. 2). Yet, in any case, at least some scepticism may be misguided. For example, we saw that some referendums have run largely deliberatively, based on careful institutional design; and that a duty to negotiate—if not to deliberate—is already an emerging expectation. Sometimes at least, the most sceptical assumptions do not materialise.

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ARTICLE

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# Constitutional Change and Referendums in Chile and Ireland: Faraway, So Close

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## Abstract

Chile and Ireland have held constitutional referendums in recent years. While Ireland has successfully passed several controversial constitutional amendments over the last decade, Chile has struggled with its proposed constitutional reform, with two unsuccessful national referendums in September 2022 and December 2023, leaving the constitutional debate unresolved. Both countries have shared challenges, such as constitutional blockage and political polarisation, and both have attempted to involve citizens in pre-referendum processes in various ways. Ireland has consolidated public participation and deliberation mechanisms despite recent setbacks, unlike Chile, which has relied on electoral innovations. So, how can these diverging outcomes be explained? This article proposes an explanation by comparing these two cases, highlighting the importance, possibilities, and limitations of constitutional referendums based on three criteria: the extent and intensity of change, the model of democratic participation, and the role of elites and incumbent powers. These three criteria are crucial for addressing constitutional change's central challenges when linked to a referendum. Consequently, these criteria offer a focused analytical framework for understanding the explicit or implicit elements that can influence the success or failure of a constitutional referendum and must be considered in its design and organisation.

## Keywords

Chile; constitutional change; democratic innovations; Ireland; mini-publics; referendums

## 1. Introduction

Referendums have been proffered as essential tools for addressing constitutional change, driven by their potential to engage the public directly in decision-making processes (LeDuc, 2003, p. 30). However, despite their popularity (Qvortrup, 2018), referendums remain complex instruments, often critiqued for inadequate deliberation and irreversible outcomes (Offe, 2017, p. 22). This article explores the interplay between institutional and extra-institutional factors that shape constitutional change and how those factors influence constitutional referendums, i.e., those linked to constitutional reform, within the context of two countries: Chile and Ireland. Both countries have become frequent users of referendums to discuss constitutional reforms. Since 1988, Chile has held five constitutional referendums, while Ireland has held thirty-three. In the case of Chile, we include as our primary data sources the three constitutional referendums held within the constitution-making processes triggered by the social unrest of October 2019. In the Irish case, we consider recent constitutional referendums, starting with the salient 34th amendment, which on 22 May 2015 amended the Constitution of Ireland to provide that marriage is recognised irrespective of the sex of the partners and ending with the 40th amendment on the provision of care. The comparison is valid since both countries have faced similar challenges, including constitutional deadlock and political polarisation, and both have tried to involve citizens in constitutional change as a solution. Ireland has successfully established public participation mechanisms for constitutional proposals before referendums, often unlocking and settling those debates. On the contrary, Chile has seen two entire constitutional drafts rejected in referendums, suffering high rates of polarisation. The key question is why their outcomes differ so conspicuously.

To analyse this, we propose three criteria: the extent and intensity of change, the model of democratic participation (Chambers, 2001), and the role of elites and incumbent powers. These criteria address essential decisions that must be made during constitutional change processes. In simpler terms, they answer three essential questions: how much change is necessary, who should draft the proposal, and the broader context of the discussion. We argue that these factors are crucial in determining the outcomes of constitutional referendums.

By addressing these two case studies, we attempt to contribute to a widespread interdisciplinary literature focusing on the factors explaining constitutional change. Recently, several works have attempted to answer the question of what determines constitutional change with quantitative social research methods. Here, we can highlight the works of scholars such as Ginsburg and Melton (2015, p. 69), who attempt to predict the rates of amendments through what they call "constitutional amendment culture," which is the "set of shared attitudes about the desirability of an amendment, independent of the substantive issue under consideration and the degree of pressure for change." Other works, such as Tarabar and Young's (2021) recent analysis of 128 constitutional episodes from 54 countries, conclude that cultures that are more individualistic and less prone to uncertainty avoidance are associated with higher amendment rates.

We propose an explanation that attempts to complement these studies through the qualitative analysis of recent constitutional episodes in two countries—Chile and Ireland—in order to understand how institutional design and extra-institutional factors (such as political polarisation or broader constitutional history) interplay in processes of constitutional change. This comparison can help us understand the significance of a constitutional referendum, extract insights for future constitution-making processes, and draw lessons about constitutional referendums' significance, opportunities, and limitations.

## 2. Background Information

To understand the implications of the Chilean case, it is essential to consider the referendums of 2020, 2022, and 2023 within their historical context. The third wave of democratisation in Latin America saw numerous countries drafting new constitutions or making significant reforms. Chile was an exception, as the 1980 Constitution—enacted during the dictatorship—remained largely intact. Although controversial aspects were gradually reformed after democracy was restored, the core structure was preserved (Godoy, 2003). For years, political crises were resolved in closed-door negotiations between the ruling leftist coalition and the right-wing defenders of the dictatorship's legacy, mainly excluding public input. This approach led to the 2005 constitutional reforms, enacted without significant public discussion or media attention (Fuentes, 2012). As a result, a disconnect grew between the political system and public sentiment regarding crisis resolution.

Although there were significant constitutional amendments in 2005, scholars noted that these reforms failed to fully address Chile's main constitutional problems, mainly the ability of the political system to provide adequate measures to address citizens' concerns. Key "constitutional locks" (Atria, 2013), such as a powerful Constitutional Court, an electoral system favouring right-wing parties, and a rigid amendment process, remained in place. The reforms also risked lending legitimacy to a constitution that lacked public support. In 2015, amid mounting public pressure, President Bachelet initiated a constituent process with a civic education phase and a Citizens' Observers Council to ensure transparency and public involvement (Henríquez & García, 2023). The process included citizen participation, congressional deliberation, and a final referendum, but only the first phase was completed. When President Piñera won the 2017 election, he halted the process, instead opting for minor updates. As Henríquez and García (2023) note, while the demand for a new constitution seemed to dissipate, the 2019 protests revealed that it had merely been delayed.

In October 2019, widespread protests triggered by a metro fare increase highlighted public discontent with Chile's "negotiated transition" approach. Initially, these protests brought together diverse demands for social rights, gender equality, public services, and relief from the rising cost of living. A broad political agreement emerged, proposing a new constitution as a solution. However, as the pandemic persisted, the coherence of these demands weakened (Olavarría, 2023). Some analysts see the October protests as a "populist moment," marked by discontent with Chile's liberal deliberative model, which some felt neutralised conflict and masked hegemony as rationality (Bellolio, 2022).

The first constituent process began with a 2020 entry referendum (i.e., to trigger the process) where 78% voted to draft a new constitution and 79% supported an elected constitutional convention (instead of a convention composed by both directly elected delegates and members of Congress). The Convention's electoral framework promoted gender parity, indigenous representation, and independent candidates, which were allowed to form electoral coalitions. The electoral results ended up with a Convention that was notably left-wing, youthful, feminist, and relatively inexperienced. However, in the exit referendum of September 2022 (i.e., the ratifying referendum), the draft constitution was rejected, with 61.86% voting "reject" and only 38.14% voting "approve."

A second attempt to draft a new constitution followed, shaped by lessons from the first. In this round, Congress established principles that could not be breached and added safeguards to encourage consensus.

Political parties closely managed this process, and independent candidates were excluded, with input from constitutional law experts. Three specialised bodies were formed: an Expert Commission appointed by Congress to draft the constitutional text, a publicly elected Constitutional Council to revise it, and a Technical Admissibility Committee to resolve conflicts between proposed norms and guiding principles.

The Constitutional Council election took place in May 2023, with 50 gender-parity seats and an Indigenous quota through a national list. Mandatory voting was reinstated by a 2022 constitutional reform a decade after its elimination in 2012. The far-right Republican Party and the centre-right coalition won a majority, allowing them to pass norms without centre-left support, which held only 16 of the 51 seats. The final referendum in December 2023 saw a resounding "reject" vote, again marking Chile's second failed attempt at constitutional reform and positioning it as a unique case in comparative terms.

Ireland has become one of the world's most frequent users of referendums, which play a significant role in its governance system (Gallagher, 2021) with 40 referendums held to May 2024, with 7 of those held since 2015. Irish referendums take place exclusively at the national level and are always, to date, concerned with amendments to the constitution (Barrett, 2017), focusing on moral issues and EU treaty ratifications. While the government initiates and formulates referendum proposals, civil society plays a substantial role in campaigning and deliberation (Kenny & Kavanagh, 2022). Despite concerns about majoritarianism and potential elite dominance, Ireland's referendum experience has generally enhanced representative government (Gallagher, 2021). Research has found that referendums in Ireland have fostered high levels of popular participation and engagement, contributing to a national conversation about constitutional meaning (Barrett, 2017; Kenny & Kavanagh, 2022).

As in Chile, democratic innovation, in the form of citizen deliberation, was introduced in Ireland in response to a crisis. It was introduced as means to enhance democratic outcomes and address political challenges following the Great Recession of 2008, which had resulted in burgeoning public debt, mass unemployment, and citizen unrest. The arrival of the Troika (the International Monetary Fund, the European Commission, and the European Central Bank) added impetus and a widespread diagnosis that existing constitutional and political structures had contributed to the economic crisis in which Ireland was embroiled from 2008 onwards (Barrett, 2017; Farrell & Suiter, 2019). The first nationwide pilot citizens' assembly, "We the Citizens," demonstrated the potential of deliberative democracy in addressing economic and political reform issues (Farrell et al., 2012). This approach has been seen as way to reinvigorate democracy and address challenges such as the EU's democratic deficit and the rise of populist illiberalism by fostering trust in political processes and offering alternative forms of citizen participation (De Búrca, 2020). In 2011 a Constitutional Convention was established by resolutions of both Houses of the Oireachtas (parliament). In its manifesto, the Labour Party had proposed that of the 90 members of this body, 30 would come from the Oireachtas, 30 from ordinary citizens chosen at random, and 30 from "members of civil society organisations and other people with relevant legal or academic expertise" (Irish Labour Party, 2011, p. 46). In coalition negotiations with Fine Gael, this became the Constitutional Convention, which was asked to consider several separate topics as well as one of its own choosing. It was, as Barrett (2017) argued, relatively conservative with a large number (33%) of its membership comprised of politicians. The remaining 66% (as one of the chairs had casting vote) were randomly selected Irish citizens deliberating in facilitating small groups.

The Taoiseach (prime minister's) vision was for a Constitution Day, allowing multiple amendments to the 1937 constitution (Farrell & Suiter, 2019). Nevertheless, the initial set of issues they were tasked with deliberating on was relatively narrow: (a) reduction of the presidential term of office to five years; (b) reduction of voting age to 17; (c) review of the system of election to the Dáil; (d) the giving of voting rights in presidential elections to residents outside the state; (e) the making of provision for same-sex marriage; (f) amendment of the constitutional clause regarding the role of women in the home; (g) increasing female participation in politics; and (h) removal of the offence of blasphemy from the constitution. Other issues could be considered if time permitted: the convention ultimately considered two more issues (Dáil reform and economic, social, and cultural rights). It sat from December 2012 to March 2014. This Constitutional Convention recommended that several referendums be held, including on marriage equality, presidential age, blasphemy, voting age, abortion rights, and the removal of a gendered clause in the Constitution. These had mixed success. Marriage equality, blasphemy, and abortion rights all passed. The gender referendum did not. The government has yet to act on the voting age. Nonetheless, Ireland has since become a pioneer in this field. The success of the marriage equality and abortion referendum and the positive international headlines they garnered helped persuade later Irish governments to proceed with further deliberative assemblies (Farrell et al., 2019).

## 3. Analytical Framework and Method

There has been great debate about constitutional referendums. On the one hand, referendums have been considered valuable tools in addressing complex constitutional reforms, arguing that, if well-designed, they could bring closure to deeply contested questions (Thompson, 2022, p. 34). Constitutional referendums are expected to tackle crises through three primary virtues: simplicity, legitimacy, and completion. Simplicity means that referendums translate complex issues into, typically, one binary question that can be answered: Yes or No. Democratic legitimacy refers to maximising the people's engagement in democratic decision-making. Completion is related to the fact that referendums can settle a matter, at least for a reasonable time (Tierney, 2012). Nevertheless, constitutional referendums have been considered flawed vehicles of democratic expression (LeDuc, 2003, p. 14) because of the risk of manipulation by elites, deliberative shortcomings, and the possibility of favouring populism. This view is shared with the mainstream theory of constitutionalism, which emphasises that referendums boost constitutional entrenchment as they are frequently seen as one of the hurdles that constitutional change must check (Elster, 2000, p. 101), heightening constitutional entrenchment (Albert, 2010, p. 10).

Constitutional referendums may involve a delicate balance between evolution and inertia: they can either act as a constraint on constitutional change (decision-controlling) or catalyse constitutional change (decision-promoting; Carolan, 2020, p. 185). In order to understand how institutional design and extra-institutional factors interplay in processes of constitutional change, we propose three criteria to assess recent constitutional episodes in both Chile and Ireland: the extent and intensity of change, the model of democratic participation, and the role of elites and incumbent powers.

The selection of these three criteria stems from their relevance in addressing core challenges that typically emerge in constitutional referendums. Constitutional referendums are particularly complex because they usually involve changes that can reshape a country's political and legal structure. The first criterion captures whether the referendum entails amendments or replacements and their impacts. The second criterion

tackles how the public is involved in constitutional change—through representative, direct, or deliberative democratic practices. Understanding the model of democratic participation is key to assessing how referendums operate in the political landscape and why certain models may lead to more successful outcomes than others. Lastly, the third criterion focuses on elite cooperation and the overall political climate, which are vital for the stability and legitimacy of constitutional referendums. Since elite dynamics directly influence the process and acceptance of constitution-making, it is vital to consider how elites participate in the process.

### *3.1. The Extent and Intensity of Change*

Here we are assuming as valid the distinction between constitutional amendment and replacement (Bernal, 2013; Elkins & Hudson, 2019), even if we are aware that this difference can be blurred because a constitutional amendment may involve a wide range of changes or detailed provisions. Over the last decades, Latin American countries typically have taken a maximalist approach to constitutional change, choosing constitutional replacements, while European countries follow a minimalist approach, choosing constitutional reforms.

One explanation is the influence of the constituent power theory Colon-Rios (2019, p. 204). This theory, developed by thinkers such as Sieyès and Schmitt, attributes constituent power to the extraordinary capacity of constitution-making to reshape the political order in a revolutionary manner. While abandoned in Europe and practically absent from Anglo-American constitutionalism, the theory of constituent power has played a vital role in recent Latin American constitutionalism (Colón-Ríos, 2015, p. 166). A complementary explanation has also been found in the failure of constitutional arrangements "to work as governance structures" or the lack of space for "competing political interests from accommodating to changing environments" (Negretto, 2012, pp. 749–750).

The choice between replacement or reform is relevant for constitutional referendums because it is challenging to transform a wide range of decisions involving a constitution into a straightforward yes-or-no vote (Gargarella, 2022, p. 240). If the draft assumes characteristics of a political program, it could be perceived as undesirable by various interest groups. Consequently, a referendum in such conditions can unintentionally foster a propensity towards extreme outcomes and oversimplification of discussion. In the latter case, referendums may be deviated into mere tools for punishing the political enemy of the day (Gargarella, 2023).

### *3.2. The Model of Democratic Participation*

Classical European constitutionalism usually entrusts constitutional reform to the parliament, following a model of representative democracy that mirrors the legislative process but heightens the threshold required to pass the reform. In this model, political parties play the most prominent role. Only six EU countries have a constitutional clause introducing referendums in constitutional reforms (Estonia, France, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Slovenia). In contrast, in Latin America, myriad direct democracy mechanisms have flourished and referendums are extensively used (Verdugo, in press). These referendums can determine whether to initiate the process, be held at the end to ratify the draft, or, as in Chile, fulfil both roles. Traditional models of constitution-making such as appointed commissions or assemblies, historically important in the region, have disappeared since 1990 (Landau, 2019).

There is also a third model of democratic participation at stake: deliberative democracy. Deliberation has been highlighted as a cornerstone of democratic processes. Much evidence suggests that deliberation can influence preferences, mediate differences, and potentially lead to consensus (Chambers, 2001, p. 231). Recent developments in democratic theory have introduced specialised mechanisms, such as deliberative polls (Fishkin, 2015) and deliberative mini-publics (Curato et al., 2021). These mechanisms enhance deliberative capacity by promoting the formulation of proposals and the achievement of consensus prior to voting. Such mechanisms, when implemented before a referendum, enhance the capacity of referendums to bring about legitimately accepted constitutional changes (Doyle & Walsh, 2022).

In this light, Latin America has innovated through participatory mechanisms such as referendums, consultations, and constituent assemblies (Tschorne, 2023, p. 3); hence, it is considered "the world's richest laboratory of constitution-making under democratic considerations" (Landau, 2019, p. 567). However, those processes have been inspired by a form of democratic majoritarianism combined with an agonistic approach to politics, which reclaims the central role of conflict in democratic politics in the formation of identities that have been denied by liberal consensus (Mouffe, 1999, p. 752). Referendums may be limited in settling a matter in such a context, especially when dealing with contested questions since they tend to perform the last resort role for veto players (Hug & Tsebelis, 2002). Thus, the character and function of constitutional referendums vary qualitatively depending on how "they are structurally coupled with other elements of the political system" (Tschorne, 2023, p. 4).

### *3.3. The Role of Elites and Incumbent Powers*

This criterion addresses the ways of cooperation among elites and existing institutions. The term "elite" generally refers to political, economic, and social leaders. Here, we narrow its definition to the political elite, as described by Mosca (1984, p. 106), including only those leaders holding positions within state institutions. In a representative democracy, political elites are closely associated with elections (Dahl, 1973). Elites compete for voters' preferences, who in turn have the power to elect, re-elect, or dismiss these elites based on their performance.

Our question is about the elite's role in constitutional referendums. Gherghina and Silagadze (2021) show that elite cooperation and accommodation are crucial for the success of constitution-making referendums. Conversely, the literature on political referendums has highlighted the dangers of elite manipulation or abuse in the hands of the executive power (Landau, 2013). Similarly, Negretto and Sánchez-Talanquer (2021) highlight the pivotal role of political elites in constitution-making processes during the foundational moments of democratic regimes. This fact unveils that a procedural compromise between elites is an indispensable prerequisite for a democratic opening. For this reason, when there is rivalry between elites and the exclusion of some of them, the constitutional-making process transforms into polarisation.

In this respect, Landau has claimed that an essential goal of democratic constitution-making should be to control unilateral exercises of power by particular groups or individuals. Evidence shows that both strongmen and individual parties, unchecked by either institutions or other movements, will often take steps to consolidate their power by weakening nascent democratic institutions, and durable constitution provisions require constituent assemblies sufficiently plural and diverse (Landau, 2013, pp. 937–938).

## 4. Comparing the Cases of Chile and Ireland

### *4.1. The Extent and Intensity of Constitutional Change*

Historically, Chile has favoured reforms over replacements. Even during the transition to democracy, a minimalistic approach to the constitution was seen as a strategic response to the set of constitutional arrangements inherited from the dictatorship that prevented structural changes (García, 2014). According to Jorge Correa Sutil (a former Constitutional Court judge instrumental in the significant constitutional amendments of 2005), the constitutional debate required "entering with an eraser rather than a pencil" (Vega, 2020). However, once the constituent processes began in 2019, the constitutional debate shifted its focus, adopting a quite maximalist approach, something unheard of in Chilean constitutional contemporary history.

The October 2019 social uprising challenged the whole constitutional framework, expressing a clear demand for constitutional replacement. The October 2020 referendum confirmed this goal, and the election results for the Constitutional Convention turned the call for replacement into a drive to create a new political order. As Luna (2024) put it, these results generated the expectation that the prevailing social consensus was not only for constitutional replacement but for a radical transformation of the political order. The Constitutional Convention adopted a foundational approach from the start, envisioning the creation of a new social pact.

However, things did not go according to plan. The proposal writing process was turbulent since the Convention exhaustively tackled the myriad divisions in Chilean society. In addition, the incapacity of political parties to fulfil their traditional role, political fragmentation, inexperience, and time constraints (six months) deadlocked the situation, pushing to include numerous topics that do not necessarily qualify as constitutional issues (Palanza & Sotomayor, 2024). To secure the two-thirds needed to approve norms in the Convention, each group or sector, from Indigenous to environmentalists or animal rights activists, intended to see their demands reflected in the final proposal. Since no group could exert veto power except for specific alliances to block radical ideas, the result was a lengthy and complex text. Predictably, by incorporating previously excluded sectors in the constitutional debate, the proposal would not be "substantively minimalist": the more people and groups involved in the constitutional debate, the more topics are likely to be included in constitutional texts (King, 2013). Ultimately, the draft was filled with appeals to principles but lacked appropriate institutional designs for implementation (Larrain et al., 2023), and the referendum campaign was loaded with great diversity and intensity of preferences, which were almost impossible to articulate into a straightforward narrative.

Although procedural and electoral modifications were made to facilitate agreements in the second process, the problems concerning the extent of constitutional change persisted for two reasons. Firstly, there was no constitutional consensus, except for the generic and ambiguous 12 constitutional bases that were agreed upon by Congress. The second process's most valuable contribution was the Expert Commission's first draft, mainly comprised of people with academic credentials or extensive political experience who worked without media pressure and with lower public scrutiny (Titelman & Leighton, 2022). This draft enjoyed cross-support, but this time, the defining reason for the maximalism was the outcome of the Constitutional Council elections, now dominated by the far-right. The Council's final text was packed with clauses that flirted with ideas like nationalism and conservatism, resulting in an equally extensive text filled with partisan demands, but this time leaning toward right-wing or far-right ideology.

In the Irish case, as Barrett (2017, p. 3) argues:

> [W]hether a referendum takes place is generally consequent on legal advice being offered by the attorney general to the government that this step is constitutionally necessary in order to give effect to a given policy choice or to enshrine a particular rule in the Constitution.

Most Irish referendums fall into one of two broad categories: those dealing with social-moral issues and those dealing with governance issues, including referendums on joining the European Community and subsequent EU treaties (O'Mahony, 2013; Sinnott, 2002, p. 812). The latter were necessary to give effect to required changes in EU lawmaking. However, on moral-social issues, politicians have been reluctant to call for a referendum on controversial issues due to fear of political repercussions (Farrell & Suiter, 2019, p. 29). If there is no certainty of public support, it is better not to engage with policies that require an explicit constitutional change. For example, the issue of abortion was so divisive that politicians avoided taking action over decades precisely because of the risk that a plebiscite could end up affecting their support base. For example, the defeat of two referendums on gender and care in 2024 was seen as a clear rebuke of the government. Generally, without a clear political consensus on an issue, calling a referendum without adequate safeguards can be risky and potentially destabilising (Girvin, 1986). Thus, there is a clear preference for constitutional amendment only where necessary.

The question of moving towards constitutional replacement, which would require holding more than one referendum on the same day, is a long-standing issue in Irish politics. In its 2011 manifesto, the Labour Party called for a Constitutional Convention with "an open mandate…to review the Constitution and draft a reformed one within a year" (Irish Labour Party, 2011, p. 46). However, in the agreed Programme for Government with its larger coalition partner Fine Gael, this was amended to the eight topics mentioned above, signalling a clear preference for amendment over replacement. Indeed, one of the topics of the 2016 Citizens' Assembly was the manner in which Referenda were held in January 2018 (Citizens' Assembly, 2023, pp. 60–68). Until then, two or more referendums were held on the same day on nine occasions, with mixed results as to turnout (Barrett, 2017). Some referendum topics may also be overshadowed by others in terms of (media) attention largely depending on topic salience. This was demonstrated in the 34th and 35th amendments in May 2015 on marriage equality and presidential age, where marriage equality took up the vast majority of media bandwidth during the campaign. The number of referendums in a day was the fourth topic considered in the 2016 citizens' assembly. The citizens' assembly voted to continue with the practice and 80% voted that having more than one referendum on unrelated issues was a good idea. Further, regarding multi-option voting in a constitutional referendum, 76% voted that having more than two options on a ballot paper should be permissible. However, there was little support for multiple referendums at the same time. Thus, the status quo of amendment rather than replacement was copper fastened.

In sum, Ireland has implemented specific and precise reforms, continuously engaging in a gradual approach to constitutional change and presenting concrete proposals for referendums. In contrast, Chile opted for a more radical and extensive constitutional overhaul, which introduced a degree of uncertainty into the process that plays an important role in explaining the results of constitutional referendums.

### *4.2. The Model of Democratic Participation*

The two Chilean constituent processes formally included a set of deliberative mechanisms to purportedly enrich the constitutional debate. Although these instances promised to foster the quality of discussion among representatives and build bridges between representatives and the people, a series of factors eroded the contribution of these mechanisms.

During the first process, the Convention established a Popular Participation Commission and a technical secretariat to coordinate participation instances in two ways: self-convened and organised by the Convention. The first way included popular norm initiatives and self-convened citizen meetings. The second way was ambitiously designed, including binding intermediate referendums, mandatory public hearings, public accounts, deliberative forums, national deliberation days, communal councils and agreements, territorial constituent offices, and constituency weeks. Additionally, the Convention launched a website to disseminate information and interact with the public. All these mechanisms had to meet OECD criteria (OECD, 2020). Despite budget and planning limitations, significant efforts were made to implement those mechanisms, but the pandemic and time constraints hindered this agenda.

According to the UNDP, nearly 1,000,000 people supported at least one popular norm initiative. However, the Convention could only conduct 3% of the projected activities. The lack of time and budget contributed to the gap between designing and implementing participatory mechanisms (UNDP, 2022, p. 10). Unrealistic expectations and lack of flexibility, caused by the absence of a strategic vision for developing civic practices without prior experiences, also led to a failure that ultimately questioned the legitimacy of the Convention itself.

There was even less room for deliberation in the second process since the debate was dominated in the first stage by the Expert Commission's agreement and in the second by the partisan Constitutional Council's draft, controlled by the far right. Commentators and public opinion praised the Expert Commission's agreement, a cross-party deal that benefited from the first process's learnings. Consequently, the Constitutional Council's draft was harshly criticised for squandering the agreement (Leighton, 2024). As the surveys revealed strong rejection of the draft, the sectors controlling the Council turned the December 2023 exit referendum into a referendum on the government (Titelman, 2023). Under this framework, participation and deliberation mechanisms became irrelevant. The process of citizen participation was open for only one month (from June 7 to July 7, 2023), had a modest approach, and was entrusted to the Executive Secretariat of Citizen Participation, chaired by the University of Chile and the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile, in coordination with other universities to implement four mechanisms: popular norm initiatives, public hearings, citizen consultation, and citizen dialogues. Dominated by an agonistic logic that shaped the work of the Constitutional Council, the quality of deliberation fell short of the ideal standards developed by modern theories of deliberative democracy (Bellolio, 2022).

Beyond the differences, the two processes ignored or underestimated the complexities of building legitimacy through public involvement (Welp, 2024). In the first process, the problem was believing that representing the country's diversity in the Convention, combined with referendums, could re-legitimise the political system (Issacharoff & Verdugo, 2023). The first process underestimated the need to work not only on innovative participation mechanisms but also on developing representation channels and connecting the process with

formal and informal institutions. This naif understanding led to an expectation of legitimacy simply because of the participation of independents or ordinary citizens as "the people" (Welp, 2024). In the second process, the problem was ignoring the necessity for participation and deliberation. In fact, the Chilean path to constitutional change started in 2019 with the resurgence of "cabildos," a sort of town meeting which played a pivotal role in the country's political culture, particularly during its independence from Spain in the early 19th century.

In fact, during Michelle Bachelet's second term, cabildos were part of its constitutional reform effort. However, these cabildos were criticised for their lack of representativeness and limited impact on the final constitutional proposal. The voluntary participation inherent in the cabildos led to selection biases, favouring areas with more substantial electoral support for Bachelet's government or urban and affluent populations (Raveau et al., 2023). Ultimately, cabildos had little influence over the final draft, written by presidential advisors, with minimal transparency (Muñoz, 2018). The entire process was further undermined by the incoming right-wing administration of Sebastián Piñera, who immediately dismissed the draft. Amid the 2019 political crisis, cabildos reemerged as a key platform for public deliberation. These gatherings allowed citizens to voice concerns and propose solutions to the political crisis. Hundreds of cabildos took place across the country, many with the active role of local municipalities, playing a crucial role in initiating the constitutional process that followed (Ureta et al., 2021). However, once the Constitutional Convention was established, the influence of these citizen-led meetings waned, and the Convention became the primary body responsible for shaping the new constitution. Ultimately, both experiences highlight the failure of cabildos to translate public participation into substantive political influence, underscoring the limitations of these forums in fostering real deliberation and shaping constitutional outcomes.

As noted in Section 2, several deliberative assemblies have been significant sources of constitutional amendment proposals and, hence, referendums in Ireland over the past decade. In our set of seven referendums since 2015, marriage equality (2015); the age of president (2015); termination of pregnancy (2018); uttering of blasphemous matter (2018); the family bill (2024); and the care bill (2024) were all matters considered by previous deliberative assemblies. The 2024 referendums were both defeated as was the referendum on the age of the president. At that time, only the dissolution of marriage (2019) had not formed part of a deliberative assembly's agenda. These are not officially referendum-triggering events. Instead, in the Act, a specific assembly is set up, and the government commits to review the recommendations within a particular time frame (often nine months) and decide whether to act. Thus, while the assembly may have called for a referendum, the government must decide whether to act and in what timeframe. Thus, while the above seven referendums were triggered by the government, others proposed by a citizens' assembly were not acted upon, including voting age, voting for citizens abroad, a Dublin lord mayor, and rights of nature.

Ideally, direct democratic mechanisms promise enhanced participation and informed decision-making. However, in practice, many fall short with second-order effects, with low knowledge and low trust being perennial problems (LeDuc, 2015). Referendums can even run contrary to the expressed preferences of the voters at that referendum (Suiter & Reidy, 2015). Some scholarship suggests that there is potential to combine these elements of citizen participation (El-Wakil, 2017; Saward, 2001, p. 363) and that they may help to build the agreement between the various actors whose approval is necessary for a constitutional amendment. Indeed, Ireland has been cited as a paradigm case for such experimentation (Doyle & Walsh, 2022). Testing this, Suiter and Reidy (2020) utilised data from three Irish referendums and found that there

was greater alignment between the core values held by voters and their vote decision when a deliberative phase was introduced into the referendum process and that this alignment grew as deliberation became more systemised and normalised. However, one factor here is that these referendums were highly salient, the deliberative events preceding them attracted a good deal of media attention, and the issue at stake was relatively simple to understand. Nonetheless, it would seem that a greater understanding of referendum issues can be achieved by mini-publics extending the time allocated to discussing issues, producing rigorous and informed materials, and delivering decisions which stem from citizens who are more likely to approximate the general public and, therefore, be more trusted by ordinary voters. Further, the deliberative assembly played an important role in terms of public will formation, generating political and public support for policy, enabling political actors to avoid the pitfalls of electoral politics to formulate a referendum amendment text that was able to attract widespread support despite being deeply divisive (Doyle & Walsh, 2022). It is worth noting that attention must be paid to their representativeness and the control of such assemblies to ensure they are tools of will formation.

To conclude, it is clear that Chile chose a majoritarian form of participation rather than a deliberative approach developed in Ireland, where deliberative mechanisms have contributed to building consensus. In the same vein, it is also remarkable that in the Chilean majoritarian approach, elected bodies took advantage of electoral triumphs, excluding entirely contingent electoral losers from negotiations and agreements.

### *4.3. The Role of Elites and Incumbent Powers*

After the 2020 entry referendum, conditions seemed ideal to establish an adequate "social pact." Opinion polls studies showed that rejection was driven mainly by far-right groups, and the widespread preference for a fully elected Constitutional Convention brought together a broad and heterogeneous range of ideological preferences, "encompassing people from the moderate right to those positioned more to the left" (Meléndez et al., 2021, p. 277). These analyses indicated that the constitutional articulation of the diverse demands made visible by the social uprising of October 2019 seemed the right path. However, the other question posed in the ballot at the entry referendum was about the body to make a constitutional proposal. As put by García-Huidobro (2024, p. 169), through this decision, "political elites delegated to the voters a highly conflictive aspect of the process design that prevented cooperation between them at critical stages when consensus-building was most needed."

The political right, faced with the opening of a new constituent process in 2019, reacted ambivalently: while some leaders decisively supported this process as a way to address the social crisis expressed in the streets, others resisted and faced the electoral processes of the first referendum and the election of the convention members with an evident obstructionist attitude (Alenda, 2020). In the referendum of October 2020, a significant part of the traditional right-wing political parties gave the minutes allotted to them in the public electoral broadcast to independent movements that never wanted to join the consensus to start a new process. The political right-wing elites' lack of identification with constitutional change resulted in an electoral debacle that led to the coalition even below the necessary one-third required to exert veto power in the Convention. Thus, the ideal conditions were now set for a significant group of convention members to enter the constituent body without any willingness to collaborate in the deliberations. Therefore, once the disastrous electoral results of the Convention were known, the right wing's strategy from the outset was to bet everything on a polarising campaign aimed at the exit referendum.

As explained in Section 2, the second process became even more polarised than the previous when the Republican party took the overwhelming majority of seats in the Constitutional Council. As Bellolio (2024, p. 24), put it "[w]hen in power, the Republican Party deliberately chose to draft a partisan constitution, meaning a constitution that unmistakably reflects the ideological DNA of one political faction while excluding the other." Although this mindset was somehow expected during the first failed process, with a prevalence of social movements activated around the social unrest of 2019, the Republican Party had the previous failure in sight during the second process. Their delegates dismantled the cross-supported agreement reached by the expert commission and pushed boundaries towards a draft that embodied backlash politics. If they failed in their strategy, the worst-case scenario for them would be maintaining the status quo.

In this scenario, Chile's recent failed processes are likely a textbook case for a substantial body of scholarly literature highlighting the determining role of cooperation and dialogue among political elites in the success of a constitution-making process (Negretto, 2020). Beyond the various academic and political analyses regarding the popular rejection of the two constitutional proposals prepared by constituent assemblies composed of radically opposing political forces (Suiter et al., 2022), a predominant factor emerges: the institutional design of these processes granted an exclusive role to the assemblies, relegating the elected representatives of incumbent powers to secondary and tertiary roles (García-Huidobro, 2024). Faced with an electoral contingency unforeseen by those who designed the rules and allocated the costs and benefits of both processes, there was no adequate response. The conditions for cooperation and dialogue among political elites vanished with the electoral results of the constituent assemblies.

On the one hand, the Constitutional Convention was dominated by far-left sectors and other independent movements advocating for particular or factional causes (Larrain et al., 2023, p. 242), while the Constitutional Council; on the other, was controlled by a recently formed far-right party with limited technical personnel prepared to address the magnitude of the constitutional task. In both cases, traditional politicians were punished at the polls and excluded from having a significant role in the decision-making assemblies. Additionally, the electoral results prevented the centre-right in the first process and the centre-left in the second from exercising veto power or fully participating in normative agreements. This turned the Chilean case into a "perfect storm" for constitutional change processes.

Deliberative processes promote a collaborative approach to interactions, which can appear fundamentally at odds with the partisanship that drives political party success (Gherghina & Jacquet, 2023). The elements of partisan politics that aid candidates during election campaigns, such as highlighting differences and avoiding consensus, can ultimately overshadow governance institutions and weaken the deliberative practices vital for fostering positive change (Parkinson, 2012). Increased polarisation and declining civility in political discourse (Massaro & Stryker, 2012) within the broader information environment can deter citizens from engaging deeply in political debates. Consequently, citizens increasingly rely on partisan cues or disengage from participation altogether (Dryzek et al., 2019). Nonetheless, political parties can incorporate more deliberative practices within a broader deliberative system (Parkinson, 2012) to rectify specific deficiencies in their internal operations (intra-party), relationships with other parties (inter-party), and interactions with the public (Gherghina & Jacquet, 2023). Focusing on the immediate benefits and addressing the issues targeted by these processes can provide more practical insights into the motivations of those commissioning them (Lacelle-Webster & Warren, 2023).

In Ireland, the government always decides to hold a referendum, which must then gain approval from the parliament. This procedure also applies to citizens' assemblies. Irish citizens' assemblies are commissioned by newly-formed coalition governments and defined by their Terms of Reference from the Oireachtas (Parliament). Politicians and parties play significant roles in proposing topics, defining the consultation framework, and responding to recommendations for both. Although factors beyond governmental control, such as EU Treaty expansions, sometimes necessitate referendums.

In terms of bridging differences, both referendums and deliberative processes fulfil several overlapping political functions. Barrett (2017) argues that referendums have functioned as institutionalised safety valves for political pressure—mechanisms for releasing political steam or removing unpopular issues from the political agenda, thereby absolving politicians from blame for controversial decisions. The same is true of citizens' assemblies. Citizens' assemblies provide political cover for politicians otherwise hesitant to endorse specific issues. McGraw (2015) suggests that both the larger parties are "ideologically flexible vote-seekers" (see also Mainwaring & McGraw, 2019), competing mainly on salience and emphasising the issues which they believe will be electorally useful. Therefore, they are more likely to have disparate internal opinions and potentially see citizens' assemblies as a way to navigate intra-party disagreements. Given their wide social basis for support and competitiveness in every constituency, they have removed controversial topics (e.g., Northern Ireland and abortion) from the realm of party politics through the use of referendums and, arguably, with citizens' assemblies.

In this way, citizens' assemblies can bridge intra-party issues in large parties to gain internal momentum for policy change while allowing more minor parties to garner cross-party support and advance policy priorities. Thus, citizens' assemblies have been used to bridge inter and intra-party differences, enabling smaller parties to push for policy change and larger parties to bridge differences across their more ideologically diverse base. Assemblies also allow winning parties to overcome their differences during coalition negotiations to form a government (Saintraint & Suiter, 2024). Some policy agreements are made during the course of this process, but these assemblies also allow some to be deferred concerning particular matters that cannot be resolved during negotiations or for which their mandate for action is limited. For example, in the setting up of the first Constitutional Convention in 2011, a compromise between Fine Gael's and Labour's competing proposals for political reform resulted in the hybrid membership (66 citizen members and 33 politicians) and its relatively long list of constitutional issues.

To sum up, in Ireland, assemblies operate as a collaborative delegation, with the government and parliament offering crucial support and cooperation to develop constitutional proposals. In contrast, in Chile, both the Constitutional Convention and the Constitutional Council carried out their functions in isolation from the institutional context and in ongoing conflict with political elites and incumbent powers.

## 5. Some Reflections on Constitutional Referendums: Possibilities and Limitations

The Chilean case is puzzling because the process started with strong support in October 2020, but the two proposals submitted to the referendum were rejected. Some scholars have suggested that the design of these referendums may explain the outcomes (Larrain et al., 2023; Zepeda, 2023). Nevertheless, comparing the Irish case provides reasons to consider how legal regulations and political institutions interplay with other factors and conditions that make constitutional change possible. As Courant (2021, pp. 1–2) puts it:

> Ireland stands out as a truly unique case because, on the one hand, it held four consecutive randomly selected citizens' assemblies, and on the other hand, some of those processes produced major political outcomes through three successful referendums; no other country shows such a record.

Chile's path to constitution-making diverged from other Latin American cases, particularly from the "Bolivarian" approach seen in countries like Bolivia and Venezuela. Unlike these cases, where populist presidents drove constitutional reforms to expand executive powers, Chile's process was essentially a response to a "crisis of representation" that culminated in massive social unrest in 2019 (Piscopo & Siavelis, 2021). Under public pressure and in a context of declining trust in institutions, the Chilean political elite turned to a citizen-driven constitutional process as a compromise solution. The process mandated an entry referendum, giving voters control over whether to proceed with constitutional reform and how to structure the convention responsible for drafting a new constitution. The decision-making mechanism was carefully designed to distance Chile from executive-centric models, emphasising broad representation and legal continuity over populist approaches. Thus, referendums played a distinctive role in Chile's constitutional journey, not as tools for consolidating executive authority but as means to facilitate democratic legitimacy and prevent elite control (Tschorne, 2023).

In Ireland, there is an awareness of the adverse effects of designing referendums that encompass too many issues, which in Chile was not taken into consideration. Consequently, referendums in Ireland have traditionally been held on specific matters, with sufficient time intervals between them. While this approach may attract criticism for the perceived slow pace of constitutional change, it has resulted in a high approval rate and legitimacy for the referendums. The Irish constitution was drawn up in 1937 and thus requires updating. There has been occasional pressure for more wide-ranging reform, yet the clear preference seems to be for more iterative constitutional amendments rather than replacement.

Chile has taken bold steps beyond its previous focus on specific reforms in the period studied. This change is primarily due to constitutional rules that hindered democratic consolidation until a major crisis arose. This entire constitutional framework was questioned during the "constitutional moment" triggered by the social uprising of October 2019, when the demand for a replacement of the 1980 Constitution became evident. If the referendum of October 2020 confirmed this goal, the results of the election to the Constitutional Convention transformed the will for constitutional replacement into a foundational drive to create a new political order. The theory of constituent power did the rest of the work: the mistaken reading of the electoral results from the Constitutional Convention claimed that its legitimacy did not depend on the established order but directly on the people. All of this resulted in a constitutional proposal that more closely resembled the Bolivarian tradition of the new Latin American constitutionalism a long and detailed constitutional text full of particular ambitions and aspirations for substantive transformation. In the second process, the issue repeated itself, this time not as tragedy but as comedy. In a Constitutional Council dominated by the far right and without veto power for centre-left forces, there was no incentive to achieve the electoral or social consensus required for a constituent process. Again, the proposal resulted in a lengthy text filled with messages directed at the support bases of the predominant right-wing electoral forces within the second constituent assembly.

Regarding the model of democratic participation, Chile opted for an elected body. In the case of the first process, corrections were introduced to bolster descriptive representation (quotas, reserved seats, etc.). This model dismissed the importance of deliberation and the shortcomings of the traditional conception of

representative democracy even reframed in its descriptive dimension in the first process. On both occasions, the elected Chilean constitutional bodies were unable to build a broader consensus in terms of public opinion. Although the Chilean constituent processes included various participatory tools, the efforts were overshadowed by electoral results discouraging the building-consensus process. In this light, Morales and Pérez (2025) identify four pivotal socio-political cleavages that were activated by the process' design—clerical versus anticlerical, urban versus rural mindset, social class belonging, and democratic versus authoritarian mindset. According to them, these factors significantly influenced voter behaviour, the overall result, and how contentious some of the debates are in Chilean society.

As discussed earlier, the electoral results of both constituent assemblies were decisive in shaping a majoritarian or competitive conception of democracy (Lijphart, 2012). If, due to electoral contingencies, a constituent assembly is formed in a way that makes it unnecessary to reach agreements with significant opposing political forces, there is a risk that constitution-making processes may end up co-opted by competitive or agonistic electoral logics. As the results of the two Chilean exit referendums show, without tools or incentives to generate prior consensus or to form a truly informed public opinion, exit referendums are highly likely to fail. Perhaps, as Verdugo (in press) suggests, it is necessary to reconsider whether constituent assemblies are a regulative ideal for replacing a constitution. However, as we argue here, the regulative ideal of a constituent assembly is better situated within a conception of deliberative democracy that enables a more thorough assessment of consensus, cleavages and particularities of the constitutional discussion in each society, whether they manifest as reforms or replacements.

On the contrary, there is already significant evidence that the Irish citizen assemblies model offers an adequate deliberative environment by strengthening the communication channels between citizens and institutions. The Irish case has allowed a renewed appreciation of the democratic value of constitutional change processes (Doyle & Walsh, 2022). The justification for constitutional change rules based on a consensual conception of democracy has found a new ally in citizens' assemblies, allowing for public opinion formation before a referendum. While citizens' assemblies are not a panacea and have seen some recent failures, they provide valuable lessons on how demands for constitutional change interact with the scope of necessary reforms. As shown by the Irish case, the political motivation behind constitutional change rules lies not only in pressing legal needs or in sure bets in electoral victories but primarily in the ability to generate consensus, which requires significant political leadership and will to engage a diverse and plural political community.

Regarding the role of elites and incumbent powers, the Chilean model suffered from levels of polarisation, which is surprising given that the constituent cycle began in 2019 with high approval rates. However, this consensus broke down once the Constitutional Convention began to work. The main reason for this polarisation is the behaviour of the political elites both inside and outside the Constitutional Convention and the Constitutional Council. In the first draft, the right-wing obstructed the process, while the left tried to overpower those who lost the election (right-wing and centrist parties). In the second draft, right-wing sectors took over the process with a similar partisan spirit but the other way around.

This antagonistic environment starkly contrasts the Irish constitutional processes of 2012, 2015, and 2018, which started with higher levels of polarisation but saw a decrease during the deliberation and approval of those amendments. Research strongly suggests that this outcome can be explained to a large degree by the crucial role that deliberative assemblies play in generating high-quality materials that reflect the authentic

views of citizens representing the general public. These assemblies enrich debate and help prevent partisan politics. Furthermore, they are vital in shaping public opinion ahead of a referendum, enabling political leaders to advocate for amendments that receive broad support, even on contentious issues.

While Ireland's experience suggests that deliberative or citizen assemblies can contribute to constitutional consensus, their relative success may not be easily replicated in contexts or cases marked by elite polarisation and political distrust, such as Chile. The Chilean process was constrained by a majoritarian democratic framework, where contingent electoral triumphs provided incentives for dominant factions to exclude opposition groups rather than seek compromise. This raises the question of whether a more incremental approach to constitutional change—gradually addressing constitutional demands rather than attempting a full replacement—could have led to better outcomes. Ultimately, the Chilean case highlights the structural and political challenges that shape constitution-making, underscoring that citizen participation alone is insufficient without elite cooperation and sustained institutional support.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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# The Emotional Dimension of the Catalan Independentist Referendum in 2017

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## Abstract

In this article, we examined the emotional regime emerging in Catalonia as a result of the 1st of October 2017 independence referendum and determined the effect of emotions and cleavages, among others, on the decision to vote in this referendum. The emotional regime, which involves the articulation of normative emotions and dominant practices in political mobilisation, is interrelated with affective polarisation. Indeed, for this phenomenon to occur the presence of positive emotions towards the ingroup and negative emotions towards the outgroup is necessary. In Catalonia, the formation of both groups—pro-independence and non-independence—is the result of the evolution of the Catalan nationalist cleavage. We used four surveys carried out by the Equipo de Investigaciones Políticas of the University of Santiago de Compostela (EIP-USC) and advanced statistical techniques. Our analysis reveals that, after the referendum, there was an increase in positive emotional presence towards pro-independence actors, which decreased as the Catalan independence process—the *procés*—progressed. We have found that, although the variable with the greatest effect in voting decision at the referendum was party identification, emotions towards leaders and parties and the Catalan nationalist cleavage greatly influenced this decision.

## Keywords

Catalonia; emotions; independence; nationalism; referendum

## 1. Introduction

Throughout history, referendums have been one of the most widely used resources to try to achieve the secessionist aspirations of some territories considered stateless nations (Keating, 1997, 2021). Many independence processes end up resorting to referendums as a mechanism of direct democracy capable of

legitimizing their aspirations (Willner-Reid, 2018). Although the logic behind referendums is that it is citizens who give legitimacy to secessionist aspirations, the truth is that, due to their generally consultative nature, the only thing referendums do is confirm what their political representatives had previously decided (Moreno, 2020). This linkage of secessionist referendum outcomes to partisan interests is due to the fact that political leaders and parties influence voters' perceptions, even to the point of generating new identities. Therefore, understanding the voting decision process proves to be a crucial objective.

While there is a large literature on electoral voting behaviour, there is little theory on how voters behave in direct democracy (Hobolt, 2006). A priori, one might think that the factors that lead voters to vote in a referendum are related to the idiosyncrasies of such an exceptional event. But the fact that leaders or political parties do not appear on referendum ballots does not imply that their influence is irrelevant to the results. It could be the voters' own political predispositions, such as their partisan identification or their emotions towards the political elites, that underpin their decision to vote for or against independence. However, until recently, emotional links with group identity or political elites seemed to be the great forgotten in the study of political behaviour. A component that cannot be neglected given that politics seems to be increasingly emotional by the presence of emotions in both the speeches of political leaders and the political content of the media, intensifying the perception that we are facing the "age of emotion" (Moss et al., 2020).

Referendums have been used in some of the best-known cases of the so-called peripheral nationalism, such as Catalonia, Quebec, and Scotland (Giori, 2017). However, in none of the three cases, for different reasons, has this mechanism resulted in the desired objective: the separation of the territories from their respective states. What differentiates the Catalan referendum from the previous ones is that the referendums held in Quebec and Scotland had the approval of the government of Canada and the United Kingdom, which facilitated their implementation and the validity of their results. This was not the case in Catalonia, where the referendum was illegal.

In contrast to studies on the Catalan independence process and its evolution over the last 15 years (della Porta et al., 2019; Muñoz & Guinjoan, 2013; Rivera et al., 2016; Serrano, 2013) that pay attention to aspects such as the roots of the conflict, the demands for independence, and the resources and strategies of the governments and elites involved, our research tries to determine the emotional regime of the Catalan citizenship around the Catalan independence process, the so-called "*procés*," in general and the referendum in particular, in order to subsequently identify how these emotions, among others, explain the vote in favour of the independence of Catalonia at the illegal plebiscite held in 2017. The emotional regime, which involves the articulation of normative emotions and dominant practices in political mobilisation (Reddy, 2001), is interrelated with affective polarisation, since the presence of positive emotions towards the ingroup and negative emotions towards the outgroup is necessary to this phenomenon. In Catalonia, the formation of both groups—pro-independence and non-independence—is related to the evolution of the Catalan nationalist cleavage.

To achieve its objectives, this article first presents the theoretical framework explaining the concept of emotional regime and its relationship with cleavages and the main contributions of the literature on voting in self-determination referendums from an emotional perspective, from which our research hypotheses emerge. This is followed by the context necessary to understand the origin of the Catalan *procés* until its culmination: the referendum on Catalan independence, and its subsequent evolution until the 2023 regional

elections, which mark the end of the *procés*. After explaining the methodology and the data, we present the results of the descriptive analysis that allowed us to observe the configuration of the emotional regime, followed by the regression model that explains the decision to vote in the referendum. Finally, we present the conclusions of our analysis and the contributions of our research to the study of voting behaviour in self-determination referendums.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

The specialized literature analyses independence referendums from three main perspectives: (a) the analysis of their origin and who calls them, and therefore their legality, which is a recurrent subject of academic disagreement; (b) the referendum as a form of expression of the demands of the social movements that drive them (della Porta et al., 2019), reflecting a strong nationalist sentiment rooted in society; and (c) the referendum as a technical/strategic mechanism used by the elites to achieve their objectives (Colomer, 2018). Thus, although the referendums in Quebec (Clarke et al., 2004; Nadeau et al., 1999) and Scotland (Liñeira & Henderson, 2019; Liñeira et al., 2017), as well as the relationship between Brexit secessionist dynamics and vote orientation (Clarke et al., 2017; Hobolt et al., 2021; Vasilopoulou & Wagner, 2020), have been extensively studied, there are still few studies from a political behaviour perspective, and even fewer that have approached electoral analysis from an emotional perspective (Brouard et al., 2021; Clarke et al., 2017; Garry, 2013).

While there is a large literature on behaviour in ordinary elections, there are still not many contributions on how voters behave in direct democracy (Hobolt, 2006; LeDuc, 2002). However, the study of voting behaviour in self-determination referendums is of special interest given the exceptional nature of such events, which makes them salient issues (Brouard et al., 2021). In response to dramatic events, such as wars or man-made disasters, or politically designed events, such as referendums, where individuals are forced to position themselves, new identities emerge or crystallize (Hobolt et al., 2021). Referendums are then about positional issues (Vasilopoulou & Wagner, 2020) which, in the case of Catalonia, implies the division of the political elite and, consequently, of the citizenry, into two new identities: pro-independence and non-independence. Indeed, the hegemony of the "*procés*" as master frame has been such that it has led to the forced positioning of all political actors—although this division is nothing more than the product of the evolution of another cleavage that traditionally, along with ideology, has articulated partisan competition in Catalonia: Catalan nationalism (Cazorla & Rivera, 2016). Therefore, relying on these two axes of competition, the ideological and the identitarian, we formulate our first hypothesis:

> H1: The Catalan nationalist cleavage is the predominant cleavage shaping voter decision-making at the 2017 referendum.

Although, unlike conventional elections, referendums are exceptional events, partisan identification has also been revealed as one of the explanatory factors of voting decision (Brouard et al., 2021; Clarke et al., 2004; Liñeira & Henderson, 2019). However, in this type of consultations, when independence is the issue and party systems tend to be structured according to the identity cleavage, partisan identification reflects preferences for independence. This cognitive shortcut would allow voters to behave according to their party's narrative, relying more on the positioning of the organization than on their own reflections about independence (Garry, 2013; Hobolt, 2006). From this argument derives our second hypothesis:

> H2: Partisan identification with pro-independence parties is the most important component in the pro-independence vote.

Not forgetting that Campbell et al. (1960) in their seminal research define partisan identification as "individual affective orientation towards an important object or group in their environment" (p. 121), so this concept is based on an emotional component. The importance of affects and emotions in political decision-making, and their influence on our cognitive perceptions, has led to multiple more or less empirical investigations, which start from the notion that explanations of political action based exclusively on cognitive elements are only partial explanations (Redlawsk, 2006).

This emotional revival has also reached the study of referendums, several of them linked to the social identity approach (Abrams et al., 2020; Grant et al., 2017; Hobolt et al., 2021; Tajfel, 1970), on which the idea of affective polarization is based, understood as an emotional attachment to in-group partisans and hostility towards out-group partisans (Green et al., 2004; Iyengar et al., 2012). Tajfel's (1970) theory refers to the awareness that individuals themselves would have of belonging to certain social groups, together with the emotional significance and value that such membership would have for them (Tajfel, 1981, p. 255). Supporters of a political formation with high levels of aversion towards other parties feel more incentivized to differentiate themselves from their political opponents, so they will position themselves on issues in accordance with their partisan preferences and away from the positions of those of other parties (Druckman et al., 2021). In addition, when members of a group feel wronged, they employ various strategies to both protect themselves and enhance their identity (Abrams, 2015; Abrams & Hogg, 1988). These strategies include protest actions, especially when that harmful situation is perceived as illegitimate. Injustices activate emotions such as anger (van Zomeren et al., 2008).

Again, issue opinion and partisan identity would be interrelated. And precisely because self-determination referendums entail positioning on identity-related issues, compared to most ordinary elections, independence referendums involve a high emotional engagement of citizens (Liñeira et al., 2017; Nadeau et al., 1999; Vasilopoulou & Wagner, 2020), to the extent that this emotional reaction can generate two differentiated identities, contributing to the increase of affective polarization (Hernández et al., 2021). Following this logic, it is at the time of holding a referendum that we perceive the greatest emotional effervescence, with emotions subsiding as time passes, which leads us to formulate our third hypothesis:

> H3: Emotional polarization is highest at the time of holding the independence referendum in 2017, with a higher presence of emotions towards political leaders and parties among Catalans.

However, most referendum research that has incorporated the study of emotions has focused primarily on three emotions at a time: (a) fear, anger, and anxiety (Garry, 2013), with anxious voters relying on substantive EU issues and angry voters relying on second-order elements related to domestic politics when voting in the referendum on the fiscal pact in Ireland; (b) fear, anger, and enthusiasm, with angry Remainers and enthusiastic Leavers changing their party vote after Brexit in line with their positioning towards this issue and even breaking with their partisan identification (Vasilopoulou & Wagner, 2020); or (c) fear, anger, and pride, with anger and pride towards New Caledonia as part of the French territory being the emotions that, respectively, have positive and negative effects on the likelihood of voting for independence (Brouard et al., 2021). A somewhat different proposal is that of Clarke et al. (2017), who took into account eight

emotions, four positive (pride, hope, confidence, and happiness) and four negative (fear, anger, disgust, and uneasiness), that respondents expressed when describing their affections for their country's membership in the EU.

As observed in the work of Clarke et al. (2017), independence referendums, as they are particularly emotive events, rather than arousing only three emotions, may draw an emotional regime in voters. This is a concept inspired by Hochschild's (1979) "feeling rules," social conventions that shape how people express their emotions in different contexts, which refers to the limited sense of the articulation of normative emotions and dominant practices in political mobilization (Hidalgo, 2018; Lagares, Máiz, & Rivera, 2022; Moss et al., 2020; Reddy, 2001). Moreover, it may be argued that the concepts of emotional regime and affective polarization are interrelated, since one of the necessary requirements for affective polarization to occur is the presence of positive emotions towards the ingroup and negative emotions towards the outgroup (Green et al., 2004; Iyengar et al., 2012) or, in other words, the existence of a common emotional regime among members of the same group.

The Catalan independence process, the so-called "*procés*," is the product of a "strategy driven by a politically motivated elite endogenous to the political process of sustained and growing confrontation with the Spanish government" (Colomer, 2018). It is the political elites who command the process leading to the referendum. And it is the political predispositions that act as mediators before the voting decision. However, although instability and progressive polarization have undoubtedly been the keynote of Catalan politics in the last 10 years, the degree of polarization of the political and media narrative could be different from the feelings of citizens (Lagares, Máiz, & Rivera, 2022). This is why the study of the emotional regime of supporters and non-supporters of independence towards the Catalan political parties and elites is of special interest—an analysis that could also serve as an indicator of the level of polarization of Catalan society. Thus, we formulate our fourth hypothesis:

> H4: The emotional regime of voters in favour of Catalan independence is articulated on positive emotions towards pro-independence leaders and parties and on negative emotions towards non-independence supporters.

Our interest, however, lies not only in describing the emotional regime of pro- and non-independence voters, but also in identifying which discrete emotions have a significant effect on the voting decision in the Catalan referendum, thus contributing to the literature on the study of voting behaviour in referendums from an emotional perspective. To this end, we formulate our fifth hypothesis:

> H5: Positive emotions towards pro-independence leaders and parties have a positive effect on the voting decision in favour of Catalan independence in the 2017 referendum.

## 3. Context

Catalan nationalism originated in the first half of the 19th century, linked to the exaltation of Catalan culture and language. It was originally regionalist rather than secessionist in nature. The Catalan process, which has transitioned from a regionalist model to secessionist aspirations, has been led by the Catalan political elite (Barrio & Rodríguez-Teruel, 2017; Colomer, 2018; Jaráiz et al., 2019; Rivera et al., 2016), which uses the

defence of Catalonia's right to self-determination and popular consultation through a referendum as mechanisms to achieve its objectives. The pursuit of referendums to achieve independence has also been a strategy employed by nationalist political elites in other contexts such as Scotland.

If one had to point to a date that marks the beginning of the *procés*, it would probably be the 28 June 2010, the day the Constitutional Court declared unconstitutional 14 articles, with 27 others being subject to a narrow interpretation by the Court, of the Catalan statute of autonomy approved in 2006 (Caamaño, 2016). Reactions were swift and, on the very day the ruling was published, the then president of the Generalitat of Catalonia, José Montilla (Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya [PSC]), encouraged citizens to participate in a demonstration in rejection of the ruling. The demonstration was called by Òmnium Cultural, but it was supported by all the political parties in parliament, except for the Partido Popular (PP) and Ciudadanos (Cs). This mobilisation, in which posters and proclamations in favour of Catalan independence, as well as *Estelada* flags, were already the predominant feature of the day, seemed to be the prelude to the staging of what, from here on, Catalan politics was: the polarisation between pro-independence and non-independence parties, with non-positioned relegated to a secondary role. This polarisation represents the political dimension of the Catalan conflict, marked by changes in the Spanish party system, especially the rise of the extreme right (Vox), as well as the consolidation of Cs and Podemos as decisive parties in the formation of the national government.

Since then, events have followed one after another. Among many others, every 11 September, the *Diada de Catalunya* is celebrated. Although it is called by civil society organisations such as Òmnium Cultural or the Assemblea Nacional Catalana, it has roots in pro-independence political parties. Between 2009 and 2011, more than 500 non-binding municipal consultations on independence took place (Muñoz & Guinjoan, 2013) and in January 2013 the Catalan parliament adopted the Declaration of Sovereignty that affirmed Catalonia as a sovereign political subject, signalling the political will to hold a referendum in the near future, despite the fact that the Constitutional Court also declared it unconstitutional, fuelling the conflict between Catalan and Spanish institutions (Orriols & Rodon, 2016). While awaiting the long-awaited referendum, on 9 November 2014, just over two million Catalans took part in a symbolic and non-binding vote led by extra-parliamentary actors and movements, albeit with the support of the Catalan parliament (della Porta et al., 2019).

Likewise, political parties began their ideological repositioning, from more moderate nationalist positions to openly pro-independence stances, the highest expression of which was the Junts pel Sí (JxSí) coalition, a candidacy for the 2015 Catalan parliamentary elections formed by Convergencia Democrática de Cataluña (CDC) and Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC), as well as Demócratas de Cataluña and Moviment d'Esquerres. These formations, despite their a priori ideological distancing, justified their union under the objective of Catalan independence, winning elections that had been planned as a plebiscite (Rivera et al., 2016). Although the spatial reconfiguration of political competition began to take shape in 2010, it became clearly two-dimensional in the 2015 regional elections, when the ideological and identity cleavages had an unequal weight, with the former weakening and the latter gaining ground (Lagares et al., 2021; Pereira, 2016; Rivera & Jaráiz, 2016). After these elections, however, disagreements began within the ideological left, which showed its clout within the coalition by vetoing Artur Mas (Martí & Cetrà, 2016).

The reconfiguration of the party system was accompanied by the modification of the increasingly emotionally charged narrative (Feijóo-Vázquez et al., 2023), which evolved over the years, from a positioning

of the elites in favour of the so-called "right to decide," through the holding of a referendum, to the demand for independence—although, strategically, the right to decide and the demand for independence are intermingled in the pro-independence discourse (Cetrà & Harvey, 2019), which is why some parties even argue that to vote in favour of independence one does not have to be a nationalist (Colomer, 2018).

The fulfilment of the electoral promise came with the approval by the Catalan parliament of the law of rupture with Spain, at the same time that President Artur Mas (Convergència i Unió [CiU]) was disqualified for two years for the 9N consultation, and the Referendum Law, which eventually was suspended by the constitutional court, as well as the law of legal transition approved the following day, which led Mariano Rajoy's administration to take control of the budget with the Ministry of the Interior taking over the coordination of the security forces in Catalonia, further fuelling the confrontation between the two blocks for and against independence. These judicial decisions represent the legal dimension of the Catalan conflict, which plays a fundamental role in the evolution of events. Moreover, in addition to the political and legal dimensions, a third one should be mentioned: the communicative dimension, which played also an important role in the polarisation process. It was characterised by the strong media campaign of the national media against the pro-Catalan process and specifically against Catalan independence.

Despite the suspension of the law, and at a time of heightened tension between the Catalan and Spanish governments, the referendum for independence was held in Catalonia on the 1st of October 2017. It was called by the pro-independence Catalan parliament and led to a wave of demonstrations both in favour of independence and in defence of the unity of Spain. The referendum asked the following yes/no question: "Do you want Catalonia to be an independent state in the form of a republic?" and according to the Catalan government, 2,262,424 Catalans (43.03%) voted in the referendum, with 90.73% in favour and 7.8% against.

In view of these results, 10 days after the holding of the referendum, the then president of the Generalitat, Carles Puigdemont (JxSí), declared, and then temporarily suspended, the independence of Catalonia. In response, the Spanish government of PP approved the application of Article 155 of the Spanish Constitution, which meant the suspension of the autonomy of Catalonia and the calling of elections within a maximum period of six months. On 2 June 2018, Quim Torra (Junts per Catalunya [JxCat]) took office as president following the elections of 21 December 2017. At the same time, the entire Catalan government at the time of the referendum, as well as other political and civil society representatives, were charged with the crimes of rebellion, sedition, usurpation of public functions, disobedience, and embezzlement of public funds. Some were imprisoned, and others, like Puigdemont, flew the country. It took about two years for the Supreme Court to sentence the defendants to prison terms of between 9 and 13 years for the crime of sedition, leading to an explosion of demonstrations, protests, and riots in Catalonia. These imprisonments marked the beginning of the break-up of the pro-independence bloc, in which ideological differences had been so far bridged by the nationalist cleavage. Subsequently, after a period in which Torra's disqualification for refusing to remove a banner from the façade of the Generalitat was on the table, a government crisis arose between JxCat and ERC, anticipating a call for elections that had to be postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The postponement was long enough for Torra to be disqualified and the then Vice-President Pere Aragonés (ERC) to assume the position of acting president, an office he finally took, with the support of JxCat and the Candidatura d'Unitat Popular (CUP) following the elections held on 14 February 2021. These elections meant a narrow victory for the PSC. This victory was consolidated with the subsequent victory of this party in the elections of 2024, and the investiture as president of the Generalitat of Salvador Illa (PSC), thus putting an end to the *procés*.

## 4. Data and Methodology

This research has two main objectives: (a) to determine the emotional regime that emerged around the Catalan process, both at the time of the referendum on the independence of Catalonia and from a longitudinal perspective, between 2015 and 2022; and (b) to identify the explanatory factors of the vote in favour of independence in the 2017 referendum, paying attention to the role of emotions towards political actors in the voting decision.

To achieve both objectives and test the hypotheses, a quantitative methodology was adopted using a descriptive analysis and constructing an additive multivariate regression model. The logic of the additive model responded to the grouping of many variables in three dimensions. The first refers to the emotional component, differentiating between emotions towards leaders and political parties and sympathy towards the political formations themselves. The emotions included in the model were pride, fear, hope, anxiety, enthusiasm, anger, hatred, contempt, concern, calmness, resentment, bitterness, and disgust, and its use has been successfully tested on numerous occasions in the field of political behaviour (Jaráiz et al., 2020; Marcus, 2013; Marcus et al., 2000). The second dimension corresponds to sociodemographic variables (gender, age, and level of education or employment status) and contextual variables (personal, current, and prospective economic evaluations of Catalonia, and the evaluation of the current and prospective politics in Catalonia and Spain). Finally, the third dimension corresponds to political attitudes: ideological and nationalist self-placements.

In all the surveys used in this research, for the measurement of emotions, we asked about a total of 13 emotions, 12 of which correspond to the orthogonal full set solution proposed by the American National Election Studies 1995 pilot study (Marcus et al., 2000), to which calmness was added. The measurement of the thirteen emotions was done through three questions: (a) presence of the emotion (whether or not the respondent has ever felt an emotion); (b) intensity of the emotion felt on a scale from 1 (*low intensity*) to 5 (*high intensity*); and (c) duration of the emotional expression (whether the respondent continues to feel the emotion; for more information see Jaráiz et al., 2020). For the purpose of this study, however, only emotional presence was used. Likewise, in the four surveys, sympathy was the variable through which partisan identification was measured. This variable corresponds to the question: "In any case, which is the party for which you feel more sympathy or is closer to your ideas?" the answer being totally spontaneous (for more information see Lagares, Pereira & Jaráiz, 2022).

The proposed statistical analysis was possible thanks to the use of four surveys carried out by the Equipo de Investigaciones Políticas of the University of Santiago de Compostela (EIP-USC) at four different points in time: the first three are post-electoral surveys of the autonomous elections in Catalonia in 2015 (EPEAC 2015; carried out between 16 November and 23 December), 2018 (EPEAC 2018; from 15 May to 15 July), and 2021 (EPEAC, 2021; carried out between 17 March and 28 April), with a sample of 1,400 in the first case and 1,000 in the other two; and the fourth was carried out in 2022 (EPECC 2022; 11–21 October) with a sample of 400 individuals. The four surveys were carried out according to a random selection sampling with a proportional allocation with quotas by sex, age, and province, and under the worst-case scenario $p = q$ with a confidence level of 95% (2 sigmas) and an associated error of ±2.62% for the 2015 survey, ±3.16% for the 2018 and 2021 surveys, and ±5.00% for the 2022 survey.

## 5. Analysis

The descriptive analysis shows that, coinciding with the holding of the referendum on the independence of Catalonia, it was in 2018 that the percentage of those who preferred independence from the Spanish state as a territorial political solution reached the highest point (34.2%; Table 1). Likewise, the percentage of those who preferred Catalonia to remain within a federal state that recognises Catalonia as a nation also increased (17.2%). At the height of the "pro-Catalonia" *procés*, citizens' preferences concentrated on the most "extreme" solutions, especially the secession of Catalonia from the Spanish state, a solution advocated by the pro-independence political elites. However, after the failed referendum and the beginning of the end of the *procés*, citizens' preferences shifted and leaned towards more feasible solutions, mainly the permanence of Catalonia within the State of the Autonomies, which in 2022 amounted to 51.5%, with special relevance given to the achievement of a more favourable fiscal status.

In line with the previous data, the response to the Moreno-Linz question (Table 2) shows that the percentage of citizens who say they feel both Spanish and Catalan fell 5 percentage points in 2018 compared to 2015, rising to over 40% in 2021 and reaching 46% in 2022. The opposite trend is shown by the options "more Catalan than Spanish" and "only Catalan," which reached the highest percentages in 2018, with 56.6% of Catalans falling into these options.

**Table 1.** The most appropriate political-territorial solution for Catalonia (%).

| | 2015 | 2018 | 2021 | 2022 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Its independence from the Spanish state | 29.4 | 34.2 | 30.4 | 20.5 |
| Its permanence within the State of the Autonomies | 16.3 | 11.2 | 16.7 | 23.6 |
| Its permanence within a Spanish federal state | 17.5 | 10.1 | 8.6 | 10.5 |
| Its permanence within a federal state that recognises Catalonia as a nation | 7.7 | 17.2 | 8.6 | 12.6 |
| Its permanence within the State of Autonomies, but with greater powers | 10.6 | 8.4 | 7.5 | 7.4 |
| Its permanence within the State of Autonomies, but with a fiscal status comparable to that of the Basque Country and Navarre | 11.0 | 11.1 | 13.5 | 20.5 |
| Its permanence within a centralised state | 2.7 | 5.0 | 6.7 | 2.8 |
| Unanswered | 4.8 | 2.8 | 8.0 | 2.1 |
| Total | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |

Sources: Equipo de Investigaciones Políticas (2015, 2018, 2021, 2022).

**Table 2.** Nationalist sentiment (%).

| | 2015 | 2018 | 2021 | 2022 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Spanish only | 6.8 | 4.7 | 4.7 | 7.3 |
| More Spanish than Catalan | 6.0 | 4.2 | 3.7 | 4.0 |
| As Spanish as Catalan | 38.3 | 32.7 | 41.1 | 46.0 |
| More Catalan than Spanish | 26.0 | 31.2 | 28.4 | 25.7 |
| Catalan only | 21.8 | 25.4 | 19.8 | 14.5 |
| Unanswered | 1.1 | 1.8 | 2.2 | 2.4 |
| Total | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |

Sources: Equipo de Investigaciones Políticas (2015, 2018, 2021, 2022).

According to the survey data, if we compare the data from the Moreno-Linz question with the position in favour or against the independence process, quite similar results are obtained. Thus, in 2015, 47.8% of respondents felt more Catalan than Spanish or only Catalan, while the percentage of those in favour of the pro-independence process was close to 50%; while in 2018, shortly after the referendum of the 1st of October, the percentage of individuals who feel more Catalan than Spanish or only Catalan rose to 56.6%, while the percentage of those who supported the pro-independence process was 54.0%. Subsequently, from 2021 onwards, as mentioned above, *Catalanist* sentiment declined, as did pro-independence sentiment, a figure that in 2021 was still 47.3%, but dropped to 36.6% in 2022.

According to the survey data, 69.1% of respondents took part in the referendum, and, of these, 79.5% voted in favour compared to 11.2% who voted against. With no relevant differences by sex in the level of participation, it was citizens aged between 30 and 49 (36.1%) that voted in favour of independence to the greatest extent, followed by older age groups (25.0% of pro-independence voters were aged between 50 and 64 years and another 25.0% over 65), with the youngest, under 29, being the least numerous group among pro-independence voters. Likewise, in general terms, the higher the level of education, the higher the percentage of individuals who voted in favour of independence, with the group of citizens with higher education accounting for 33.4% of pro-independence voters.

With regard to the political profile of voters in favour of Catalan independence, in 2012, 36.7% voted for ERC and 23.7% for CiU, while in 2015, when ERC and CDC ran on the same ticket, 68.0% chose to support JxSí. In 2018, the year following the referendum and the dissolution of the coalition, 42.1% voted for ERC and 37.1% for JxCat, with 49.0% and 21.0% sympathy for both political formations, respectively. Similarly, the leaders of both political organisations were the best rated by voters in favour of Catalan independence, with high average ratings for Junqueras (8.31) and Puigdemont (8.04), and a rating of 7.22 for Quim Torra. Finally, this recurrent and high percentage of support for ERC was reflected in the ideological self-placement of voters, which stood at 3.32, while the nationalist self-placement reached an average rating of 7.63.

In the area of emotions (Table 3), and in line with the high ratings of the pro-independence leaders, over 70% of pro-independence voters felt pride towards Junqueras and Puigdemont, as well as hope in both leaders, in addition to Torra, while around 50% felt enthusiasm and calm towards the three pro-independence leaders mentioned. These four positive emotions were present, although to a lesser extent in the case of the CUP leader. In contrast, voters in favour of Catalan independence felt negative emotions towards the leaders who clearly positioned themselves against the referendum and in favour of the unity of Spain: Arrimadas and Albiol. Among these emotions, however, the most prevalent were anger and concern, especially towards the Cs candidate. Meanwhile, voters against Catalan independence felt hope in the leaders who showed more moderate positions and advocated intermediate solutions: Iceta and Domènech. At the same time, they also felt anger and concern towards the pro-independence leaders, although these two emotions also extended to the leader of PP.

These data were repeated for the political parties (Table 4). In the case of voters in favour of Catalan independence, however, the presence of pride towards the parties was lower in percentage terms than towards the pro-independence leaders, although the presence of hope was particularly high in the case of ERC (74.2%). With regard to negative emotions, in addition to anger and concern towards the parties that defend the unity of Spain, the presence of fear towards Cs stood out (41.6%).

**Table 3.** Comparison of voters' emotions towards political leaders in the 1st of October referendum (%).

| | In favour | | | | | | | | Against | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Torra | Puigdm | Junq | Riera | Dom | Iceta | Arrim | Albiol | Torra | Puigdm | Junq | Riera | Dom | Iceta | Arrim | Albiol |
| Pride | 54.4 | 71.8 | 72.9 | 32.9 | 13.0 | 4.3 | 0.5 | 0.3 | 6.3 | 14.0 | 21.7 | 2.4 | 16.7 | 18.8 | 14.6 | 4.6 |
| Fear | 1.8 | 3.4 | 1.8 | 4.2 | 0.3 | 3.8 | 36.6 | 26.1 | 23.4 | 17.2 | 6.5 | 16.7 | 5.0 | 2.4 | 10.1 | 15.9 |
| Hope | 74.5 | 74.5 | 77.5 | 45.2 | 28.0 | 9.8 | 0.9 | 0.2 | 12.5 | 10.8 | 28.3 | 4.8 | 33.3 | 44.7 | 36.4 | 9.1 |
| Anxiety | 6.1 | 6.2 | 5.1 | 2.8 | 1.4 | 5.4 | 27.3 | 19.1 | 17.2 | 18.3 | 10.9 | 14.3 | 0.0 | 2.4 | 4.5 | 13.6 |
| Enthusiasm | 53.3 | 59.9 | 57.7 | 32.1 | 11.3 | 2.8 | 0.6 | 0.6 | 6.3 | 9.7 | 20.7 | 2.4 | 15.0 | 21.2 | 19.3 | 5.7 |
| Anger | 6.5 | 9.6 | 4.3 | 7.4 | 5.4 | 24.2 | 63.6 | 55.7 | 43.8 | 54.8 | 25.0 | 21.4 | 5.0 | 3.5 | 21.3 | 38.6 |
| Hatred | 0.6 | 0.4 | 0.0 | 1.2 | 0.3 | 3.2 | 18.9 | 16.5 | 6.3 | 3.2 | 1.1 | 0.0 | 1.7 | 1.2 | 2.2 | 4.5 |
| Contempt | 1.0 | 0.7 | 0.3 | 1.8 | 1.6 | 7.5 | 39.7 | 37.0 | 15.6 | 16.1 | 3.3 | 4.8 | 0.0 | 4.7 | 12.4 | 15.9 |
| Concern | 23.7 | 25.1 | 22.8 | 12.1 | 9.2 | 17.1 | 53.0 | 36.9 | 57.8 | 54.8 | 38.0 | 33.3 | 6.7 | 4.7 | 19.1 | 29.5 |
| Calmness | 59.4 | 48.6 | 52.0 | 33.0 | 24.0 | 14.0 | 2.3 | 3.8 | 11.1 | 7.5 | 20.7 | 9.5 | 21.7 | 28.2 | 20.5 | 9.1 |
| Resentment | 1.0 | 1.6 | 0.7 | 2.0 | 2.3 | 7.9 | 24.8 | 20.6 | 4.7 | 18.3 | 10.9 | 7.1 | 1.7 | 3.5 | 6.7 | 11.4 |
| Bitterness | 0.6 | 1.5 | 1.8 | 1.2 | 1.7 | 7.3 | 23.6 | 16.1 | 10.9 | 9.7 | 7.6 | 2.4 | 0.0 | 2.4 | 3.4 | 4.5 |
| Disgust | 0.2 | 0.1 | 0.1 | 1.2 | 0.3 | 5.6 | 23.8 | 27.5 | 12.5 | 10.8 | 5.4 | 2.4 | 0.0 | 2.4 | 4.5 | 13.6 |

Notes: Question filtered by those respondents who know the political leaders; Puigdm = Puigdemont; Junq = Junqueras; Dom = Domènech; Arrim = Arrimadas. Source: Equipo de Investigaciones Políticas (2018).

**Table 4.** Comparison of voters' emotions towards the political parties in the 1st of October referendum.

| | In favour | | | | | | | Against | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | JxCat | ERC | CUP | CCP | PSC | Cs | PP | JxCat | ERC | CUP | CCP | PSC | Cs | PP |
| Pride | 51.3 | 61.2 | 36.6 | 14.2 | 4.2 | 0.2 | 0.3 | 6.5 | 13.2 | 3.3 | 7.5 | 13.8 | 15.1 | 6.4 |
| Fear | 1.6 | 1.5 | 7.2 | 0.8 | 4.0 | 41.6 | 26.8 | 16.1 | 11.8 | 23.9 | 1.1 | 2.1 | 10.8 | 11.7 |
| Hope | 67.1 | 74.2 | 48.1 | 34.6 | 12.2 | 0.4 | 0.4 | 6.5 | 17.2 | 1.1 | 22.6 | 38.3 | 31.5 | 9.6 |
| Anxiety | 4.2 | 1.9 | 4.4 | 0.6 | 4.0 | 22.5 | 18.4 | 19.4 | 8.6 | 15.2 | 3.2 | 4.3 | 5.4 | 10.6 |
| Enthusiasm | 46.9 | 50.6 | 33.8 | 12.3 | 3.7 | 0.3 | 0.1 | 3.2 | 9.7 | 1.1 | 11.8 | 16.0 | 14.0 | 6.4 |
| Anger | 6.6 | 4.3 | 11.1 | 6.5 | 25.0 | 57.3 | 56.0 | 36.6 | 18.3 | 25.0 | 4.3 | 7.4 | 20.4 | 37.2 |
| Hatred | 0.1 | 0.0 | 0.2 | 0.5 | 3.1 | 17.7 | 16.8 | 3.2 | 2.2 | 2.2 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 3.2 | 7.4 |
| Contempt | 0.6 | 0.1 | 1.1 | 1.2 | 8.3 | 34.5 | 34.0 | 4.3 | 16.1 | 7.6 | 1.1 | 2.1 | 8.6 | 12.8 |
| Concern | 13.8 | 12.8 | 18.2 | 7.8 | 17.8 | 49.6 | 41.6 | 41.9 | 29.0 | 39.1 | 7.5 | 8.5 | 22.6 | 28.7 |
| Calmness | 42.0 | 48.7 | 28.1 | 23.3 | 11.8 | 2.7 | 3.4 | 5.4 | 14.0 | 5.4 | 11.8 | 22.3 | 18.3 | 11.7 |
| Resentment | 1.2 | 0.4 | 2.0 | 2.0 | 9.4 | 20.5 | 21.4 | 11.8 | 6.5 | 9.8 | 3.2 | 2.1 | 3.2 | 11.9 |
| Bitterness | 0.3 | 0.0 | 0.9 | 1.5 | 4.5 | 17.4 | 18.7 | 5.4 | 3.2 | 5.4 | 1.1 | 1.1 | 4.3 | 7.4 |
| Disgust | 0.3 | 0.0 | 0.8 | 0.5 | 5.2 | 24.1 | 24.6 | 5.4 | 4.3 | 4.3 | 1.1 | 1.1 | 6.5 | 9.6 |

Note: CCP = CatComú-Podem Source: Equipo de Investigaciones Políticas (2018).

In general terms, we can affirm that there was a differentiated emotional regime between those who voted in favour of independence in the 2017 referendum and those who voted against. The former felt more emotions, and, above all, positive emotions, mainly pride, enthusiasm, and hope, towards pro-independence leaders and parties, although also, to a lesser extent, negative emotions such as anger, concern, and even fear towards the parties that positioned themselves against Catalan independence, especially Cs. On the other hand, those who voted no in the independence referendum had a generally more negative emotional regime, with a predominance of anger, anxiety, concern, and fear towards the pro-independence parties, but also anger towards PP, which they held responsible for the drift of the conflict. Positive emotions included hope, calmness, and, to a lesser extent, pride, especially towards the PSC and Cs.

If we look longitudinally at the emotional regime of Catalans (Table 5), regardless of their participation or not in the referendum, we can see a gradual decline between 2018 and 2022 in positive emotions towards the pro-independence leaders (Puigdemont, Junqueras, and Riera/Sabater). In contrast, in the case of Puigdemont, we can see how, over time, there was an increased presence of negative emotions such as fear, resentment, and disgust, but, above all, contempt, anger, and concern. In the case of Junqueras, we do not observe such a clear trend, though. While anger, hatred, and contempt increased, anxiety and concern decreased. Puigdemont's flight, to avoid the imprisonment that Junqueras faced, probably had much to do with the differences in emotions towards the two pro-independence leaders. Meanwhile, in the case of Arrimadas and her replacement Carrizosa, in general terms, with the passing of time, the presence of positive and negative emotions decreased, coinciding with the loss of electoral relevance of Cs. In like manner, the presence of positive and negative emotions towards PP leaders also decreased.

Many of the trends observed for political leaders were confirmed by observing the evolution of the emotional regime towards political parties for the same period (Table 6). In the case of the pro-independence parties, JxCat, ERC, and CUP, the percentages of all positive emotions decreased over time, with anger increasing and concern remaining the same. In the case of Cs, the presence of positive and negative emotions decreased—and the same was true of its leaders—in parallel with the loss of political relevance of the party. In contrast, in the case of PP, positive emotions gradually increased over time, while some negative emotions such as fear and anger decreased.

Next, we identified the variables involved in the voting decision in the 2017 referendum by fitting an additive logistic regression model structured in three phases (Table 7). The variables were included in the model although no sociodemographic or contextual variable had significant effects on the vote once the emotional component was added. Thus, starting with the first model: On the one hand, there would be enthusiasm for JxCat, a mobilising emotion in the face of an electoral event. But also a lack of concern towards the same political formation and fear and anger towards its leaders (Torra and Puigdemont, respectively). These were the emotions that influenced the pro-independence vote. On the other hand, the model reveals that hope played a crucial role in this vote. First, because feeling hope in two pro-independence parties, ERC and CUP, and in one of the JxCat leaders, Torra, increased the probability of voting in favour of independence. Therefore, given that hope is an emotion that looks at the future, these two formations and the JxCat leader were able to make the possibility of Catalonia´s secession credible. Secondly, the absence of hope in the PSC and its leader, Iceta, and in Cs, might also explain the yes vote. Hope is thus constructed as the dominant and determining emotion of the Catalan referendum, to the point that when hope weakens, the process runs out of steam (Lagares, Máiz, & Rivera, 2022).

**Table 5.** Comparison of emotions towards political leaders 2018–2022 (%).

| | Puigdemont | | | Junqueras | | | Riera/Sabater | | | Domènech/Albiach | | | Iceta/Illa | | | Arrimadas/Carrizosa | | | Albiol/Fernández | | | Garriga | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 18 | 21 | 22 | 18 | 21 | 22 | 18 | 21 | 22 | 18 | 21 | 22 | 18 | 21 | 22 | 18 | 21 | 22 | 18 | 21 | 22 | 21 | 22 |
| Pride | 41.1 | 26.9 | 16.7 | 46.0 | 27.7 | 19.5 | 21.2 | 17.1 | 7.8 | 12.7 | 10.2 | 6.7 | 10.5 | 11.4 | 8.3 | 9.7 | 6.3 | 3.2 | 3.6 | 8.0 | 2.8 | 3.1 | 2.6 |
| Fear | 11.2 | 11.4 | 12.6 | 4.7 | 6.3 | 5.4 | 8.9 | 3.7 | 1.7 | 1.9 | 1.7 | 1.1 | 3.3 | 2.3 | 3.1 | 25.0 | 10.2 | 8.0 | 20.9 | 5.1 | 4.5 | 23.6 | 16.6 |
| Hope | 43.1 | 25.4 | 20.8 | 50.2 | 30.1 | 19.2 | 31.1 | 28.5 | 13.3 | 27.3 | 30.0 | 17.6 | 23.2 | 26.4 | 13.8 | 18.9 | 9.7 | 5.4 | 6.0 | 13.5 | 10.1 | 5.7 | 5.3 |
| Anxiety | 12.2 | 8.0 | 6.3 | 7.9 | 5.8 | 2.4 | 5.3 | 4.0 | 0.4 | 3.0 | 2.2 | 0.7 | 4.0 | 3.1 | 3.7 | 15.3 | 7.5 | 5.0 | 13.2 | 3.3 | 4.7 | 11.5 | 7.1 |
| Enthusiasm | 34.7 | 13.6 | 13.4 | 35.0 | 14.2 | 11.4 | 18.9 | 8.1 | 8.1 | 10.6 | 8.7 | 4.2 | 10.1 | 9.8 | 5.6 | 9.9 | 3.5 | 1.7 | 3.4 | 6.1 | 3.2 | 2.9 | 3.3 |
| Anger | 25.8 | 33.6 | 37.8 | 13.6 | 22.3 | 22.5 | 10.0 | 16.2 | 6.7 | 5.9 | 10.3 | 5.6 | 15.7 | 13.8 | 15.7 | 40.9 | 29.8 | 17.8 | 40.5 | 20.3 | 11.0 | 35.3 | 14.2 |
| Hatred | 24.2 | 4.0 | 5.5 | 1.5 | 2.5 | 4.3 | 2.2 | 1.7 | 0.9 | 0.9 | 1.5 | 0.9 | 2.1 | 0.8 | 2.6 | 9.0 | 3.3 | 2.9 | 9.2 | 2.2 | 2.8 | 7.3 | 4.8 |
| Contempt | 3.0 | 12.4 | 19.9 | 4.0 | 6.4 | 7.4 | 4.7 | 3.7 | 5.1 | 2.3 | 2.1 | 4.2 | 5.5 | 2.1 | 5.2 | 23.5 | 9.2 | 15.0 | 26.1 | 5.1 | 7.6 | 19.5 | 13.8 |
| Concern | 9.3 | 29.4 | 37.0 | 27.4 | 23.1 | 21.7 | 14.5 | 19.2 | 11 | 11.1 | 16.1 | 9.6 | 14.7 | 22.9 | 15.5 | 35.4 | 21.0 | 14.5 | 28.9 | 16.3 | 14.2 | 30.4 | 21.6 |
| Calmness | 28.4 | 9.1 | 10.1 | 34.1 | 13.1 | 16.4 | 23.7 | 10.9 | 11.6 | 21.0 | 9.4 | 10.3 | 21.4 | 19.0 | 14.4 | 12.0 | 4.5 | 5.5 | 7.0 | 9.4 | 7.8 | 3.5 | 5.8 |
| Resentment | 7.8 | 8.6 | 10.9 | 4.5 | 4.7 | 5.1 | 2.5 | 2.6 | 3.4 | 3.2 | 1.3 | 1.3 | 5.1 | 2.4 | 3.8 | 14.4 | 5.4 | 3.7 | 13.5 | 4.4 | 2.6 | 7.8 | 4.8 |
| Bitterness | 6.6 | 5.3 | 9.2 | 4.3 | 3.5 | 4.9 | 2.9 | 3.3 | 1.6 | 2.1 | 1.8 | 1.6 | 5.7 | 1.8 | 2.7 | 14.0 | 5.1 | 3.0 | 10.7 | 3.4 | 3.4 | 7.8 | 10.0 |
| Disgust | 5.9 | 6.0 | 14.7 | 2.8 | 3.7 | 6.0 | 2.5 | 2.8 | 4.6 | 1.1 | 1.4 | 1.5 | 4.2 | 0.9 | 4.0 | 14.7 | 5.3 | 6.8 | 17.5 | 3.3 | 4.4 | 12.0 | 10.9 |

Note: Question filtered by those respondents who know the political leaders. Sources: Equipo de Investigaciones Políticas (2018, 2021, 2022).

**Table 6.** Comparison of emotions towards political parties 2018–2022 (%).

| | JxCat | | | ERC | | | CUP | | | CCP/ECM | | | PSC | | | Cs | | | PP | | | Vox | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 18 | 21 | 22 | 18 | 21 | 22 | 18 | 21 | 22 | 18 | 21 | 22 | 18 | 21 | 22 | 18 | 21 | 22 | 18 | 21 | 22 | 21 | 22 |
| Pride | 28.1 | 17.9 | 10.0 | 36.0 | 23.1 | 14.8 | 19.4 | 14.1 | 9.3 | 11.6 | 9.5 | 7.8 | 8.0 | 13.4 | 10.0 | 8.5 | 5.4 | 4.2 | 3.8 | 5.9 | 6.6 | 2.7 | 2.1 |
| Fear | 10.4 | 8.6 | 8.0 | 7.2 | 6.8 | 5.6 | 15.4 | 9.8 | 8.5 | 3.8 | 3.7 | 4.1 | 3.5 | 3.3 | 3.9 | 29.7 | 7.7 | 7.2 | 20.4 | 9.0 | 9.9 | 32.9 | 30.2 |
| Hope | 37.3 | 27.0 | 13.4 | 46.3 | 35.7 | 20.2 | 27.1 | 24.2 | 11.7 | 29.8 | 27.4 | 14.3 | 23.0 | 26.8 | 20.6 | 17.2 | 10.5 | 8.4 | 6.8 | 9.2 | 12.0 | 6.1 | 7.3 |
| Anxiety | 10.5 | 6.1 | 6.5 | 6.3 | 5.6 | 5.1 | 8.4 | 6.3 | 3.9 | 2.7 | 2.9 | 3.3 | 3.7 | 4.0 | 3.1 | 15.4 | 4.6 | 4.7 | 13.8 | 4.9 | 6.4 | 11.1 | 15.2 |
| Enthusiasm | 24.8 | 10.7 | 7.3 | 29.3 | 15.8 | 9.3 | 17.5 | 7.5 | 6.1 | 10.6 | 6.4 | 6.3 | 7.7 | 11.3 | 7.4 | 7.8 | 4.3 | 2.9 | 3.2 | 3.6 | 5.3 | 2.3 | 3.3 |
| Anger | 17.8 | 28.1 | 27.2 | 13.0 | 25.2 | 23.3 | 16.2 | 27.5 | 18.0 | 7.4 | 18.9 | 13.4 | 17.0 | 21.1 | 16.8 | 37.2 | 32.3 | 22.4 | 43.2 | 42.0 | 25.9 | 52.8 | 31.0 |
| Hatred | 2.6 | 2.3 | 3.6 | 1.9 | 1.9 | 2.2 | 2.9 | 2.5 | 2.2 | 0.6 | 2.0 | 2.0 | 1.9 | 1.4 | 1.1 | 9.7 | 3.0 | 4.3 | 10.4 | 3.2 | 6.4 | 9.0 | 9.5 |
| Contempt | 6.5 | 4.9 | 7.9 | 4.1 | 3.9 | 5.4 | 7.2 | 7.1 | 8.4 | 2.7 | 3.9 | 5.0 | 4.5 | 3.5 | 3.0 | 20.0 | 8.3 | 13.4 | 22.6 | 9.6 | 13.8 | 25.5 | 23.9 |
| Concern | 25.8 | 24.2 | 24.2 | 21.2 | 26.3 | 21.9 | 22.2 | 25.1 | 19.2 | 12.3 | 16.9 | 15.5 | 15.7 | 25.9 | 15.9 | 35.2 | 24.6 | 18.9 | 33.2 | 24.6 | 26.0 | 34.7 | 39.5 |
| Calmness | 24.4 | 11.4 | 6.5 | 30.9 | 17.7 | 12.5 | 16.4 | 8.2 | 5.2 | 18.4 | 9.1 | 7.8 | 17.7 | 18.8 | 15.7 | 10.9 | 4.3 | 5.8 | 6.7 | 5.9 | 9.4 | 2.9 | 4.1 |
| Resentment | 5.4 | 4.5 | 7.2 | 4.0 | 3.8 | 4.6 | 4.5 | 3.7 | 4.9 | 2.6 | 2.8 | 3.7 | 5.9 | 3.8 | 4.1 | 12.6 | 5.0 | 6.1 | 14.8 | 6.7 | 7.3 | 9.7 | 10.7 |
| Bitterness | 4.1 | 3.6 | 5.2 | 2.8 | 3.1 | 3.6 | 4.0 | 3.5 | 3.8 | 1.8 | 2.5 | 1.6 | 3.6 | 2.9 | 4.2 | 10.5 | 4.2 | 9.8 | 13.3 | 4.7 | 7.8 | 8.9 | 11.6 |
| Disgust | 4.0 | 3.3 | 7.5 | 2.8 | 2.3 | 5.3 | 5.0 | 3.8 | 5.4 | 1.5 | 2.4 | 6.1 | 3.8 | 1.9 | 2.9 | 14.0 | 4.7 | 8.9 | 16.2 | 6.7 | 9.2 | 22.2 | 20.3 |

Note: CCP/ECM = CatComú-Podem/En Comú Podem. Sources: Equipo de Investigaciones Políticas (2018, 2021, 2022).

**Table 7.** Pro-independence vs. non-independence voting model in the 1st of October referendum.

| | Coef. | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Emotions | | | | |
| Enthusiasm JxCat | β | 1.874** (0.702) | 1.749* (0.692) | |
| | Exp (β) | 6.515 | 5.751 | |
| Concern JxCat | β | −0.903* (0.429) | −1.019* (0.459) | |
| | Exp (β) | 0.405 | 0.361 | |
| Hope ERC | β | 1.511*** (0.428) | 1.121* (0.443) | 1.183** (0.439) |
| | Exp (β) | 4.529 | 3.069 | 3.263 |
| Hope CUP | β | 1.285* (0.538) | 1.367* (0.562) | 1.965*** (0.554) |
| | Exp (β) | 3.615 | 3.925 | 7.136 |
| Hope PSC | β | −1.377* (0.548) | | |
| | Exp (β) | 0.252 | | |
| Hope Cs | β | −3.845* (1.600) | −3.959* (1.888) | −3.850* (1.745) |
| | Exp (β) | 0.021 | 0.019 | 0.021 |
| Fear Torra | β | −2.401*** (0.756) | −2.625** (0.842) | −3.185*** (0.834) |
| | Exp (β) | 0.091 | 0.072 | 0.041 |
| Hope Torra | β | 1.245** (0.437) | | |
| | Exp (β) | 3.474 | | |
| Anger Puigdemont | β | −0.924* (0.405) | | |
| | Exp (β) | 0.397 | | |
| Hope Iceta | β | −1.211* (0.524) | −1.940*** (0.453) | −1.853*** (0.446) |
| | Exp (β) | 0.298 | 0.144 | 0.157 |
| Sympathy | | | | |
| Sympathy JxCat | β | | 2.378*** (0.786) | 2.438*** (0.757) |
| | Exp (β) | | 10.786 | 11.453 |
| Sympathy ERC | β | | 2.818*** (0.588) | 2.507*** (0.595) |
| | Exp (β) | | 16.751 | 12.263 |
| Sympathy CUP | β | | 1.852* (0.798) | |
| | Exp (β) | | 6.375 | |
| Political attitudes | | | | |
| Nationalist self-positioning | | | | 0.311*** (0.079) |
| | | | | 1.365 |
| Constant | β | 1.221*** (0.524) | 0.349 (0.332) | −1.282* (0.512) |
| | Exp (β) | 0.298 | 1.417 | 0.277 |
| *N* | | 555 | 541 | 538 |
| Logarithm of the likelihood-2 | | 199.934 | 171.590 | 170.745 |
| $R^2$ ajusted | | 68.3% | 72.2% | 72.3% |

Notes: * p value ≤ 0.001; ** 0.001 > p value ≤ 0.010; *** p value ≤ 0.05. Source: Equipo de Investigaciones Políticas (2018).

In the second model, by introducing the variable of sympathy towards the main political leaders, the lack of hope in the PSC, the hope in Torra, and the absence of anger towards Puigdemont were no longer significant. Instead, it was the fact of feeling political sympathy towards the three pro-independence parties that increased the probability of choosing this option in the referendum, as reported in the literature (Lelkes, 2018). These

results also indicate that some of the emotions in the first model are also constitutive of identification with the parties.

Finally, in the third model, by incorporating political attitudes, enthusiasm and lack of concern towards JxCat, as well as party identification with CUP were no longer significant. Therefore, the vote in favour of Catalan independence was determined by the hope in ERC and CUP or the lack of hope in Cs and Iceta, in addition to the absence of fear towards Torra; by party identification with JxCat and ERC; and by nationalist self-placement—the more citizens feel more Catalan nationalist, the more likely they are to support independence. Consequently, we observed that, although it is not a sine qua non condition, the fact of being nationalist influences the vote for independence. Besides, it also demonstrates the predominance of identity cleavage over ideological cleavage. Once again, introducing party identification as an explanatory variable reduces the direct effect of emotions. This is to be expected since party identification already has a strong emotional component.

## 6. Conclusion

The purpose of secessionist referendums is to give legitimacy to the pro-independence aspirations of a territory considered to be a stateless nation. In the Catalan case, it has been the Catalan political elite that has built a narrative on the cleavage of nationalism. They used the old resource of the Manichean division between the "we," the Catalans, harmed and oppressed by belonging to the Spanish state, and the "others," the Spanish government, the oppressors, encouraging the generation of two new identities: the independentists and non-independentists. As the only way out of the identity conflict, they proposed the holding of the referendum of the 1st of October 2017, despite its unconstitutionality. Such has been the division of Catalan society in these two identities that the nationalist cleavage has proven to be decisive in the decision to vote for independence, with ideological cleavage having no effect, thus confirming our first hypothesis.

This finding represents an empirical contribution to the literature on the importance of identity in the decision to vote in self-determination referendums. However, unlike studies that have concluded that identity transcends partisan identification, in the Catalan case pro-independence and non-independence identities respond to voters' political predispositions, such as partisan identification. Party identification with pro-independence political parties is the variable with the greatest effect on the decision to vote in favour of independence in the 2017 referendum, confirming our second hypothesis.

Given that self-determination referendums entail positioning on identity-related issues, they involve a high emotional engagement of citizens. Our analysis points out that, within the period 2015–2022, it was in 2018, a few months after the referendum was held in Catalonia, that the high point in the evolution of Catalan identity-related sentiment and emotional effervescence was reached. The increase in nationalist identification among Catalans was accompanied by a greater presence of positive emotions towards pro-independence leaders and parties, which decreased as the process faded, confirming our third hypothesis. For example, over 40% of Catalans felt pride and hope in Puigdemont and Junqueras in 2018. In 2022, however, except for hope in the former (20.8%), these emotions were felt by less than 20% of the population.

As has been argued, the secessionist drift in Catalonia is the product of an articulation of the political elites that is reflected in the existence of a differentiated emotional regime between those who voted yes in the

referendum and those who did not support independence. Citizens who voted for independence in the referendum felt positive emotions, especially pride, hope, and enthusiasm, towards pro-independence leaders and political parties, while they felt negative emotions, especially anger, concern, and even fear, towards leaders and political formations that defended the unity of Spain. This confirms our fourth hypothesis. In contrast, voters who showed their refusal to independence, felt fundamentally hope and calm towards the leaders who proposed intermediate solutions between independence and the maintenance of the status quo, perhaps as a counterpoint to the anger, concern, fear, and anxiety they felt towards the pro-independence elite—negative elements that guided their vote. Despite this, emotions played a bigger role in explaining yes voters than no voters, mainly because the secessionist idea looks at the future, and the positive emotion that is best associated with the future is hope.

In addition to partisan identification and nationalist identity, emotions are presented as the determining factors in supporting independence in our explanatory model. Party identification with JxCat was supplemented by the absence of fear towards one of its leaders, who ended up becoming the president of the Generalitat, Quim Torra, while party identification with ERC is accompanied by hope in the political formation when voting for the independence of Catalonia. To this feeling of hope in ERC, we should add hope in the CUP, thus increasing the probability of supporting independentism in the referendum and the absence of this emotion in both a leader who adopted a moderate position and an intermediate solution and a party that unequivocally advocated for the permanence of Catalonia within Spain. These results demonstrate the validity of H5. Positive emotions, however, were not the only emotions that influenced the voting decision The absence of certain negative emotions towards the leaders themselves, or positive emotions towards leaders or parties against independence also played a part.

In short, our research provides evidence that an event of a positional nature can result in the division of society into two identity groups that respond to a common emotional regime, thus contributing to the literature on electoral behaviour in extraordinary consultations from an emotional perspective. However, unlike other research showing the influence of emotions towards the status of the territory opting for secession, we demonstrated that emotions towards political leaders and parties have a determinant effect on the voting decision, which also speaks of the influence of the political elites on the results of independence referendums.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

## Data Availability

Upon request to paloma.castro2@usc.es

## Supplementary Material

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

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# The Ball That Failed to Curve: The 2023 "Populist Polarizing" Referendum in Poland

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## Abstract

In October 2023, Poland's illiberal right-wing government held a referendum modeled after the one held in Hungary one year earlier. Organized in conjunction with the parliamentary elections under the pretext of "saving costs," the 2023 Polish referendum constitutes the most recent example of how populists can use direct democracy to mobilize their electorate. However, unlike Hungary's experience a year earlier, this referendum highlights how "populist polarizing" referendums can become a double-edged sword. Building on previous work by Bartolini and Mair, and Enyedi, this article introduces a new type of referendum: the populist polarizing. Initiated by populist parties to amplify political divisions for partisan gain, this referendum-type frames choices in starkly oppositional terms, creating an "us vs. them" dynamic that intensifies polarization. We contrast this with the more known and studied "cleavage referendums." In particular, using both primary and secondary data, we demonstrate how Poland's populist government employed the referendum instrumentally. They posed thematically differentiated questions on issues such as relocating migrants within the EU, selling state assets, raising the retirement age, and removing a border barrier. By exploiting emotionally driven political divides, the government aimed to polarize the campaign and mobilize their voters in the lead-up to the general elections. Departing from the case-study literature, we present an innovative argument: opposition parties can counteract populist governments' strategies and successfully defend democracy by encouraging a selective boycott—voting in elections while refusing to participate in the referendum. The Polish experience illustrates how populist polarizing referendums, initially aimed to increase polarization and undermine democracy, can paradoxically be used to reverse democratic backsliding and safeguard liberal democracy. The Polish case shows that populist polarizing referendums are not infallible. While populist forces typically exploit polarization, referendums can also become a tool for the opposition. However, for the strategy to be effective, the opposition must take a constructive and strategic approach.

**Keywords**
boycott; cleavages; Poland; populist polarization; referendum

## 1. Introduction

As instruments of direct democracy, referendums are intended to reflect the will of citizens on public issues. Sometimes they help resolve more ordinary matters, such as the education system, retirement age, sustainable energy, or taxation. Other times, they are used to ratify previously adopted decisions pertaining to constitutions, international treaties, or EU accession. Moreover, they may pose questions on other issues, such as independence, abortion, or immigration—that are based on deeply rooted socio-political divisions. These are what we call "cleavage referendums," typically grounded in traditional Lipset-Rokkan (1967) cleavages, such as center vs. periphery, state vs. church, and urban vs. rural. The 2016 Brexit referendum in the UK is perhaps the most notable example of a cleavage referendum. It exposed and reinforced long-standing socio-political, cultural, and geographical divisions that had been gradually intensifying over time (Gifford, 2021; Hobolt, 2016; Schnapper, 2021). Other examples include the 2018 abortion referendum in Ireland (Elkink et al., 2020), the 2014 Scottish independence referendum in the UK (Keating, 2015), the 1998 Northern Ireland Good Friday Agreement Referendum (Murphy, 2021), and the 1995 Quebec independence referendums in Canada (Dufour et al., 2020). In fact, all of these referendums, except for the abovementioned 2018 abortion referendum, which was based on a religious cleavage deeply rooted in Irish society (Marsh, 2023), responded to a long-standing center-periphery cleavage.

Building on Enyedi (2016), we introduce "populist polarizing" referendums, which are similar to cleavage referendums. Both referendums are equally conflictive, but unlike those based on genuine cleavages (see Bartolini & Mair, 1990), populist polarizing referendums are used by populists as strategic tools. Rather than reflecting deep societal rifts, they aim to exacerbate existing political divisions, reinforce divisive narratives, marginalize the opposition, and consolidate power. Examples include the 2016 Hungarian referendum on migrant quotas (Musiał-Karg, 2019), the 2017 Turkish constitutional referendum (Castaldo, 2018; Dinçşahin, 2012; Erçetin & Erdoğan, 2021), and the 2022 Hungarian referendum on LGBTQ+ rights (Bíró-Nagy, 2022). Initiated by populist parties to reinforce their rhetoric and mobilize voters, these referendums often push for further illiberal changes in the political system. They show how direct democracy, which populist parties seem to advocate (Gherghina & Pilet, 2021), can be employed to undermine the very foundations of democratic governance. By simplifying complex issues into binary choices, these referendums fail to capture the nuances of public opinion. Moreover, in none of these cases were referendums used to genuinely address deeply rooted cleavages.

Drawing on the concept of populist polarizing referendums and using a case-study approach (George & Bennett, 2005), this article puts forward and tests the following argument: Although these referendums are generally intended to undermine democratic institutions by intensifying political polarization, they can paradoxically strengthen democracy. This occurs when opposition parties unify their strategies and adopt a constructive approach to counteract these divisive efforts.

The October 2023 Polish referendum, held concurrently with parliamentary elections, is the latest example of how direct democracy can be employed by populist forces to amplify political polarization. Similar to

cleavage referendums, this referendum featured emotionally charged and divisive questions designed to mobilize their electorate and retain power. The questions addressed contentious issues, including whether Poland should accept migrants under an EU relocation plan, allow the sale of state assets to foreign entities, raise the retirement age, and remove the barrier along the border with Belarus (for more, see Section 3). Initiated by the then illiberal government, the 2023 Polish referendum mirrored Viktor Orbán's 2022 referendum strategy in Hungary. It clearly exacerbated the existing socio-political divisions in the country, highlighting the ongoing struggle between the right-wing populist parties and the pro-democratic opposition. For the right-wing parties, the referendum was a political tool to rally the ruling party's supporters while diverting attention from broader, pressing issues in the election, such as the cost of living, low wages, inadequate healthcare, and growing inequality. The opposition not only criticized the biased phrasing of the referendum questions but also called for a boycott of the referendum. They aimed to undermine the legitimacy of the referendum, restore democratic integrity, and stabilize Poland's relations with the EU. Ironically, this boycott strategy helped to mobilize anti-Law and Justice (PiS) voters. These voters, while participating in the parliamentary election, refused to participate in the referendum. The outcome of the strategy was unsurprising. Although the government's stance was supported on all referendum questions, the turnout (41 percent) fell short of the 50 percent threshold needed to make it legally binding. Moreover, while the ruling populist coalition secured the most votes (35.4 percent), the opposition parties were bolstered by a historically high turnout of 74.4 percent. This was the highest turnout ever recorded in Polish democratic history (see Figure A1 in the Supplementary File) and, more recently, also the highest in post-communist Europe (see Figure A2 in the Supplementary File). As a result, the opposition won 53.9 percent of the parliamentary seats, paving the way for the formation of a new pro-democratic government.

In light of growing concerns about the use of referendums by populist forces (Altman, 2017; Mudde, 2007; Topaloff, 2017) and building on the literature discussing cleavage referendums, this article uses a case-study approach to illustrate how political actors can misuse direct democratic tools. Such tools are often exploited to deepen existing political divisions between ruling and opposition parties in their attempt to retain power. Responding to recent discussions on how to face and combat the populist challenge (Casal Bértoa & Rama, 2021), the article also shows how opposition parties can resist falling into political traps set by populists in power, particularly in deeply polarized contexts. In other words, the main goal of this article is to address two central questions: (a) How did the populist government manipulate the 2023 referendum to try to win in parliamentary elections by exacerbating political divisions? And, (b) how did the opposition parties use the referendum boycott to remove the populists from power? The first question is examined in Section 3 whereas the second is discussed in Section 4.

The article is divided into five sections, apart from the Introduction and Conclusion: The first one reviews the literature on referendums, introducing a new concept of populist polarizing referendums and highlighting its differences and similarities with cleavage referendums. The second one explores the sociology of Polish politics, summarizing the evolution of the country's party system since 1989, with a particular focus on the post-2005 period. The next section uses historical turnout data to place the 2023 referendum in a comparative perspective. The fourth one analyses the various ways the government used the referendum as a political tool, manipulating it instrumentally and irregularly. Using regional data on turnout for both the referendum and the parliamentary elections, the fifth section shows how the pro-democratic opposition managed to oust the populist government from power. It also shows that populist polarizing referendums might become a double-edged sword. The article ends with a summary of the main findings.

## 2. Populist Polarizing Referendums and Cleavage Referendums

Referendums are often considered the purest form of democracy as they are believed to directly reflect the will of the people (Qvortrup, 2024). For this reason, populist parties show a strong preference for referendums, using them as a tool to communicate directly with the people they claim to exclusively represent (Gherghina & Pilet, 2021; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013). This holds true even when considering other factors, such as the institutionalization of the party system or the age of democracy. Support for referendums as a decision-making tool is higher in societies where populist attitudes are prevalent (Jacobs et al., 2018; Mohrenberg et al., 2021).

In recent years, concerns have emerged regarding the use of referendums by populist governments to address highly contentious issues and deepen existing divisions. In fact, little is known about how populist parties use referendums to exploit existing and emerging political divisions, increase polarization, and, consequently, mobilize their electorate. Populist parties also use this tactic to sway undecided voters by stirring their emotions. This gap in understanding is really surprising, given that such referendums can have significant consequences. They may lead to further democratic backsliding, as seen in Hungary, or they could galvanize the opposition, ultimately leading to the removal of populist leaders, as in the case of Poland.

Unfortunately, most of the literature has focused on analyzing how particular cleavages, such as class, religion, or ethnicity, have shaped the outcome of referendums in countries with minimal populist influence (Baum & Freire, 2001; Ceccarini & Bordignon, 2017; Dufour et al., 2020; Elkink et al., 2017, 2020). Alternatively, scholars have examined how populist parties benefit from referendums organized by mainstream forces (Ceccarini & Bordignon, 2017; Gifford, 2021). However, with very few exceptions (Gherghina et al., 2024; Kazai, 2022), scholars have largely ignored what is referred to as populist polarizing referendums. These referendums are characterized by "high polarization," "an intense and aggressive competition between opposing blocs," and populist strategies. Such strategies often include "the concomitant rejection of the division of power" and focus on defining who truly represents the "people" (Enyedi, 2016, pp. 216–217).

As with Enyedi (2016), a publication focusing on party systems, the application of the *populist polarizing* label to referendums might seem unusual. However, when referendums are initiated by parties employing populist strategies, they often turn into a choice between conflicting political options. These conflicts tend to generate significant ideological differences within the population, inevitably leading to polarization and potentially even democratic backsliding. This stands in clear contrast to cleavage referendums. While being equally divisive, cleavage referendums can serve as a tool for democratic deliberation. They typically engage citizens in meaningful debates about the future direction of society and its governance, as seen in Canada, Ireland, and Scotland. In contrast, populist polarizing referendums are less about resolving existing societal cleavages and more about manipulating public sentiment for political gain. Table 1 summarizes the main features of each type of referendum, showing their shared characteristics and critical differences between them.

Moreover, unlike cleavage referendums, which arise from sociological and ideological differences (Bartolini & Mair, 1990), populist polarizing referendums are based on different types of divisions. These divisions vary in their origin, nature, and depth (Needham, 2023; Scislowska, 2023). Thus, departing from the "cleavage

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | Rely on emotional/identity appeals, mobilizing voters by emphasizing the "us vs. them" dynamic. | |

**Table 1.** Populist polarizing and cleavage referendums: Differences and similarities.

| Features | Populist polarizing referendums | Cleavage referendums |
|---|---|---|
| *Origin* | Top-down (by populist leaders) | Bottom-up (respond to the need to resolve/manage long-standing conflicts) |
| *Aim* | Consolidate power, undermine opposition, or legitimize controversial policies | Resolve long-standing social-political divides/conflicts<br>Deepen political divisions by focusing on issues that polar |
| *Drivers* | Promoted by leaders/movements claiming to represent "ordinary" people" against elites/other social enemies | Pre-existing deep cleavages in society (e.g., class, religion, ethnicity, and regionalism) |
| *Rhetoric* | Always populist | Populist rhetoric is possible but not necessary |
| *Timing* | Often opportunistic, called by political leaders as a strategy to: (a) mobilize their base, (b) marginalize the opposition, or (c) claim broad support for their political program | Tend to follow, usually, long political negotiations |
| *Consequences* | Increase political polarization and democratic backsliding | • Resolve the conflict and stabilize the party system<br>• Deepen the conflict by destabilizing the party system<br>• In both cases, they do not endanger democracy |

formation" literature (Bartolini, 2005; Deegan-Krause, 2007), populist polarizing referendums highlight divisions that are primarily political. They combine normative (i.e., attitudinal) and behavioral (i.e., organizational), but not empirical (i.e., structural) elements, such as ethnicity, religion, and class.

Both types of referendum reduce political competition to a clear "us vs. them" dynamic, which helps to mobilize the electorate and further widen the gap between opposing sides (Guirola & Rivero, 2022). This often has a long-lasting impact on the political landscape. Depending on the result, the referendum either reinforces the existing structure of inter-party competition by making political divisions more salient, or it can lead to a complete realignment of political forces by shifting the focus of political competition.

An analysis of recent referendums initiated by right-wing populist governments in Hungary and Poland reveals that the ruling parties intended to use mechanisms similar to those of cleavage referendums. As this article shows, these referendums were designed to exploit deeply rooted political divides. By simplifying complex issues into binary choices, they split the electorate into two opposing camps, failing to capture the nuances of public opinion.

The Hungarian 2022 referendum, held concurrently with the parliamentary election, is perhaps the most illustrative and successful example. Initiated by the governing coalition of Fidesz and the Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP), it was a response to the European Commission's infringement procedure over discrimination against social minorities. The anti-LGBTQ+ referendum was carefully designed not only to show EU countries that the new legislation had wide social support in Hungary but also to mobilize Fidesz voters at the time of the legislative elections (Bíró-Nagy, 2022). Mobilization was further enhanced through the partisan use of state resources. A lavishly financed campaign was carried out by the entire state apparatus, including all public media (Batory & Svensson, 2019; Kazai, 2022).

The referendum included four questions, all framed in a leading manner to support the government's narrative. These questions encouraged voters to reject the promotion of LGBTQ+ issues in child education and media (Enyedi, 2020). Although the referendum failed to become legally binding due to a large number of voters intentionally spoiling their ballots—invalid votes ranged from 20.9 and 21.4 percent, depending on the question—it still served the government's objectives. First, the government was able to claim that a large majority of Hungarians, between 92 and 96 percent, supported the legislation. Second, it successfully mobilized its electorate during the concurrent parliamentary elections. Voter turnout, driven by the combination of the referendum and the parliamentary elections, reached 69.2 percent, the highest ever recorded (see Figure A1 in the Supplementary File).

This referendum is a clear example of how populist forces, framing themselves as defenders of the "true" people or nation against external threats, such as immigration or globalization, and internal enemies like political and economic elites, or sexual minorities, can use direct democracy to their advantage. By exploiting existing ideological divides, they deepen political divisions in the process.

We also place the 2023 Polish referendum in this context, called by the populist government to stoke fear against immigrants, foreign agents, and economic elites in an already polarized society. The goal was to mobilize their own electorate, encourage the undecided to participate in the referendum, and secure a parliamentary majority. However, before we examine the details of the 2023 referendum, it is important to first explore the dynamics of inter-party competition in Poland, with particular attention to the way socio-political divisions have evolved over time.

## 3. The Polish Political Landscape: Cleavages and Political Divides

In the last 30 years, Poland's political landscape has been turbulent, marked by shifts in the underlying cleavages. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the country adopted a proportional electoral system and a semi-presidential regime (Casal Bértoa, 2012; see also Grzybowska-Walecka et al., in press). This system evolved around two different types of cross-cutting cleavages: "economic and cultural/axiological, which includes religious and post-communist divisions" (Casal Bértoa, 2014, p. 27; Kitschelt et al., 1999; Markowski, 2010). As different scholars have shown (Jasiewicz, 2007; Szczerbiak, 2006), the combination of these two cleavages led to the formation of four distinct political camps: *liberal*, characterized by secular values and a pro-market stance; *conservative*, defined by religious values and a pro-market orientation; *agrarian*, rooted in religious values and a pro-state approach; and *social-democratic*, which embraced secular values and a pro-state agenda. Until 2001, these camps were represented by a multitude of parties, making the Polish party system resemble an "alphabet soup" of political options (Casal Bértoa & Guerra, 2018, p. 224).

Following the collapse of the left-wing government in 2005, the distinction between these four political camps became more pronounced. Civic Platform (PO) emerged as a leader of the liberal camp, while PiS represented the conservative camp. The Polish People's Party (PSL) became the dominant force in the agrarian camp, and the post-communist Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) headed the social-democratic camp. In addition, a new populist camp emerged. This camp combined Euroscepticism and nationalism with conservative and anti-communist values while maintaining strong support for state interventionism. The most prominent representatives of this populist camp were the agrarian Self-Defense of the Republic of Poland (SRP) and the ultra-conservative League of Polish Families (LPR). Alongside PiS, these two formed a coalition government between 2005 and 2007. However, both SRP and LPR collapsed after 2007, paving the way for a new coalition government formed by PO and PSL (Gwiazda, 2016). This coalition lasted until October 2015, when a strategic mistake by the SLD-led electoral coalition changed the political landscape. The coalition failed to register its electoral committee as a party, resulting in failing just 0.4 points short of achieving the 8 percent threshold. This allowed the PiS-led electoral coalition, which included the liberal-conservative Poland Together (PR) and the Catholic-nationalist Sovereign Poland (SP), to secure a parliamentary majority. PiS had transformed during its eight years in opposition, gradually shifting towards more socially conservative positions, and absorbed much of the populist, radical right-wing core from the collapsed SRP and LPR (Pytlas, 2021). When PiS returned to power, it did so with renewed force and determination.

In 2015–2023, the new PiS-PR-SP coalition, supported by a PiS-nominated president, actively sought to dismantle the political system known as the Third Republic. This system was established by the 1997 constitution, and approved by a parliament which was then dominated by liberal, agrarian, and social-democratic forces. At that time, the main conservative parties were not represented due to a strategic mistake, similar to the one made by SLD in 2015. The primary goal of the new coalition was to establish an Orbán's style of illiberal democracy (Pirro & Stanley, 2022) and create a so-called Fourth Republic. The so-called populist coalition government (Stanley, 2016) focused on enacting a comprehensive reform of the justice system, tightening control over the media and education systems, which inevitably led to confrontation with the EU (Bodnar & Ploszka, in press). The political shift led to an exponential increase in polarization (Horonziak, 2022; Tworzecki, 2019) and the emergence of "a new populist divide" (Stanley, 2018). On the one side, we had PiS and its allies, including PR, SP, and the far-right Confederation, whereas on the other stood the pro-democratic, pro-EU camp, formed by the remaining political forces: the liberal Civic Coalition (KO) between PO, Modern, and the Greens, the agrarian-conservative Third Way coalition of PSL and Poland 2050, and The Left coalition composed of the social-democratic New Left party and the radical-Left Together. This divide and polarization were further fueled by issues such as abortion, immigration, and the distribution of generous welfare benefits to certain social groups (Lindner et al., 2020).

This was Poland's critical situation leading up to the parliamentary election in October 2023. Opposition parties were eager to unite against the governing parties and restore liberal democracy, as they had done in the 2020 presidential elections. Aware of the challenges in retaining power, as no Polish government has ever been re-elected more than once (Casal Bértoa & Enyedi, 2022), PiS decided to copy Orbán's 2022 strategy. Consequently, PiS announced a nationwide referendum to coincide with the legislative elections. The referendum aimed to (a) exploit the new political divide, (b) intensify polarization, and (c) help mobilize their electorate for the parliamentary elections. The following section includes the study of this highly instrumental referendum.

## 4. The 2023 Referendum in Comparative Perspective

Poland has not had an exceptionally positive experience with nationwide referendums. Since the transition to democracy in 1989, only six referendums have been held, with an average turnout of 35.9 percent. Out of these, only one reached the necessary 50 percent turnout threshold to be considered binding (see Figure A1 in the Supplementary File). This was the 2003 referendum on Poland's accession to the EU, which saw 58.9 percent turnout. It is important to note that, despite a low turnout of 42.9 percent in the 1997 constitutional referendum, the Polish Constitutional Court ruled the referendum binding. The Court based its decision on the 1992 "small" constitution, considered to take precedence over the 1995 Referendum Act that introduced the 50 percent threshold (Musiał-Karg, 2008).

This stands in clear contrast to the "enfranchisement" and "privatization" referendums, both held in 1996, which only reached a turnout of 32.4 percent. Even lower, and setting a record not just in Poland but in post-WWII Europe, was the 2015 referendum with a turnout of 7.8 percent (see Figure A1 in the Supplementary File). The referendum was called by President Bronisław Komorowski (affiliated with the centrist PO) after he came second in the first round of the 2015 presidential election. The referendum posed three issues: (a) the adoption of single-mandate electoral districts, (b) the abolition of direct public funding for political parties, and (c) the introduction of the "*in dubio pro* taxpayer" principle. By adopting some of the most popular postulates of the third presidential candidate, populist rocker Paweł Kukiz, president Komorowski hoped to attract part of Kukiz's supporters in the run-off and consequently defeat Andrzej Duda (PiS' candidate). However, Duda finally won the election (Hartliński, 2015). The 2015 referendum was the first instance of the instrumental use of direct democracy in Poland (Musiał-Karg, 2017).

The 2023 referendum managed to attract only 40.9 percent of the electorate. While this represents a relatively higher turnout compared to other referendums (as shown in Figure A1 in the Supplementary File), it highlights the broader apathy among Polish voters. This voter indifference can be attributed to several factors such as the absence of a strong referendum tradition as Poland just held two referendums during the inter-war period and two more during the Communist regime. Other facts include low public interest in politics, widespread skepticism about the significance of individual votes, and the perception that referendums are often exploited by politicians to serve their own interests (Marczewska-Rytko, 2018; Musiał-Karg, 2017).

Following the Hungarian example, the Polish government utilized the prerogative included in Article 90 of the 2003 Referendum Act. On August 17, 2023, the Polish government passed a resolution in parliament to hold a nationwide referendum alongside the parliamentary elections scheduled on October 15 by President Andrzej Duda just days earlier. The resolution was passed with 234 MPs, mostly from the populist camp, voting in favor. While 210 MPs, mainly from the opposition, voted against it, and seven MPs abstained from voting.

While the official reason to hold the referendum concurrently with the parliamentary elections was to reduce costs, it was evident that the true motive was strategic. The government aimed to boost electoral support and secure a parliamentary majority for the third consecutive term. By replicating Orbán's referendum strategy from the previous year, the Polish government expanded on the tactic by posing four questions to the public, each addressing a different topic. The exact wording of the questions was as follows:

1. Do you support the sell-off of state assets to foreign companies, leading to a loss of control by Polish women and men over strategic sectors of the economy?
2. Do you support an increase in retirement age and the reinstatement of the increased retirement age to 67 for men and women?
3. Do you support the removal of the barrier on the border between the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Belarus?
4. Do you support the admission of thousands of illegal immigrants from the Middle East and Africa, in accordance with the relocation mechanism imposed by the European bureaucracy?

The first referendum question was part of PiS's broader strategy to frame the parliamentary elections as a choice between a government protecting Polish sovereignty and an opposition that endangered it. By tapping into nationalist sentiment, the main goal was to appeal to conservative voters and discredit the "liberal" opposition.

The second question was strategically crafted to draw a sharp contrast between the government and the opposition. In 2015, PiS lowered the retirement age by two years, reversing the policy introduced by the main opposition party (i.e., PO). PO, led by Donald Tusk, a former prime minister of Poland and past president of the European Council, had initiated an increase in the retirement age in 2012, raising it from 60 to 67 for women and from 65 to 67 for men. By reviving this issue, which resonates strongly with older and working-class citizens, the government aimed to remind voters of Tusk's perceived disconnect from the interests of ordinary poles and weaken his credibility as the leader of the opposition.

The last two questions were about immigration, a very sensitive topic in Poland, especially after the huge influx of Ukrainian refugees following Russia's invasion. These questions were also linked to the ongoing Polish-Belarussian border crisis, which started in 2021 and involved Belarus using migrants from North Africa and the Middle East to destabilize Poland and other countries in the region (Bodnar & Grzelak, 2023; Grzywaczewski, 2021). Additionally, they touched on Poland's conflict with the EU over the EU migrant relocation system. These questions were designed to appeal to PiS core voters, known for their conservatism, nationalism, and monoculturalism. By prioritizing national identity and security, the government wanted to remind voters of Donald Tusk's role, as president of the European Council, in EU-level decisions regarding immigration during the 2015 "Syrian crisis." Furthermore, the strategy sought to attract more nationalist voters from the far-right Confederation party, which had emphasized anti-immigration as a key part of its electoral campaign.

These referendum questions were part of a strategic effort by the populist government to exploit sensitive and divisive issues, such as national identity, welfare, and security. The goal was to position itself as the defender of Polishness against pressures from the EU and external threats from Russia and Islam, while discrediting the opposition in general, and its leader Donald Tusk in particular. A review of videos posted on Facebook announcing the referendum questions shows the use of fear-based tactics. PiS leaders claimed that "Germans want Tusk in Poland to sell off state assets" and accused opposition politicians of endangering Poland by allowing illegal migrants. They warned of "rapes, murders, terror zones, and property destruction," allegedly linked to immigration in Western Europe, using dramatic visuals to amplify these fears. Additionally, PiS argued that "Poland could become Putin's next target," and urged voters to prioritize security by supporting the government's stance.

## 5. The 2023 Referendum: An Evaluation

This section examines how the government used the referendum instrumentally and irregularly to advance its political objectives. It also explores how opposition parties used the referendum boycott as a counterstrategy to undermine populist power. This analysis highlights the crucial role of the referendum in the wider struggle between populist and opposition forces and offers insights into its function as a tool for political maneuvering.

The decision to hold the referendum was controversial from the outset. Opposition parties objected to the idea of having the referendum in parallel with parliamentary elections. They accused the government of exploiting what should otherwise be a democratic tool for particularistic, electoral gains. Opposition parties expressed serious concerns supported by experts in electoral law and election campaign financing (see Musiał-Karg & Casal Bértoa, 2024; Musiałek, 2023; Urbaniak, 2023). The opposition stance was also supported by numerous NGOs and international organizations, such as the Batory Foundation, the Political Accountability Foundation, and the European Platform for Democratic Elections. These organizations questioned not only the appropriateness of the referendum but also its legality and the integrity of the whole process. Moreover, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR, 2023) mission expressed concerns in its preliminary findings. These included: (a) the highly confrontational style of the campaign, (b) lack of financial transparency, particularly regarding third-party involvement and state-owned companies bypassing spending limits, (c) the overlap between the ruling party's campaign and government information campaigns, and (d) breach of ballot secrecy due to overcrowding and inadequate voting booths. These issues, especially those related to the concurrent nature of the voting, clearly violated several key principles of the Code of Good Practice on Referendums (Venice Commission, 2022). These principles include fairness, transparency, and the separation of state and party interests. Below, this article examines some of the key concerns.

### *5.1. Vacatio Legis*

The government hastily drafted the referendum bill in parliament, failing to comply with several important statutory requirements. First, it did not comply with many legal provisions. Second, it bypassed the usual stages of the regular legislative process. Third, no consultations were held with experts on the matter. Additionally, the government violated the *vacatio legis* rule, which mandates a 14-day period between the publication of a law and its enforcement. The law, adopted on July 7, 2023, went into effect the very next day.

Moreover, the government disregarded international standards, which stipulate that, to prevent the instrumental use of elections and ensure fair electoral competition, changes to electoral legislation should not be made less than six months before the actual vote (Urbaniak, 2023). The Polish Constitutional Court had repeatedly upheld this standard, extending the recommended "legislative silence" period to at least one year before elections (Musiał-Karg & Kapsa, 2021; Venice Commission, 2022).

### *5.2. Wording of the Questions*

The wording of the questions was deliberately biased to influence voters' opinions. The first question targeted foreign influence, the second aimed to discredit the opposition leader, and the third and fourth focused on

immigration and the EU. All four questions were framed to stir social fear and exacerbate political division and polarization.

An analysis of the terminology used in the referendum questions, such as "selling-off national assets," "loss of control," "border," "border barrier," "Belarus," "refugees," "forced resettlement," "illegal immigration," and "European bureaucracy," reveals the deployment of various rhetorical mechanisms designed to elicit particular reactions from voters. These mechanisms include evoking fears of losing sovereignty, highlighting external threats, raising concerns about national security, and portraying opponents in a negative light. The use of fear-inducing language and the construction of a threat narrative are hallmarks of populist strategies (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018). They were designed to polarize emotions and mobilize voters. By provoking fear and invoking the urgent need to "defend" the nation, these strategies fostered suspicion about the consequences of an unfavorable outcome. Overall, the language reflected a populist discourse (McDonnell & Ondelli, 2024), appealing to nationalist and security concerns. It established a clear division between "the people" and perceived threats, whether external like migrants, or internal such as elites (Wojczewski, 2020).

### *5.3. Issue Salience*

According to Article 125.1 of the 1997 Constitution, nationwide referendums may be held on matters of "special importance for the state." While the Constitution does not list what qualifies as such, legal experts have traditionally maintained that these issues should refer to constitutional provisions, political systems, or extremely controversial social matters (Wiszowaty, 2015). Additionally, a referendum should always address issues that are part of the public debate. At the time the referendum was called, however, these issues were largely absent from the public discourse, raising doubts about whether the referendum truly met the standard of "special importance."

### *5.4. Secret Voting*

Given that the voting in both parliamentary elections and the referendum was held at the same polling stations, it was impossible to guarantee the secrecy of voting for those who participated in the parliamentary elections but refused to vote in the referendum (Horbaczewski, 2023). This issue was further exacerbated by the requirement for electoral officers to mark the voter roll with the names of citizens who chose to boycott the referendum (ODIHR, 2023; Urbaniak, 2023).

### *5.5. Unlimited Campaign Finance*

The simultaneous campaigns—one for the parliamentary elections and another for the referendum—led to a clash between two distinct funding models: the more restrictive 2011 Electoral Code (KW) and the more liberal 1995 Referendum Act (Casal Bértoa et al., in press). This clash allowed for duplication of campaign funding, especially benefiting the governing parties, whose political agenda clearly aligned with the referendum objectives. It also enabled the ruling parties to tap into funding sources, such as state-owned enterprises. This funding, permitted under the 1995 Act but prohibited by the 2011 KW, certainly violated international standards. These included guidelines from the Venice Commission and the OSCE/ODIHR 2020 Guidelines of Political Party Regulation, which are designed to prevent the abuse of state resources and guarantee a level playing field in elections (ODIHR, 2023; Political Accountability Foundation, 2024).

### *5.6. Doubtful Binding Effect*

The binding consequences of the referendum were also questionable. First, the Polish-Belarussian border issue had already been resolved: a barrier on the border was approved on October 29, 2021, and constructed between January 25 and June 30, 2022. Second, any decisions regarding immigration quotas could conflict with European regulations, which supersede national legislation. Third, the government had yet to clarify the nuances of the legislation required to address the remaining two issues, i.e., state assets and retirement age (Musiał-Karg & Casal Bértoa, 2024; Political Accountability Foundation, 2024).

In response to the concerns mentioned above, the opposition parties rallied together and called for a boycott of the referendum. They asked their supporters to refuse the collection of referendum ballots when voting in the parliamentary elections. This approach differed from that of the Hungarian opposition, which encouraged supporters to invalidate the referendum ballots rather than boycott them. The results in the two countries were consequently very different. While in both cases the referendum failed to meet the binding threshold, in Hungary, the opposition strategy did not prevent the electoral mobilization that Orbán had intended by holding the referendum at the same time as the parliamentary elections. Turnout for both the referendum and elections was around 69 percent, which benefited the ruling party. As a result, Fidesz and its coalition partner, KDNP, secured their fourth consecutive constitutional majority (Simon, 2022).

## 6. Populist Polarizing Referendums: A Double-Edged Sword

Building on the above comparison of opposition strategies in Poland and Hungary, this section delves into regional turnout data for both the referendum and parliamentary elections. It highlights how Poland's pro-democratic opposition successfully mobilized voters to counteract populist tactics and ultimately unseat the government. Furthermore, it examines the risks inherent in populist polarizing referendums, demonstrating how the latter can backfire and ultimately weaken populist movements.

Like in Hungary, the Polish government managed to show wide support for their policies among those voting in the referendum. On average, almost 96 percent of voters opposed selling off national assets to foreign companies, raising the retirement age, removing the border barrier between Poland and Belarus, and allowing illegal immigrants into the country. However, unlike Hungary in 2022, the Polish populists did not manage to mobilize enough of the electorate to secure a parliamentary majority. In fact, we can assume that all those who voted "no" in the referendum also supported the government in the parliamentary elections. This is evidenced by nearly identical support figures, namely 35.4 percent in the elections and 36.9 percent in the referendum. Thus, it becomes evident that the government's strategy to mobilize the electorate beyond its core base failed. Barely 36 percent of voters cast ballots in both the election and the referendum. In contrast, a large majority of opposition supporters boycotted the referendum. The fact that virtually all PiS voters participated in the referendum, while opposition voters boycotted it, illustrates the deep political divide in Polish politics.

An interesting pattern emerges when we compare electoral support figures for the governing PiS-led United Right (ZP) and the main opposition KO in the parliamentary elections with the turnout in the referendum per province (see Table 2). In general, support for ZP was higher in those regions where the turnout was highest, particularly in Podkarpackie, Lubelskie, Świętokrzyskie, Małopolskie, and Podlaskie. These five provinces,

**Table 2.** Votes in parliamentary elections (lower chamber) and turnout in the referendum by province.

| Province | % of votes for the *Sejm* | | ≠ in % of votes (PiS as baseline) | Referendum turnout |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *PiS* | *KO* | | |
| Podkarpackie | 52.8 | 17 | 35.8 | 52.2 |
| Lubelskie | 47.7 | 19.1 | 28.6 | 49.1 |
| Świętokrzyskie | 47.1 | 20.9 | 26.2 | 48 |
| Małopolskie | 41.7 | 23.5 | 18.2 | 47 |
| Podlaskie | 42.4 | 20.8 | 21.6 | 46.2 |
| Łódzkie | 38.1 | 29.7 | 8.4 | 43.5 |
| Mazowieckie | 34.9 | 31.5 | 3.4 | 42.6 |
| Śląskie | 33.5 | 32.1 | 1.4 | 40 |
| Wielkopolskie | 30.1 | 33.6 | −3.5 | 37.7 |
| Kujawsko-Pomorskie | 32.3 | 32.3 | 0 | 37.3 |
| Dolnośląskie | 30.6 | 36 | −5.4 | 36.2 |
| Warmińsko-Mazurskie | 33.6 | 32.6 | 1 | 36 |
| Opolskie | 31.3 | 33.6 | −2.3 | 35 |
| Zachodniopomorskie | 29.7 | 39.6 | −9.9 | 34.3 |
| Pomorskie | 27.3 | 39.7 | −12.4 | 33.9 |
| Lubuskie | 27.8 | 37.7 | −9.9 | 33 |

Source: National Electoral Commission (2023).

traditionally considered PiS electoral strongholds, showed a significant lead for ZP over KO, with the gap ranging from 18.2 in Podlaskie to almost 36 percentage points in Podkarpackie.

Overall, ZP won in all provinces where electoral turnout was higher than 40 percent. Conversely, it lost in six of the eight provinces where turnout was below that threshold. These provinces, Lubuskie, Pomorskie, Zachodniopomorskie, Opolskie, Dolnośląskie, and Wielkopolskie, are located in the traditionally more liberal western part of Poland (Zarycki, 2015). In the centrally located province of Kujawsko-Pomorskie, ZP and KO were nearly tied. The only exception was in Warmińsko-Mazurskie, one of the poorest regions in the country, where PiS managed to defeat KO despite a rather low referendum turnout of just 36 percent.

The analysis demonstrates the extent to which referendums and parliamentary elections are often intrinsically linked, as widely acknowledged in the literature (Levine & Roberts, 1994; Rakowska, 2023; Setälä & Schiller, 2009). However, the 2023 Polish referendum shows that contrary to the initial expectations, populist polarizing referendums can function like cleavage referendums (e.g., Brexit) and act as a double-edged sword. The outcome largely depends on the strategy adopted by the opposition. In Poland, the opposition successfully united and leveraged the high level of polarization to mobilize their voters while encouraging them to refrain from participating in what was widely perceived as a completely instrumental and manipulative referendum. By doing so, opposition parties may prevent populists from retaining power and help reverse democratic backsliding.

The opposition successfully turned the referendum against the ruling party by adopting a highly informative campaign strategy aimed at raising public awareness. They informed voters on how they could participate in

the parliamentary elections while abstaining from the referendum. By empowering voters with the knowledge to engage selectively in the democratic process, the opposition positioned themselves as defenders of democracy. They stood against what they perceived as the ruling party's manipulation of inherently democratic tools for partisan political gain. In addition to promoting a boycott of the referendum, the opposition ran a positive campaign, advocating for democratic reforms and presenting a vision of a more pro-European, open, and socially cohesive Poland. These strategies were designed to attract undecided voters and energize an electorate disillusioned with current PiS policies. This approach proved successful, as it shifted the focus away from the PiS populist rhetoric and toward the more substantive issues in the parliamentary elections. Thanks to this cohesive messaging and the unification of opposition parties, their strategy resulted in a surge of support, culminating in the opposition's victory and the consequent shift in the balance of power in Poland. As a result, despite PiS receiving more votes than any other party, the opposition—comprising KO, the Third Way (TD), and the New Left (NL)—was able to form a parliamentary majority. This ultimately led to the establishment of a new pro-democratic government under Tusk's premiership.

This stands in stark contrast to the situation in Hungary, where the opposition's strategy of encouraging voters to invalidate Orbán's referendum backfired. Not only did it fail to increase turnout among its own supporters at the parliamentary elections, but it also did not prevent Fidesz from successfully mobilizing its electorate (Scheppele, 2022). The outcome was yet another populist victory that pushed the country even further toward autocratization.

## 7. Conclusions

The 2023 referendum marks a pivotal moment in Poland's contemporary history. Framed around emotionally charged and divisive issues, the referendum reflected the government's populist tactic aimed at strengthening its electoral position. By shaping the political discourse, the government sought to deflect attention from its governance shortcomings and stir up division within the opposition. Additionally, by intensifying polarization during the electoral campaign, the ruling party hoped not only to consolidate its supporters but also attract undecided voters in the concurrently held parliamentary elections. It is also important to note that referendums can serve as highly polarizing political tools. By presenting voters with a binary choice, referendums inherently reduce space for nuanced and moderate views, forcing the electorate into two opposing blocs: for vs. against.

What the government failed to anticipate was that the referendum strategy would backfire, despite the seemingly successful precedent set by Hungary's 2022 populist polarizing referendum. In Hungary, Orbán used the referendum on LGBTQ+ education to further polarize Hungarian society and drive his supporters to the polls. The key difference in Poland was the opposition's strategy. Opposition parties united and called for a boycott, effectively countering the populist narrative and undermining the legitimacy of the referendum. This outcome highlights a paradox: in highly populist, polarized contexts, democratic backsliding can be reversed not by engaging in direct democracy, but by refusing to participate in its instrumentalized form. Thus, the Polish example illustrates that by strategically demobilizing their own voters in response to the populist instrumentalization of direct democracy, opposition parties can resist populist tactics and restore liberal democracy.

Understanding the relationship between populism, cleavage politics, and referendums is essential, as populism often thrives on and exacerbates existing political divides. Populists use these divides to mobilize support and frame political discourse in ways that increase polarization. By introducing the concept of populist polarizing referendums, we aim to distinguish this category from cleavage referendums, highlighting their distinct origins, purposes, rhetoric, timing, and effects. We hope this contribution enhances the literature by offering a deeper understanding of how referendums are increasingly used in modern politics. It also promotes a more nuanced analysis of referendums as tools of political strategy and their implications for democratic governance.

Populist polarizing referendums are often deliberately used by populist actors to frame issues in ways that emphasize existing political conflicts and/or ideological divides. These direct democratic tools are typically initiated by populist actors to heighten polarization and mobilize a specific sector of the electorate. While this article shows that the increasing use of such referendums, seen in countries like Turkey and Hungary, can pose significant challenges to the healthy functioning of democracy, they can also, as in Poland, become instruments of democratic regeneration.

The Polish case shows that populist polarizing referendums are not infallible. Although populists often exploit polarization for their gain, opposition forces can also turn this dynamic to their advantage. The key lies in the opposition acting constructively, using unity as a tool to build rather than to divide. Ultimately, what populists intend as political "curveballs" can be effectively transformed into "sliders" by a well-organized and strategic opposition.

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The authors declare no conflict of interests.

## Data Availability

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

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# Game Changers: National Referendums and the Politicization of Europe

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## Abstract

How do national referendums shape political contestation? This article explores this question by examining the politicization of European integration, a key "cleavage issue" restructuring political conflict across Europe. While national referendums are often assumed to intensify public contestation over European integration, systematic comparative evidence remains limited. This study contributes to the debate by analyzing 87 public debates on European integration across six Western European countries (Austria, Britain, France, Germany, Sweden, and Switzerland), including 12 debates with national referendums. The analysis draws on the PolDem dataset (Hutter et al., 2016), updated to include the Brexit referendum. Through comprehensive across-debate and within-debate analyses, the findings show that referendums are associated with heightened politicization, particularly by expanding actor participation and increasing issue salience. Civil society and other non-executive actors gain visibility in referendum contexts, reinforcing the view that referendums level the political playing field. Although referendums increase framing diversity, they do not consistently lead to more polarized or identity-focused debates involving radical parties, challenging the notion that referendums inherently drive cultural conflict. This study advances our understanding of how direct democracy shapes European integration debates and calls for further comparative research on institutional factors and endogenous conflict dynamics to better grasp the varied impacts of referendums on politicization.

## Keywords

direct democracy; European integration; framing; post-functionalism; referendums

## 1. Introduction

This study examines how opening the direct-democratic arena—specifically through referendums—shapes the dynamics of political contestation over European integration, a critical "cleavage issue" alongside immigration that is restructuring the political space in Europe (e.g., Bornschier, 2010; de Vries, 2018; Hooghe & Marks, 2018; Hutter & Kriesi, 2019a, 2019b; Kriesi et al., 2008). Ratification referendums "have been the paradigm examples of historical opportunities for publicly debating Europe. During referendum campaigns, the question of European integration is distinctly put on the political agenda, explicitly and deliberately opening the possibility for the politicization of Europe" (de Wilde & Zürn, 2012, p. 145). Referendums are seen as challenging the strategic control of mainstream party elites over the integration process; they "shift the initiative to citizens and single-issue groups, and disarm party elites" (Hooghe & Marks, 2009, p. 20).

The literature reviewed in this article offers at least three reasons why referendums influence the "quantity" (i.e., the level) and "quality" (i.e., the type) of politicization. Specifically, referendums (a) direct public attention to European issues, (b) empower Eurosceptic challengers both within and outside the party system, and (c) reshape EU issue competition by imposing a binary choice and intensifying framing contests around a more restricted set of issues. Referendums are expected to create a distinct form of political conflict rather than simply amplifying existing debates on European integration. Following the failed Constitutional Process in the early 2000s, the avoidance of referendums has therefore been portrayed as a central strategy for restricting public contestation over Europe (see de Wilde & Zürn, 2012; Schimmelfennig, 2014; Statham & Trenz, 2013a, 2013b). Relatedly, the Brexit referendum has reinforced skeptical views of referendums among scholars (e.g., Offe, 2017) and citizens (e.g., Steiner & Landwehr, 2023).

Despite these expectations, we have limited comparative evidence on how referendums specifically impact the politicization of European integration. Most studies of European referendums are outcome-oriented, examining the referendum period to assess the stakes and explain voting results (see Atikcan, 2015; Franklin, 2002; Garry et al., 2005; Hobolt, 2006, 2009; Hug, 2002; Qvortrup, 2017; Svensson, 2002). Comparative efforts in the field have largely focused on why governments opt for non-mandatory referendums (e.g., Closa, 2007; Mendez et al., 2014; Oppermann, 2013; Posser, 2016), while studies adopting a politicization framework have tended to analyze electoral or parliamentary arenas. There have been few comparative analyses of referendum-driven politicization (see Fagan & van Kessel, 2023; Hoeglinger, 2016; Hurrelmann et al., 2013; Hutter et al., 2016; Statham & Trenz, 2013a, 2013b; Vetters et al., 2009). These studies have often focused on a limited number of prominent cases and have yielded inconclusive results, especially regarding the types of challengers and issue-framing contests magnified in direct democratic contexts. Statham and Trenz's (2013a, 2013b) analysis of the Constitutional Process, for instance, examines the effects of president Chirac's decision to hold a referendum by comparing public debates in France, Britain, and Germany and breaking these debates down into three phases (pre-constitution, drafting, and ratification).

This article's primary contribution is empirical, enhancing our understanding of how referendums affect the politicization of European integration by building on and expanding the work of Hutter et al. (2016). I reanalyze the PolDem dataset on European public debates from the early 1970s to the euro crisis—originally collected by Hutter et al. (2016) and publicly available (https://poldem.eui.eu)—and added the pivotal Brexit debate. The analysis covers 87 national public debates across six Western European countries—Austria, Britain, France,

Germany, Sweden, and Switzerland—including 12 debates involving a national referendum on membership, treaty reforms, or specific policy decisions related to European integration.

While Hutter et al. (2016) established a positive correlation between referendums and politicization, their approach was limited to what I term an across-debate analysis, focusing on general levels of politicization without differentiating among types of challengers or the specific nature of EU issue competition in referendum contexts. My study advances their findings by systematically examining a broader set of dependent variables and integrating both across-debate and within-debate comparisons, similar in concept to Statham and Trenz (2013a, 2013b) but encompassing a larger set of cases. In the across-debate analysis, I assess differences in the quantity and quality of debates over integration steps involving referendums compared to those without. By contrast, the within-debate comparisons track the progression of public debate over time within each of the 12 integration steps that included a referendum. By examining key stages, or *critical dates*, this approach clarifies how debates evolve, leading up to and during the referendum campaign itself. The added value of combining these approaches lies in their distinct perspectives: the across-debate comparison assesses referendums' broad impact on politicization across multiple cases, while the within-debate comparison isolates the unique dynamics a referendum introduces within a single integration step. This helps mitigate endogeneity concerns by showing whether politicization specifically spikes during referendum campaigns. Together, they offer a more nuanced understanding of both the structural and temporal influences of referendums on public debate.

Overall, the findings from the two types of comparisons confirm that referendums significantly heighten the politicization of European integration by expanding actor participation and elevating issue salience. However, the type or quality of politicization is not as uniformly affected by national referendums. Most importantly, claims that referendums uniformly lead to a more polarized or identity-focused debate find limited support. This nuanced outcome challenges the view that referendums inherently reinforce divisive cultural narratives within European integration debates.

This article is structured as follows: I start by presenting the arguments and previous findings on the effects of referendums on public debates. Next, I discuss the data and measurement issues. The empirical analysis is divided into two parts. The first part compares debates with and without referendums (the across-debate analysis), while the second part focuses on cases with referendums, tracing the evolution from the start of the integration step to the final weeks of the referendum campaign (the within-debate analysis). Finally, I summarize the main findings of the article and avenues for further research.

## 2. Why and How Should Referendums Affect the Politicization of Europe?

It is important to clarify what is meant by politicization, as the term is used in various contexts and carries different meanings. This article adopts an understanding of politicization based on Schattschneider's (1957, 1975/1960) seminal work, which views conflict as the core of politics. More specifically, it aligns with the emerging consensus in the study of EU politics that highlights three interrelated dimensions of politicization: issue salience, actor expansion, and polarization (see de Wilde, 2011; de Wilde et al., 2016; Hutter et al., 2016 for more extensive discussions).

The first dimension, *issue salience*, refers to the visibility of an issue in public debates; topics frequently highlighted by political actors are considered politicized. This approach follows Green-Pedersen (2012) and

Guinaudeau and Persico (2013), who argue that politicization is best examined through the lens of salience. The second dimension, *actor expansion*, concerns the range of participants in the debate. As Schattschneider (1975/1960, p. 2) notes: "the number of people involved in any conflict determines what happens." If only a narrow range of actors engage publicly, the issue remains weakly politicized. This analysis considers how far other actors join dominant executive figures in EU integration debates. The third dimension, *polarization*, relates to the intensity of conflict on the issue. For an issue to be polarized, actors must take starkly opposing positions, resulting in well-defined opposing camps (de Wilde, 2011; Hoeglinger, 2016). The most intense polarization occurs when two camps advocate entirely opposing views with similar intensity.

Why might national referendums affect both the level and type of politicization around European integration? Scholars argue that referendums impact political conflicts through at least three mechanisms, influencing the visibility of an issue in public debates, the types of participants, and the dynamics of issue competition.

First, referendums are expected to draw public attention to specific issues. They enable what Kriesi (2003, p. 202) calls a "quasi-institutional going public," contrasting with national election campaigns where mainstream parties can more easily de-emphasize European issues if they are divided or disconnected from public opinion (Green-Pedersen, 2012; Hellström & Blomgren, 2016; Van der Eijk et al., 1996). During referendums, parties are in any case compelled to take a public stance on the issue. While debate intensity may vary (Hobolt, 2009, p. 95), referendums place Europe in the public spotlight, particularly in contexts where referendums are rare.

Existing comparative studies support this claim. The French and Dutch referendums on the European Constitution spurred highly salient debates on Europe from 2004 to 2006 (Hoeglinger, 2016, p. 46), an effect seen not only in these two referendum-holding countries but also in the other four Western European countries included in the study (i.e., Austria, Britain, Sweden, and Switzerland). Similar findings have emerged from analyses of the French referendum on the European Constitution by Statham and Trenz (2013a, 2013b) and Vetters et al. (2009). Hurrelmann et al. (2013) also noted that debates over the Nice and Lisbon Treaties were more intense in Ireland (which held referendums) than those around the European Constitution, which was not put to a referendum. Similarly, Hutter et al. (2016) observed a strong positive correlation between levels of politicization and whether integration steps culminated in national referendums.

Second, referendums are expected to increase the visibility of challengers from both within and outside the party system. The direct-democratic arena offers more opportunities for peripheral actors, such as social movements and civil society organizations (for the Swiss case, see Hoeglinger, 2008; Kriesi & Bernhard, 2011; Kriesi & Wisler, 1996). Unlike electoral campaigns, referendums typically impose fewer access restrictions, and the binary nature of competition ensures representation for both sides, creating a level playing field between outsiders and established political actors (de Vreese, 2006). In EU integration contexts, this dynamic often benefits Eurosceptic voices from party fringes. However, there is debate over referendums' effects on party visibility; some argue that parties are less central in direct democratic settings, while others emphasize their roles in campaigns and voter influence (e.g., Budge, 2001; Colombo & Kriesi, 2017).

Hurrelmann et al. (2013, p. 522) observed a stronger presence of civil society and party actors in Irish referendum debates, attributing this to the referendum itself. Hoeglinger (2016) also noted increased

visibility for civil society actors during referendums in France, the Netherlands, and Switzerland. However, party actor visibility increased only in France and the Netherlands but not in Switzerland. By contrast, radical parties—particularly from the populist right—gained visibility at the expense of mainstream parties in all countries (see also Petithomme, 2011). During the French referendum on the European Constitution, Statham and Trenz (2013a, p. 92) observed a "limited awakening of civil society," largely overshadowed by intensified intra-party contestation, especially within the Socialist Party.

Third, referendums can alter the nature of EU issue competition. Unlike routine periods, referendums present voters with a binary choice—yes or no—typically narrowing the set of debated issues but amplifying divergent interpretations and justifications. In Gamson's (2004, p. 245) terms, referendums intensify "framing contests." Actors must adopt frames that attract media attention and influence voters while countering opposing frames (Hänggli & Kriesi, 2010). This dynamic fosters framing contests beyond the control of any single actor, contributing to "campaign dynamics" (Hobolt, 2009). Post-functionalist integration theory suggests that referendums not only intensify framing contests but may also bias these contests toward identity politics (Hooghe & Marks, 2009, p. 20). Referendums, therefore, are likely to shift conflicts toward identitarian and cultural frames, where pro-European mainstream parties typically rely on economic and utilitarian arguments while more Eurosceptic forces, especially from the right, advocate a nationalist critique of European integration (see Helbling et al., 2010; Hutter et al., 2016).

Demand-side studies highlight cultural factors in direct-democratic votes in Europe (e.g., Clarke et al., 2017; Hobolt, 2016 on Brexit). However, comparative research offers limited insights into how referendums influence framing diversity and bias strategies in public debates in Europe. The most systematic contribution comes from Statham and Trenz's (2013a, 2013b) comparative study on the European Constitution debate. They found that framing contests intensified during the French referendum campaign but did not observe a shift toward cultural-identitarian arguments. Instead, while the government used cultural arguments to support the Treaty, dissent within the Socialist Party centered on an economic narrative of a "Social Europe" (see also Crespy, 2008).

I propose three guiding hypotheses about how access to the direct democratic arena is likely to affect the politicization of European integration. Given the design of this study, these hypotheses are cautiously framed as associations rather than strict causal claims. The first and baseline hypothesis focuses on the level of politicization, suggesting that all dimensions of politicization (salience, actor expansion, and polarization) are likely to increase in referendum contexts. In contrast, the second and third hypotheses focus more specifically on the types of challengers and the dynamics of EU issue competition that are expected to be amplified.

1. *Level hypothesis*: National referendums on European integration are associated with increased politicization in public debates, reflected in higher issue salience, expanded participation of non-executive actors, and increased polarization with clear opposing stances.

2. *Challenger hypothesis*: National referendums on European integration are associated with increased visibility of non-mainstream actors in public debates, including Eurosceptic voices from party fringes, social movements, and civil society organizations. This hypothesis suggests that the open and binary nature of referendums levels the playing field, allowing peripheral actors to engage more visibly and

compete with established governmental elites, thereby diversifying the range of voices represented in the debate.

3. *Issue competition hypothesis*: National referendums on European integration are associated with shifts in EU issue competition, intensifying framing contests around a narrower set of issues. Furthermore, referendums are associated with the increasing prominence of cultural-identitarian frames over economic or other utilitarian arguments, reflecting a reorientation towards more value-based and polarized narratives in line with post-functionalist integration theory.

The literature review highlights that while expectations about referendums boosting politicization align with prior findings, they remain largely untested across a broad range of cases, especially beyond the well-studied referendums on European integration of the 2000s. Although previous research (including Hutter et al., 2016) shows that referendums typically increase the salience of European issues, the findings are less conclusive regarding other aspects, such as actor diversity and issue framing. These dynamics have not yet been examined within a framework that combines systematic comparisons across and within debates—a gap this study seeks to fill.

## 3. Design and Data

The empirical analysis in this article covers 87 public debates on major integration steps in six Western European countries (Austria, Britain, France, Germany, Sweden, and Switzerland) from the early 1970s to 2016. The dataset, collected as part of the Politicization of Europe project by Hutter et al. (2016) and updated to include the 2016 British vote on EU membership, is publicly available at the PolDem (https://poldem.eui.eu; poldem-debate_eu; including further details on data collection strategies). Country selection was based on pragmatic reasons, as manually collecting comprehensive data on public debate intensity and content is time-consuming. However, previous analyses of the data show that the sample controls for several factors influencing levels of politicization in integration debates, especially the duration and scope of EU integration. France and Germany were founding members of the European Community; the UK joined in 1973, Austria and Sweden in 1995, and Switzerland, a non-EU member with its "semi-direct democracy," provides additional insights into the relationship between national referendums and politicization.

The data includes debates on all major European treaty reforms, both successful and unsuccessful, such as the Single European Act, Maastricht, Amsterdam, Nice, the European Constitutional Treaty, and the Lisbon Treaty. It also covers every enlargement round since the 1970s—First Enlargement, Southern Enlargement I & II, EFTA Enlargement, Eastern Enlargement I & II—as well as debates on Turkey's EU accession and nine country-specific debates from Austria, Britain, Sweden, and Switzerland. These debates centered on critical decisions regarding each country's relationship with the EC/EU, particularly their integration into the Single Market or Economic and Monetary Union, the Free Trade Agreement in the early 1970s (Austria and Switzerland), membership of the European Economic Area (EEA) in the mid-1990s (Austria, Sweden, and Switzerland), the two bilateral treaties between Switzerland and the EU, the Swedish referendum on the introduction of the Euro in 2003, and the UK's decision to leave the EU.

This sample is well-suited for the study as it includes 12 cases where a national referendum determined the outcome of an integration step. These cases cover all the countries under scrutiny except Germany, which has

not held such a vote. The sample represents only 12 of the more than 60 national referendums on European integration held, from the first referendum in France in 1972 through 2024 (del Monte, 2022). While not exhaustive, this sample offers important variation across time periods, types of institutional settings (including the Swiss case with its mandatory referendums), member and non-member states, and the specific issues at stake. As shown in Table 1, the sample includes all three types of referendums on European integration identified by Hobolt (2009): membership, treaty ratifications, and single policy decisions. As Hobolt noted, these differences in referendum content can impact supply-side strategies and shape public opinion during direct democratic campaigns.

The study's main contribution to the literature on how referendums shape the level and type of politicization is empirical, as it goes beyond analyses of just one or a few prominent cases (see Section 2). Moreover, it substantially advances the work of Hutter et al. (2016), not only by including the pivotal case of Brexit but also by (a) systematically disentangling the different components of politicization and evolving issue competition and, most importantly, (b) by combining across-debate and within-debate comparisons. In the across-debate comparison, the unit of analysis is the national debate surrounding a specific integration step, with the central question being how the public debates for the 12 steps involving a national referendum differ in quantity and quality from the remaining 75 debates without a referendum. This part of the analysis focuses on the net effect of the availability of the direct democratic arena across integration steps.

**Table 1.** Overview of integration debates with national referendums.

| Country | Integration Step | Year of referendum | Abbr. | Type | EC/EU member | Index | Salience | Polarization | Actor expansion |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| UK | Brexit | 2016 | brexit | M | 1 | 2.19 | 2.47 | 0.18 | 0.71 |
| FR | Maastricht | 1992 | ma | T | 1 | 1.87 | 1.96 | 0.26 | 0.70 |
| FR | First Enlargement | 1972 | fenl | I | 1 | 1.54 | 1.54 | 0.30 | 0.70 |
| AT | EFTA-Enlargement | 1994 | efta | M | 0 | 1.45 | 2.48 | 0.10 | 0.49 |
| CH | EEA | 1992 | eea | M | 0 | 1.27 | 1.52 | 0.10 | 0.73 |
| CH | Bilateral Treaties II | 2005 | bt2 | T | 0 | 0.87 | 0.81 | 0.35 | 0.71 |
| UK | First Enlargement | 1975 | fen | M | 1* | 0.84 | 1.07 | 0.16 | 0.62 |
| SE | EFTA-Enlargement | 1994 | efta | M | 0 | 0.71 | 0.92 | 0.19 | 0.58 |
| FR | Constitution | 2005 | tec | T | 1 | 0.70 | 0.69 | 0.31 | 0.71 |
| CH | Free Trade Agr. | 1972 | fta | T | 0 | 0.62 | 0.83 | 0.27 | 0.48 |
| SE | Eurozone | 2003 | euro | I | 1 | 0.61 | 0.49 | 0.38 | 0.86 |
| CH | Bilateral Treaties I | 2000 | bt1 | T | 0 | 0.44 | 0.59 | 0.11 | 0.62 |

Notes: The table lists the 12 public debates involving a national referendum; it also shows the type of issue according to Hobolt's (2009) classification (M = Membership; T = Treaty reform; I = Single issue) and the different indicators for the politicization of the domestic public debate; the steps are sorted according to the overall index of politicization; * involves the referendum in 1975 when the UK was already a member state.

For the within-debate comparisons, I examined the over-time dynamics across the 12 integration steps that included a national referendum. This approach is feasible because integration steps and their associated public debates are not confined to a single event but unfold over extended periods. Consequently, the data include information on public debates at several key sub-decisions within each integration step. These *critical dates* include (a) the initiation of the project (e.g., formal application for membership or a European summit), (b) the European Commission's response (for enlargement rounds only), (c) the start of negotiations, (d) the drafting and signing of a treaty, and (e) the national adoption phase (either by parliament or referendum). For each critical date, public debates were coded over three weeks. The central question for the within-debate comparison is then how the debate during the actual referendum campaign differed from earlier phases of public contestation within the integration step, while also capturing differences among the 12 referendum cases.

The within-debate comparisons also partly address the potential endogeneity problem by isolating the impact of the referendum campaign on the politicization of the entire integration step. If the causal argument were that politicization leads to referendums (i.e., highly politicized debates prompt national referendums), significant differences between pre-referendum and referendum phases would not be expected—especially in cases where holding a national referendum was uncertain from the start (as in the three French cases). This analysis therefore takes a first step in testing the hypothesized links between national referendums and features of public debate. However, fully demonstrating causal mechanisms would require further (qualitative) tracing of these processes.

The public debates are examined using a manual relational content analysis of media reports. As Statham and Trenz (2013b, p. 3) state: "Politicisation requires the expansion of debates from closed elite-dominated policy arenas to wider publics, and here the mass media plays an important role by placing the contesting political actors in front of a public." The selected news reports on the different integration steps come from one quality newspaper per country: *Die Presse* (Austria), *The Times* (Britain), *Le Monde* (France), *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (Germany), *Svenska Dagbladet* (Sweden), and *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (Switzerland; on the selection and sampling strategy, see Hutter et al., 2016, p. 45–48). Articles were coded using the core sentence approach, originally developed by Kleinnijenhuis et al. (1997) and further developed by Kriesi et al. (2008), where each grammatical sentence is split into subject-object relations and manually annotated by trained coders. The PolDem data from Hutter et al. (2016) captures relations between actors and European integration issues (actor–issue sentences) and between actors themselves, with a thematic link to European integration issues (actor–actor sentences). No restrictions were made with respect to the type of actors, so domestic and international actors as well as partisan and non-partisan actors were coded. However, both relation types (actor–issue and actor–actor) were coded only if they related to European integration, encompassing general orientations towards European integration as well as more specific constitutive and policy-related European issues.

The actors and issues were coded in great detail, with variables on the type, party affiliation (if available), and individual name (if available) of the actors, as well as codes for the specific issue (including a string variable). The direction of the relationship was quantified on a scale from −1 to +1: −1 indicating a critique or rejection, and +1 indicating an affirmative evaluation. In addition to the actors, issues, and their relationship, the frames used by the actors to justify their issue positions were also coded. These justification frames are at the level of core sentences, just like the actors and issues. Because actors sometimes provide different arguments for their positions, the dataset contains up to three such frames for each actor–issue sentence. The article focuses

on political conflict among domestic actors, so the sample is limited to statements involving domestic subject actors. The empirical analysis is based on approximately 17,000 core sentences and 10,000 frames.

How are the different features of politicization measured? To assess the *level* of politicization, I focused on the three dimensions emphasized in the theoretical section: salience, polarization, and actor expansion (see Table 2). Salience is measured by the average number of articles coded per selected day. Actor expansion is assessed by the share of non-governmental actor statements (e.g., opposition leaders, parliamentary spokespersons, and civil society actors) as a percentage of all coded statements. This variable is assigned on the basis of the specific roles and functions of the coded actors and not on the basis of party affiliation. For example, ministers of the national government are coded as executive actors, while statements by members of parliament or party leaders without an executive function are coded as non-executive. Polarization is measured using an adapted version of Taylor and Hermann's (1971) index of ideological polarization, ranging from 0 (no polarization) to 1, focusing on differences in actors' positions on six EU issues.

I relied on previous work by Hutter et al. (2016) to distinguish between the six EU issues: (a) basic or general orientations towards the EU, which refer to positive or negative positions towards European integration and the EU in general; (b) specific constitutive issues related to the nature of the EU polity, including membership, competences, and decision-making rules, further divided into three sub-categories: *widening*, pertaining to the horizontal dimension of European integration, most notably the accession of new member states; *economic deepening*, relating to the level and scope of integration in economic fields; *non-economic deepening*, relating to the scope and level of integration in non-economic fields; (c) policy-related issues, which are comparable to those at the national level (such as welfare or immigration policy) and cover policy questions in areas where European institutions are active. The policy issues are divided into two sub-categories: *economic intervention*, relating to whether and how Europe should exercise its competences in economic policy fields; and *non-economic intervention*, concerning whether and how Europe should exercise its competences in non-economic policy fields. Finally, the three indicators for salience, actor expansion, and polarization were combined into an overall index by multiplying salience with the sum of the other two dimensions (for a more detailed discussion on the three measures and the combined index, see Hutter et al., 2016, pp. 301–304).

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics of dependent variables.

| Measure | *N* | Mean | Std. dev. | Min | Max |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Politicization index | 87 | 0.28 | 0.42 | 0.00 | 2.19 |
| Salience | 87 | 0.41 | 0.51 | 0.00 | 2.48 |
| Polarization | 87 | 0.10 | 0.12 | 0.00 | 0.42 |
| Actor expansion | 87 | 0.39 | 0.25 | 0.00 | 1.00 |
| | | | | | |
| Political parties (share) | 87 | 0.28 | 0.19 | 0.00 | 0.75 |
| Radical parties (share) | 87 | 0.09 | 0.14 | 0.00 | 1.00 |
| Civil society (share) | 87 | 0.11 | 0.13 | 0.00 | 0.58 |
| Intra-party dissent | 87 | 0.27 | 0.22 | 0.00 | 0.80 |
| | | | | | |
| Issue diversity | 87 | 1.02 | 0.47 | 0.00 | 1.55 |
| Frame diversity | 87 | 1.35 | 0.67 | 0.00 | 2.05 |
| Cultural frames (share) | 87 | 0.26 | 0.18 | 0.00 | 0.67 |

To examine non-governmental challengers that may gain visibility in referendum campaigns, I analyzed the presence of (a) party challengers from the radical left or right and (b) the presence of various civil society actors (e.g., interest associations, social movements, and experts). These shares indicate their visibility relative to all coded subject actors, including governmental actors. Furthermore, I assessed whether we also observe more intra-party dissent, measured by a weighted standard deviation of party positions on the detailed issues coded for each integration step, weighted by the relative visibility of the parties. This measure reflects how much contestation around European integration is not only due to conflicts between different parties and various other types of actors but also due to conflicts among members of the same party. Robustness checks using dissent only within mainstream parties did not lead to different results from those presented below.

Changes in the issue of competition were measured with three indicators. The indicators for issue and frame diversity use Shannon's H entropy score, commonly applied in agenda-setting research to assess the concentration or dispersion of attention across categories (Boydstun et al., 2014). Issue diversity was calculated using the same set of six issue categories introduced above for the polarization measure. The entropy score ranges from 0 (debate concentrated on a single category) to a maximum of 1.8 (equal distribution across the six-issue categories). Finally, frames—the justifications for issue positions—were coded using a theoretically derived system of categories. The coders were not allowed to create new types of frames but had to group the observed justifications into existing categories (including a "not classifiable" category).

At the most aggregate level, the specific categories used by Hutter et al. (2016) can be grouped into three major categories: *cultural frames* and *utilitarian frames*, the latter being subdivided into *economic* and *other utilitarian frames* (see Helbling et al., 2010). Utilitarian frames consist of arguments referring to particular interests, as well as to efficiency and rational cost-benefit calculations. Cultural frames, by contrast, refer to ideas and values that are considered by the actors to be inherent to a particular community. Among them are nationalistic-identitarian frames, which argue for a culturally homogenous society in order to uphold an exclusive national identity, or nationalistic-institutional frames, which refer to embedded institutions such as direct democracy or constitutional principles (such as neutrality in foreign and security policy). However, cultural frames also cover arguments related to multicultural-inclusive (e.g., cultural openness and the peaceful coexistence of cultural and religious groups) or moral-universalist values (e.g., basic civil rights, political rights, or international solidarity). For the following analysis, frame diversity was again calculated with Shannon's H entropy score based on 10 specific frame categories. Therefore, the resulting score ranges from 0 (debate concentrated on a single frame) to a maximum of 2.3 (equal distribution across all ten frame categories). The emphasis on cultural frames is measured by the percentage of cultural frames relative to all frames.

## 4. Empirical Findings

### *4.1. Across-Debates: How Do European Integration Debates With and Without Referendums Differ?*

Do referendums systematically affect the quantity and quality of politicization in debates over European integration? To address this question, I compared integration debates with and without referendums. Figures 1 to 3 show the mean values of the indicators for these two categories. I also conducted OLS regressions with debate characteristics as dependent variables, including and excluding country dummies to account for variations across and within countries, and checked whether the results hold for cases with a

certain number of coded core sentences involving domestic actors and for EU member states only. As the results align with the descriptive statistics in the figures, a summary and the full models of these regressions are reported in the Supplementary File.

The findings in Figure 1 support the expectation that referendums on European integration increase the level of politicization in public debates, confirming the *level hypothesis* (see also the regression analysis in Tables A1 and A2 in the Supplementary File). The average values of all three dimensions of politicization (salience, polarization, and actor expansion) were significantly higher in debates that ended with a referendum than in those that did not—whether we consider all countries and steps or just EU member states. Statistically significant relationships between "holding a referendum" and the intensity of politicization were observed in all models. These findings confirm theoretical expectations and align with earlier studies based on smaller samples.

Moreover, by distinguishing the different dimensions, I show that the direct-democratic arena is associated with a much higher salience of contestation in the press, leading to greater visibility for public debates on European integration. The explanatory power of the referendum variable is particularly high for salience ($r^2$ is above 0.42), but there were also significant increases in the polarization of positions and the presence of non-executive actors in these debates ($r^2$ between 0.12 and 0.27; see Table A2 in the Supplementary File). This is not surprising given that the three measures are not independent of each other, with correlation coefficients of r = 0.36 for salience and polarization, r = 0.44 for salience and actor expansion, and r = 0.64 for polarization and actor expansion. However, the moderate correlation coefficients and the results presented here show that it is useful to look at them individually and see which dimension is boosted the most in the context of a referendum.

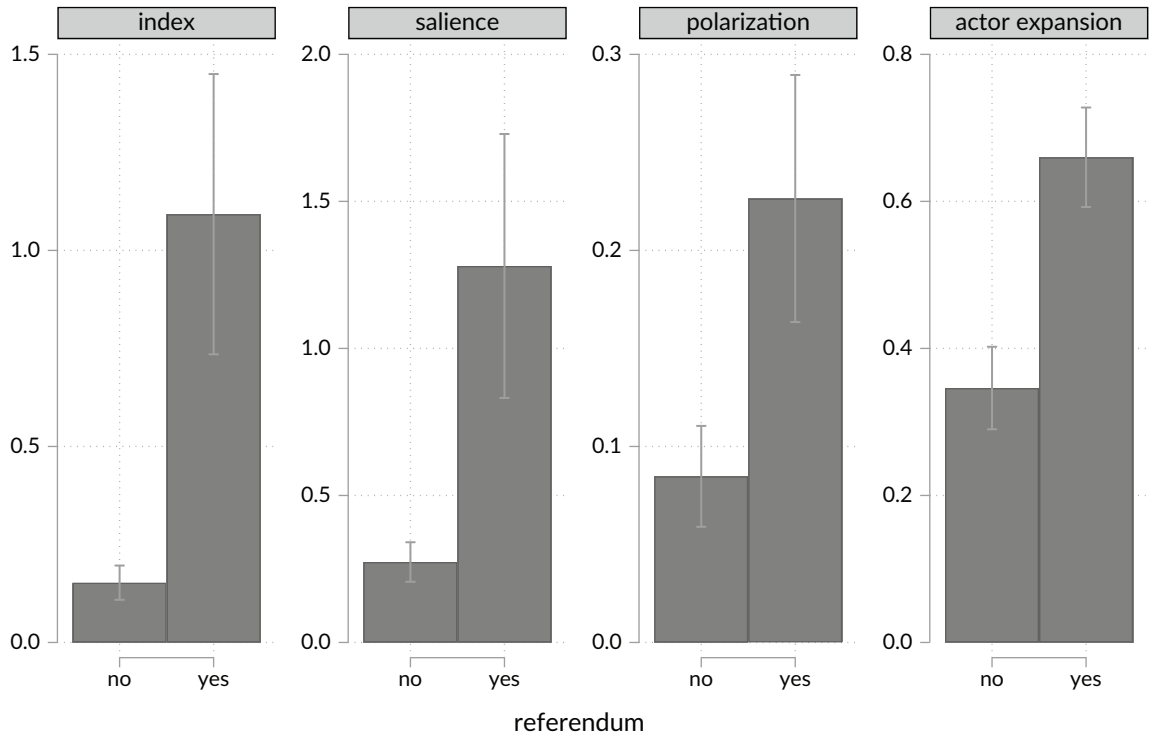


**Figure 1.** Politicization levels in European integration debates, with and without referendums (*N* = 87).

The results shown in Figure 2 largely confirm the *challenger hypothesis*, which posits that various types of non-governmental challengers become more visible in public debates during referendums. The average values for all three outcome variables are higher when a debate involves a referendum; governmental elites face more competition from civil society actors and increasing intra-party dissent. However, the results for radical parties diverged from expectations; while their visibility increased, the change is not statistically significant, as indicated by the confidence intervals shown in Figure 2 and the results of the regression analyses (see Tables A1 and A3 in the Supplementary File). This suggests that, contrary to the hypothesis, referendums do not necessarily lead to a significantly higher presence of radical parties in public debates on European integration.

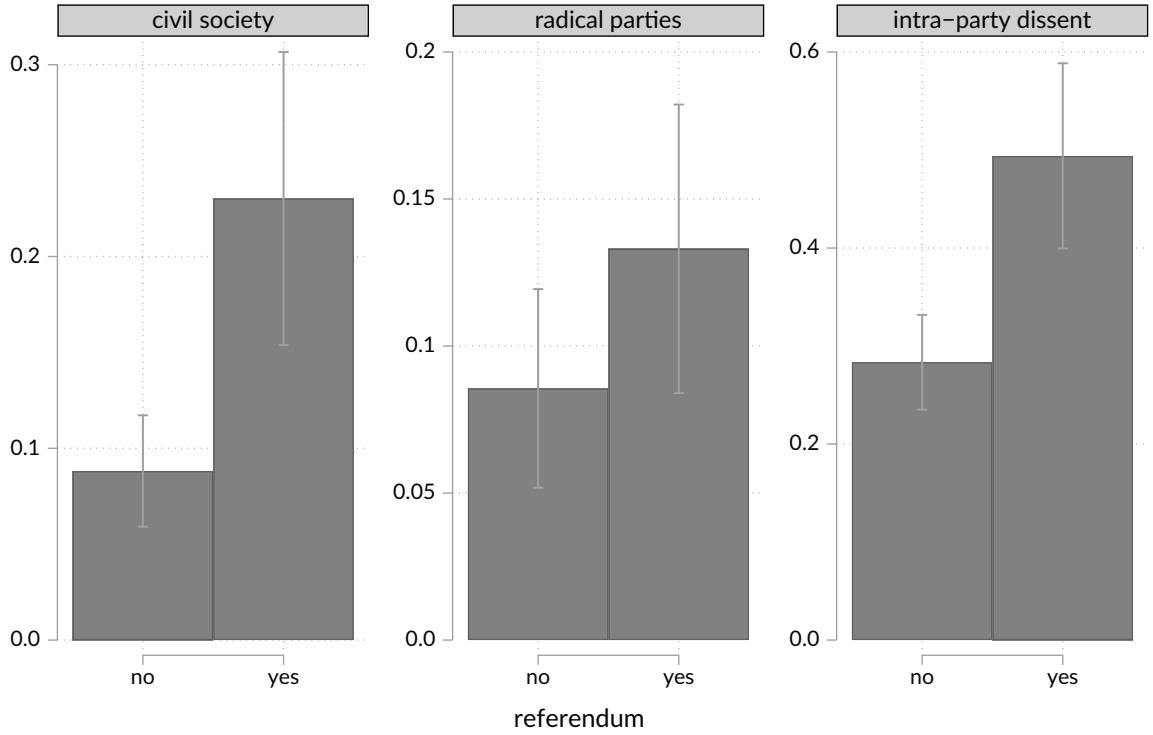


**Figure 2.** Visibility of actors and intra-party dissent in European integration debates, with and without referendums ($N = 87$).

The findings on issue competition provide mixed support for the *issue competition hypothesis*, making it the least supported among the three hypotheses (see Figure 3 and the regression analysis presented in Table A1 and A4 in the Supplementary File). Although "referendum debates" do not consistently exhibit a stronger focus on specific issues, there is evidence of increased framing contests. Actors diverged more significantly in how they justified their positions towards Europe in debates with a referendum, resulting in higher frame dispersion. This supports part of the hypothesis—referendums enhance framing contests in public debates, as different actors employ a wider range of frames to shape public opinion. While the descriptive data indicates an average increase in the use of cultural frames in debates involving referendums as well, this result is mainly driven by some outliers and is therefore not statistically significant, as indicated by the large confidence interval in the last panel in Figure 3 and the regression analyses in Table A4 in the Supplementary File. Consequently, the expectation that referendums would substantially shift the logic of issue competition toward cultural-identitarian arguments is not supported.

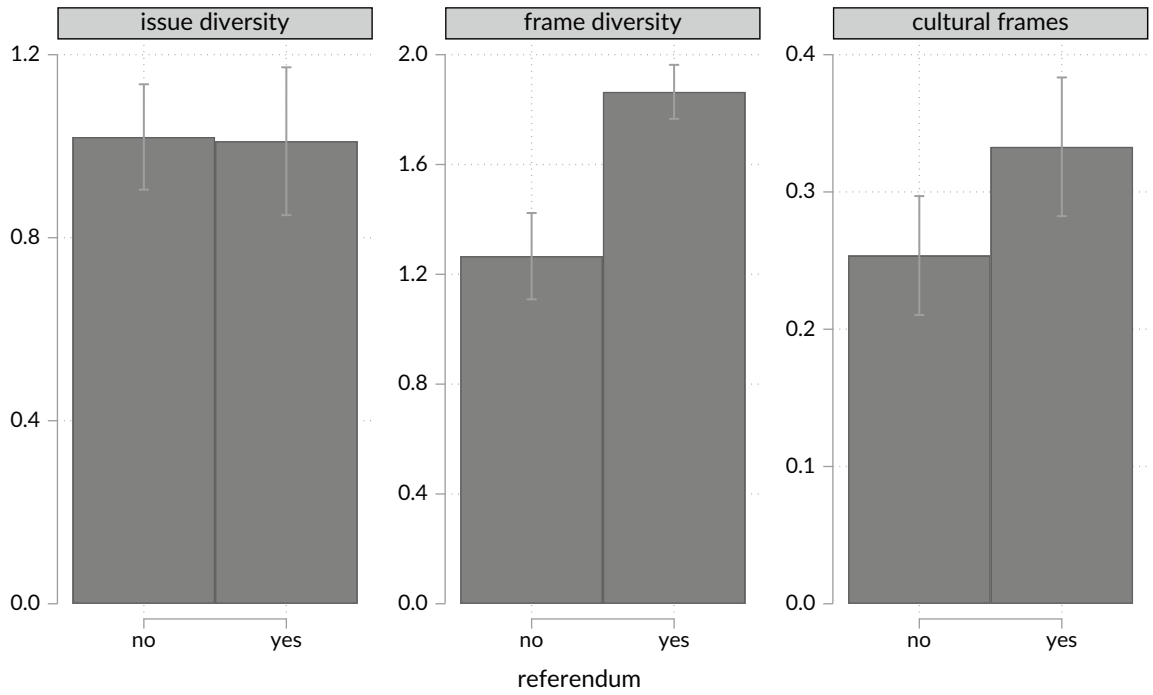


**Figure 3.** Issue focus and framing contests in European integration debates, with and without referendums ($N = 87$).

### *4.2. Within-Debates: How do European Integration Debates Differ Before and During Referendum Campaigns?*

The comparison across debates indicates that holding referendums on European integration is associated with peaks in politicization. Next, I focus on the 12 cases involving a referendum and trace the development of public debates over time, comparing the weeks around the referendums with earlier critical dates leading to membership, treaty reforms, or single policy decisions. This approach allows for further isolation of the effects of the direct-democratic arena on the level and type of politicization in a more direct way. In other words, I assess how much the final weeks of the referendum campaign contribute to the differences observed earlier.

Table 3 provides summary information on the various characteristics of the debates, from the politicization index to the extent to which actors justify their positions towards Europe with cultural-identitarian frames. The third and fourth columns display the average values for the pre-referendum periods covered by the data and the three weeks around the vote, respectively. The fifth column indicates how many cases align with the hypotheses. After discussing the general pattern, the second part of the analysis focuses on the variation across cases.

The results in Table 3 both support and, in some respects, qualify the findings from the previous across-debate analysis. Referendums show a strong association with peaks in politicization levels. In all 12 cases, the politicization index rose, with an average value across these cases that was more than six times higher. This increase was most strongly driven by the heightened salience of European integration issues during the campaign period, as all cases exhibited noticeable rises in issue salience. Our baseline expectation that referendums focus attention on the issues at stake is supported in both types of comparisons.

**Table 3.** Summary of politicization characteristics in pre-referendum and referendum campaign periods ($N = 12$).

| Outcome | Expected relation | Pre-referendum campaign | Referendum campaign | # Cases with increase in the expected direction |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Politicization index | + | 0.51 | 3.33 | 12 out of 12 |
| Salience | + | 0.72 | 3.40 | 12 |
| Actor expansion | + | 0.51 | 0.73 | 10 |
| Polarization | + | 0.19 | 0.26 | 5 |
| Civil society | + | 0.13 | 0.28 | 11 |
| Radical parties | + | 0.11 | 0.18 | 8 |
| Intra-party dissent | + | 0.26 | 0.44 | 9 |
| Issue diversity | – | 1.13 | 0.74 | 10 |
| Frame diversity | + | 1.80 | 1.71 | 4 |
| Cultural frames | + | 0.36 | 0.33 | 4 |

Moreover, we observed a significant increase in the range of actors involved during referendum campaigns. In 10 out of the 12 integration steps involving a referendum, there was a rise in non-executive actor participation, with the average proportion growing from 0.51 to 0.73. In contrast, the increase in polarization of advocated positions over time was less consistent. Only five cases showed an upward trend in polarization, and the average polarization value rose only slightly, from 0.18 in the pre-referendum periods to 0.26 during referendum campaigns. The within-debate comparison indicates that while referendum campaigns tend to generate more salient discussions involving a broader range of actors, they do not consistently lead to more polarized debates.

What types of challengers and dissenting voices gain prominence during referendum campaigns? The within-debate analysis strongly aligns with the across-debate findings for civil society actors. All 12 cases confirm the expectation that civil society positions become more prominent around the time of the vote compared to earlier stages of debate on European integration. The other two party-related measures shown in Table 3 also support the expected trends: eight cases display increased visibility of radical parties and nine show heightened intra-party dissent. While the association between referendums and intra-party dissent was also observed in the across-debate analysis, comparing the two types of analysis indicates that radical parties are not consistently more involved in debates over integration steps with a referendum than those without. However, as referendum campaigns reach their peak, radical parties often find an amplified platform in mass-mediated public debate.

In terms of issue competition, the over-time comparison indicates that referendum campaigns typically result in a narrowing of the issue agenda, with the entropy score decreasing from 1.13 to 0.74, and 10 out of 12 cases showed trends in the expected direction (see Table 3). This suggests that the focus of public debate does narrow during the final weeks of a referendum campaign. However, contrary to expectations and the across-debate analysis, the results do not show an increase in framing contest intensity during the referendum's concluding weeks. While integration steps with referendums generally feature greater frame diversity in public debate, this does not appear to be driven by the referendum campaign itself. Furthermore, the hypothesis that cultural frames gain prominence in referendum contexts finds limited support in either

the across or within-debate comparisons. Only four cases showed a trend in this direction, and the average values in Table 3 are nearly identical for the campaign and pre-campaign periods.

Taking a closer look at the specific cases, Figure 4 shows the information for one indicator per set of outcome variables for which we find the most variation: the relative changes in the visibility of radical parties (y-axis), the relative changes in the share of cultural frames (x-axis), and increases in polarization during the referendum campaign (indicated by a black triangle). The results indicate a lot of variation across these dimensions, with cases like the first-ever referendum on European integration (the 1972 French referendum on the first enlargement round with the UK seeking accession) being a prime example where the final weeks of the campaign were characterized by a stronger presence of radical parties, amplified cultural-identitarian justifications, and ultimately a more polarized public debate. However, this is only one potential combination, as the French 2005 referendum campaign on the European constitution shows. In that case, not only did radical parties get less attention during the run-up to the vote, cultural-identitarian frames also decreased and polarization levels did not increase. This confirms Statham and Trenz's (2013b) results on a shift to more social and economic frames and from inter to intra-party contestation during the final weeks of the referendum campaign. The only systematic pattern emerging from the three variables and the 12 cases is that the cases which saw increased polarization during the campaign (the French debate on first enlargement, Austria's membership decision, the Swiss decision on the Free Trade Agreement, Sweden's decision on the Euro, and Brexit) all saw increasing visibility of radical parties during the actual campaign as compared to pre-campaign moments. While the sample is too small to draw any strong conclusions on

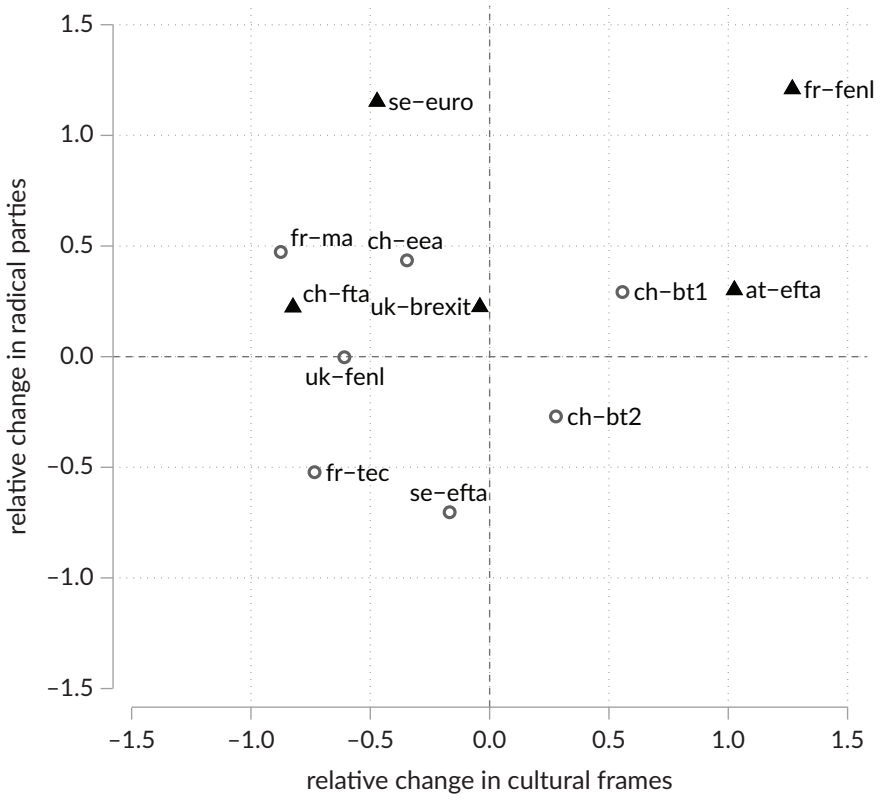


**Figure 4.** Relative over-time changes from the pre-referendum to the referendum campaign period ($N = 12$).

cross-national and institutional differences, the results in Figure 4 also show that the Swiss cases do not drive the results, being distributed in three of the four quadrants.

## 5. Conclusion

This article's primary contribution is empirical, advancing our understanding of how referendums influence the politicization of European integration by building on the work of Hutter et al. (2016) through a comprehensive reanalysis of the PolDem dataset, which now includes the pivotal Brexit debate. Covering 87 public debates across six Western European countries—including 12 debates involving referendums on membership, treaty reforms, and specific EU policy decisions—this study goes beyond prior work by systematically incorporating both across-debate and within-debate comparisons. The across-debate analysis captures broad patterns in how referendums affect politicization, while the within-debate analysis traces shifts in public debate over time, revealing the dynamics around the referendum campaigns. By combining the two approaches, this study provides a nuanced view of the structural and temporal impacts of referendums on European integration debates.

Both analyses strongly support the *level hypothesis*, supporting the baseline expectation from previous studies that referendums are associated with higher levels of politicization. Across debates, referendums were consistently associated with intensified public discussions on European integration. The within-debate analysis reveals that the spikes in politicization, particularly in salience, were most pronounced in the weeks directly leading up to the referendum. Although polarization generally increases in referendum contexts, the within-debate analysis shows that this effect is not uniform, peaking only in select cases during the final weeks around the vote itself.

The *challenger hypothesis* is also supported across both analyses, as referendums consistently broaden actor participation; civil society and other non-executive actors gain greater visibility, joining governmental actors, and diversifying the public debate. This trend underscores the role of referendums in leveling the political arena and expanding participation beyond governmental actors, aligning with expectations that referendums create a more inclusive platform for debate. The within-debate analysis reveals that civil society participation and intra-party dissent particularly intensified during the referendum campaign period. A comparison of the two types of analysis indicates that radical parties are not consistently more involved in debates over integration steps with referendums than those without. However, as referendum campaigns reach their peak, radical parties often find an amplified platform in mass-mediated public debate.

Both analyses only partially support the *issue competition hypothesis*. The findings indicate that referendums do foster framing contests, with actors using a broader range of justifications to articulate their positions on European integration. However, this increase in frame diversity is not confined to the intense referendum campaign period itself; rather, it appears as a broad characteristic of referendum debates overall. By contrast, the within-debate analysis reveals a notable narrowing of the issue agenda as the referendum date approaches. This trend, absent in the across-debate analysis, underscores that this issue concentration is a time-specific effect likely driven by the immediate focus on the referendum question. The expectation that referendums shift debates toward cultural frames finds limited support in either analysis. Referendums do not consistently focus discourse on identity-based arguments.

Referendums on European integration have a differentiated impact on politicization. They consistently increase the level or quantity of politicization by broadening actor participation and elevating issue salience. However, in terms of the type or quality of politicization, claims that referendum campaigns uniformly lead to a more polarized or identity-focused debate on European integration are not supported. This calls into question overly negative assessments that portray referendums as inherently polarizing and culturally loaded, reinforcing Europe as a divisive issue along the emerging "integration-demarcation" or "transnational" cleavage.

Overall, this study makes a significant step forward in advancing a more comparative empirical research agenda on the relationship between national referendums and public contestation over European integration. Future research, leveraging advances in computational text-as-data techniques, should expand the database beyond the six countries and 12 referendum debates examined here to further generalize these findings and explore the potential effects of institutional factors (such as mandatory vs. non-mandatory referendums), referendum content (membership, treaty reforms, or specific EU policy issues), and time periods (see Heidbreder et al., 2019). Although this study does not systematically test these features, its preliminary results suggest consistent trends in certain aspects (such as heightened salience and actor expansion) and variations in others (such as the visibility of radical parties and cultural frames) which seem less related to structural factors but more endogenous to unfolding conflict dynamics. The manual annotations used in this article could serve as valuable input for building the computational pipeline needed for such an endeavor.

Future research should also look beyond European integration as an issue—a particularly fruitful avenue could be a comparative study of referendums on sovereignty with a broader definition (see de Vries et al., 2021; Mendez & Germann, 2018). Further research might also incorporate comparative survey data to link political supply with citizens' preferences and direct-democratic choices. This would be particularly valuable for understanding the impact of cultural-identitarian frames, which, while not more prominent in referendum debates, strongly predict direct-democratic voting behavior.

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## Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

## Data Availability

The data is available at https://poldem.eui.eu

## Supplementary Material

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

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# Campaigns, Mobilisation, and Composition Effects in the 2018 Irish Abortion Referendum

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## Abstract

Referendums on issues usually thought to split along cleavage lines are least likely to see significant campaign effects because it is difficult to get voters to switch sides on such issues. We argue that even though campaigns might not be very effective at shifting people's votes—persuasive effects—the campaign can influence the decision to vote or not—mobilising effects. Using the 2018 referendum to repeal the Irish ban on abortion, we test for mobilisation effects in which one campaign caused the withdrawal of support for its campaign and possibly motivated potential voters in the other side's campaign. By remaining "on message" the pro-choice side's arguably less interesting campaign allowed mainstream elites to come on board. We offer evidence that the campaigns mobilized some groups and suppressed turnout in others, leading to a larger victory for the repeal (the ban on abortion) side than most had expected.

## Keywords

backfire effects; cleavages; electoral campaigns; minimal effects; referendums; turnout composition effects

## 1. Introduction

If electoral results are all about fundamentals (cleavages, the state of the economy, and partisanship), then campaigns should have limited and fleeting effects. This would seem to be even more likely in referendums on subjects that relate to issues on which there is a cleavage division in society. People's values are fixed or change slowly, so it is unlikely that an electoral campaign will matter. But campaigns may activate those fundamentals or a cleavage through framing. Because of underlying values, many people will only be likely to vote one way, but whether they vote or not can be influenced by the campaign. Rather than look at the campaign's ability

to *persuade* people to switch their vote choice, referendum campaigns might be more impactful by *mobilising* people to vote (or to depress their probability to vote). To do that campaigns may highlight some issues that make it easier or harder for people who hold underlying beliefs to go to the polls in support of what might be their natural "side."

We take the case of the 2018 abortion referendum in Ireland, which is a hard test of the "campaigns matter" thesis because for many it is a salient issue on which positions are fixed, so campaigns and campaign events are less likely to have an impact (Arceneaux & Kolodny, 2009; Leduc, 2002). It was a clear choice for voters, whether the proposal was to remove a ban on abortion or not. The referendum to replace the 8th amendment of the Irish constitution—an earlier 1983 amendment that gave Ireland one of the most restrictive abortion regimes in the world—was carried comfortably on 26th May 2018. On a turnout of 64 percent, just over 66 percent voted in favour of repeal (the ban on abortion). Most observers were surprised by the large margin of victory, as there was a tendency for support for liberalising referendums to be overestimated in polling or to tighten during the campaign.

Using polling evidence and an analysis of the campaigns for either side we demonstrate that the Yes side (to repeal the ban on abortion) concentrated its campaign on the issue of fatal foetal abnormalities and primarily campaigned through young women and their families who had been negatively affected by the extant abortion regime. The campaign was careful not to alienate moderates unhappy with the status quo but fearful of a very liberal abortion regime. It framed the referendum not in terms of women's rights, but as a means to avoid harm to women. The No side, on the other hand, ended up alienating many soft-Nos. Through the campaign, the Yes side gathered elite support, while the No side shed support from elites who no longer wanted to be associated with that side. The effect was to create an unusual composition of voters, where those most likely to vote Yes—women and young people—were more likely to vote than normal turnout patterns would have predicted.

First, we expand the discussion on campaign effects generally, then on framing in campaigns, and how framing can impact mobilisation. We then defend the case selection, outline available data sources, setting up hypotheses related to the possible impact of the campaigns on turnout. We look at the background of the abortion referendum, and the subsequent "short" campaign. The subsequent section amasses evidence from various sources, including an exit poll taken on the day of the referendum, but also historical referendum data and constituency-level data from 2018. The data indicate unusual turnout patterns at this referendum that support our argument that the campaign mobilised groups differently.

## 2. Campaign Framing and Mobilisation

Conventional wisdom tends to assume campaigns matter. So when we look at those aspects of a winning or losing campaign that stand out, we judge that these must be the crucial elements that the campaigns got right or wrong. Political science is less certain, and it points to minimal effects of many types of campaign activity (Gelman & King, 1993). These minimal effects might be consequential in a tight race but are unlikely to have caused big victories for which fundamentals (values, ideology, policy performance, or partisan attachment) could be more likely explanations. A meta-analysis estimated campaigns' *direct* persuasive effects on candidate choice in the US at zero (Kalla & Broockman, 2018).

Even if campaign events register with potential voters, their impact might be largely cancelled out by the campaign activities of opponents. If they have an impact it could be that the impact is vanishingly small in some elections or referendums. Erikson and Wlezien (2012) found that there is an equilibrium position, perhaps in referendums based on the voters' ideological positions, which campaigns may disturb momentarily. Thus, campaign events will only have an impact if they happen so close to polling that there is no time for the effect to decay.

Campaigns, however, may activate those fundamentals, by defining what a proposal actually means. Voters' ideological positions will be important, especially in referendums, but often the referendum is not so clearly defined, so that "opposing camps campaign on behalf of competing ways of understanding what is at issue" (Sniderman & Theriault, 2004, p. 158). Voters can be activated or primed to consider what the referendum is about. So we can see that the Brexit referendum was framed in terms of immigration and domestic control of policy, which might have had an impact on the result. This suggests that campaigns might change voters' behaviour without shifting the values underlying opinions. In a referendum on EU enlargement, a focus on immigration might cause a voter who had seen the enlargement project positively in terms of expanding markets, to switch sides without actually changing their outlook on the EU.

Hillygus and Shields (2008, p. 185) found that "campaigns help voters translate their predispositions into their candidate selection by increasing the salience of one consideration over another." In particular, presidential candidates target "persuadables," those voters who are either not aligned to a party, or for whom they are in conflict with their party on a certain issue. With the right messages, that issue can be used to "wedge" the voter from their party. Vavreck (2009) found that while the economy mattered, it was up to the campaigns to clarify this in voters' minds. If the fundamentals do not work in your campaign's favour, you need to try to focus on some "insurgent" issue. Sides et al. (2018) found evidence that the Donald Trump campaign's activation of race, ethnicity, and gender helped him win the 2016 US presidential election. Thus, while the election was not about race, voters were activated to view the candidates in terms of their own attitudes to these issues.

As well as activating some predispositions, the campaign can also have an impact on whether or not people become voters at all. In most countries without compulsory voting, about 25 to 50 percent of those who could vote choose not to. Sometimes this is for circumstantial reasons—a voter is away on polling day—sometimes it is for structural reasons—a voter finds voter registration difficult. We know that certain groups are more likely to vote than others, which would seem to give some campaigns an advantage. It is by now well established that older people, the middle class, and the more educated, are more likely to vote than the young, working class, and the less educated. Fraga (2018) looks at the "turnout gap" between groups in the US and finds that turnout can be suppressed when there is a perception that groups are electorally irrelevant. So Fraga argues, that when an electorate is expressly engaged by a campaign, it can close or create a turnout gap that will have an effect on electoral results. Indeed much of modern campaigning focuses on mobilisation rather than persuasion—see, for instance, Bowler and Donovan (1994). Differential turnout could cause different outcomes due to stratification bias, as some groups are systematically more or less likely to vote. Existing studies showing this tend to be on the US, and studies on referendums tend to focus exclusively on Switzerland or the US (though, see Velimsky et al., 2024).

Often the decision not to vote is because potential voters have not been mobilised: the campaign may not have been intense, the issue may not be one they have an interest in, or could be that they cannot choose an

obviously better option among those available to them. It has been shown that in referendums in Switzerland, campaign intensity had a greater impact on the turnout for selective voters rather than habitual voters or non-voters (Goldberg et al., 2019). Kleinnijenhuis et al. (2018) found issue of saliency was linked to turnout in a Dutch referendum. Campaigns try to mobilise their own support, but could, by exposing conflicts on the opponent's side, create demobilising factors for that side. This was observed in the 2005 Dutch EU Constitution referendum (Schuck & de Vreese, 2009). Campaigns on moral issues are often run based on the moral frame of the proponents, not necessarily the voters they are targeting (Feinberg & Willer, 2019). The messages then might be unpersuasive and even off-putting, leading to some groups not participating and other groups being more likely to vote.

The effect of these phenomena—campaign framing and mobilisation—might interact. Certain framings might mobilise certain groups and suppress turnout among others. For instance, on two occasions Ireland re-ran referendums asking an almost identical question within a short period of time. The Nice and Lisbon Treaties were initially rejected on low turnouts where the No side set the agenda, but the rerun saw increased turnouts, and the Yes side won on a substantively different framing. In the absence of panel data, we cannot say whether many minds were changed, but the raw number of No votes in the referendum on the Nice Treaty was almost identical in the first and second referendums. However, the raw number of Yes votes in the second referendum went up, and the referendum was passed. Garry et al. (2005) found that the change in salience of the issue brought about by a more intense campaign led to an increased turnout and a changed result.

Mobilisation often takes place through elite activity. Referendums are unusual in that there is not control of the campaign in the same way that in elections a party will have control of how it campaigns. Anyone can campaign for a Yes or No vote in a referendum, which may hinder the ability of elites to control the campaign. Elites will sometimes back a campaign that they see as a winning one, but if it seems to be losing or campaigning unconventionally, elites might withdraw support, which in turn could have the effect of suppressing turnout. In Ireland, an earlier attempt at socially liberalising amendments that showed high early polling support had failed because of a successful campaign which effectively reframed the issue on which people saw themselves voting.

Darcy and Laver (1990) found that, in the 1986 Irish divorce referendum, the No campaign changed the subject of the referendum from the issue of assisting those suffering in broken marriages to the likely plight of remarried men abandoning their duties to their previous families; "The Amendment will impoverish women" was one of the messages the No side produced. An opinion reversal occurred because opponents of divorce managed to create doubts in people's minds. This in turn led to a populist takeover and elite withdrawal from the campaign. It was in Darcy and Laver's (1990) view a general trend, one they observed in distinct questions and settings. We do not know the mechanism through which this took place—if there was any impact on turnout, for instance.

O'Mahony (2009) argued that elite withdrawal or non-involvement was at work in the initial Irish Nice and Lisbon referendums. And, in a low-information referendum on parliamentary inquiries, the entry of elites in opposition to a proposal was important (Suiter & Reidy, 2015). Elite activity seems to matter, but the causal order might be reversed as elites withdraw from losing campaigns. So we might see that campaigns in cleavage referendums matter because they activate certain frames, thereby mobilising certain groups of voters.

## 3. Case and Hypotheses

The abortion referendum of 2018 in Ireland allows us to test these propositions. Abortion is clearly a cleavage issue on which many people have opinions linked to strong underlying values—women's rights and the right to life, for instance. Sometimes, in referendums, political parties take positions that determine whether people vote and how, but, in this case, all the main party leaders supported the repeal side, though some were more open to party members campaigning for a No vote. There should be limited partisan effects. On Leduc's (2002, p. 714) continuum, this case lies at the end of the scale where campaigns should matter least.

Indeed, it could be argued that nothing much happened in this case. If we look at underlying opinions on abortion, they appear to be stable between the 2016 Irish general election and the 2018 referendum (see Table 2 in Section 5). This referendum would appear to be a clear case of campaigns do not matter. We argue against the prima facia evidence that in fact the campaign did matter, and while the campaign did not switch the result, a different campaign could have tightened the margin, which in turn would have affected the debate in the post-referendum legislative environment.

This is primarily a case study, with an extreme case as measured on the variable stability/volatility in referendum voting. We treat the case study like an attempt to solve a puzzle, piecing together bits of evidence to point to a likely cause (Gerring, 2017, p. 20). It uses a description of the campaign based on contemporary reports, interviews with people in the campaigns, and polling data. The test will use these data to establish the motivation of those who voted and to calculate the turnout proportions of different groups. We also use aggregate data on turnout in Irish referendums. Rather than have a smoking-gun test, we gather pieces of evidence that will point to the probability that the campaign mattered in the sense that it mobilised some groups more than others, though, in 2018, it certainly did not change the outcome.

We expect:

> H1: The composition of voters in different referendums will vary from those voting in other referendums and elections (differential turnout).
>
> H2: Those most affected by the issue will be mobilised to vote in greater numbers than would otherwise be the case.

In sum, we argue that we will observe campaign effects, but that these effects relate to the withdrawal of some from a campaign, and demobilisation among those who initially opposed the referendum. In the next sections, we go through the case, first giving a background to the referendum.

## 4. Background to the Referendum

Abortion had long been a divisive issue in Ireland. Abortion was outlawed by the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act, which stipulated life imprisonment for illegally procuring an abortion. The section of that Act related to abortion became irrelevant in the UK in 1967 by its Abortion Act. Ireland, however, with Church control of state-funded hospitals, schools, and other welfare-providing institutions, was unlikely to see a liberalising law proposed.

However, there were genuine fears that abortion might be introduced by the courts. In the US, the 1974 Supreme Court decision in Roe v. Wade had the effect of making it much more difficult for states to restrict access to abortion. The Irish Supreme Court was unlikely to immediately follow suit, but since the 1960s it had been active in inventing rights that had the effect of liberalising Irish laws in ways the Oireachtas (parliament) would never have. The McGee judgement in 1973 effectively told the Oireachtas that because of the newly discovered right to marital privacy, it could not outlaw contraceptives. Privacy had been an issue in Roe v. Wade, so it was not farfetched to think an Irish Court might later go down this route.

In this context, the Pro-Life Amendment Campaign was formed, and it was remarkably successful. The leaders of the two main parties, like most Irish politicians, came out in favour of an amendment to put a constitutional ban on abortion. Over time the Courts chose a path that the people had probably not foreseen. The X case in 1992, involving the rape of a 14-year-old girl, tested the question of "equal right to life of the mother," which was interpreted to mean that if a woman's life was at risk, including from suicide, an abortion should be permitted. This was something Irish governments thought intolerable and twice proposed amendments to close off suicide as a ground for abortion. The people rejected both attempts to do that in referendums.

Opinion changed slowly, with people becoming more ambivalent after 2007, and then more liberal after 2011. Table 1 shows the changes in opinion. The cause of the ambivalence to the issue after 2007 is uncertain, but after 2011 the issue became politicised again.

The death in 2012 of a pregnant woman, Savita Halappanavar, in circumstances that suggested that the 8th amendment influenced whether doctors could make life-saving medical interventions if that meant the termination of a foetus, created anger among many. Unusually, that level of anger did not dissipate but instead spurred increased activity in the existing groups that had been campaigning for the repeal of the 8th amendment. Halappanavar's death added to the pressure on the government to react to a European Court of Human Rights ruling, and legislation was finally put in place to give effect to the Supreme Court decision in the X case in 2013. Though it was an exceptionally restrictive regime for the provision of abortion in Ireland, it still caused a split in the main governing party.

While abortion was not a major issue in the 2016 election, it was significant enough that the two governing parties made commitments in their manifestos to address the issue. Labour said it would put a repeal referendum to the people within five years, and the Christian Democratic Fine Gael party committed to sending the issue to a Citizens' Assembly (CA). The Fine Gael minority government formed after that

**Table 1.** Attitudes to abortion among Irish people (in percent).

| | 2002 | 2007 | 2011 | 2016 | 2018 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total ban (0–2) | 33.5 | 27.0 | 15 | 15 | 18 |
| Ambivalent (3–7) | 38.2 | 40.8 | 50 | 44 | 41 |
| Freely available (8–10) | 23.4 | 26.7 | 27 | 35 | 40 |
| Do not know | 5.1 | 4.5 | 9 | 4 | 1 |

Notes: People who fully agree that there should be a total ban on abortion in Ireland would give a score of 0; people who fully agree that abortion should be freely available in Ireland to any woman who wants to have one would give a score of 10; and other people would place themselves in between these two views; question: Where would you place yourself on this scale?; the question in 2018 to voters in the referendum was worded slightly differently. Sources: Marsh et al. (2008, 2017, 2018) and McShane (2018).

election immediately did this, and the CA met over the course of a year, eventually recommending repeal, and suggesting that abortion should be allowed in any circumstance reason up to the 12th week of pregnancy. The report was then sent to an Oireachtas (parliamentary) committee, which broadly agreed with the recommendations of the CA, garnering support even from some avowedly pro-life parliamentarians. There was a sense that the CA showed politicians that advocating to loosen the restrictive regime would not be political suicide.

The post-2016 election environment had also changed somewhat. It saw the election of several pro-choice Teachtaí Dála (TDs or MPs) in the traditionally more conservative Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil parties. Fine Gael got a new leader (and Taoiseach) in 2017 with the election of Leo Varadkar, who was younger and more liberal than his predecessor. Varadkar immediately committed to a referendum on the issue.

The government announced that once one legal hurdle was crossed it would put the choice to repeal the 8th amendment to the people in a referendum, with a new clause to explicitly give the Oireachtas the right to legislate. When that hurdle was cleared on 7 March 2018, the Bill to allow for the referendum was introduced. Both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael allowed a free vote on the Bill, though the leadership of both parties indicated they would support repeal. It passed 110 votes in favour and 32 opposed. Apart from one Sinn Féin TD and eight independent TDs, all other opponents were from Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil—the main centre-right parties. The date for the referendum was then set for 25 May 2018, which meant a nearly two-month campaign.

## 5. The Campaigns and Campaign Strategies

Campaigns work by trying to pick issues on which to run and to state a position on those issues in a clear, logical, and emotionally appealing way. The clear result in favour of Yes, suggests that its campaign was the better one, but establishing that the campaign mattered is not that simple. As we see in Table 2, polling on the issue almost two years before, suggests that the campaign did not matter much, except perhaps to move much younger and much older voters, but these are small shifts. In an analysis of survey data, Elkink et al. (2017, 2020) show that the fundamentals were associated with the vote in conventional ways. Thus older, rural, church-going voters were more likely to vote No.

Polling consistently showed a strong lead for change from the status quo, and a desire to repeal the 8th amendment (see Figure 1), but conventional wisdom for which there is some evidence (opinion

**Table 2.** Position on abortion after the 2016 election and referendum campaign.

| Mean score | Total | male | female | 18–24 years old | 25–34 years old | 35–49 years old | 50–64 years old | 65+ years old | ABC1 | C2DE | F |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *2016* | 6.07 | 5.97 | 6.18 | 6.80 | 6.97 | 6.44 | 5.82 | 4.72 | 6.50 | 5.79 | 4.02 |
| *2018* | 6.10 | 5.81 | 6.33 | 7.63 | 7.12 | 6.28 | 5.69 | 4.11 | 6.52 | 5.80 | 4.59 |
| *change* | +0.03 | −0.16 | +0.15 | +0.83 | +0.15 | −0.16 | −0.13 | −0.61 | +0.02 | +0.01 | +0.57 |

Notes: The question was: "On a scale from 0 to 10 where 0 means you strongly believe that there should be a total ban on abortion in Ireland, and 10 means that you strongly believe that abortion should be freely available in Ireland to any woman who wants to have one, where would you place your view?"; ABC1 refers to professional and managerial class; C2DE refers to manual workers and unemployed; F is farmer. Source: McShane and Fanning (2016) and McShane (2018).

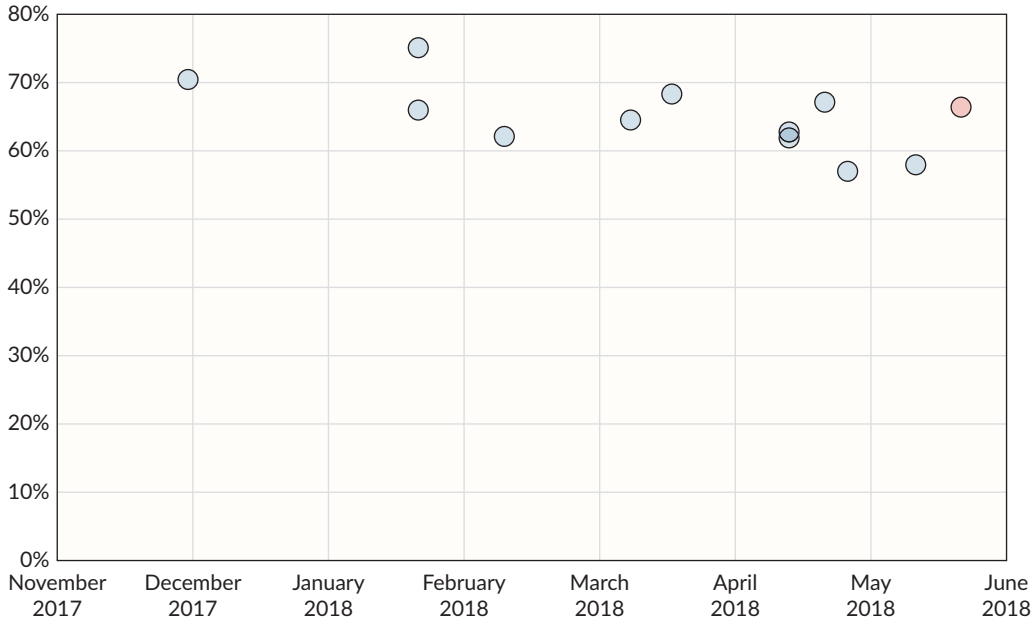


**Figure 1.** Percentage supporting the repeal of the 8th amendment in opinion polls during the long campaign.

poll-predicted Yes votes are on average nine points higher than the actual Yes vote in Irish referendums), assumed that this would tighten in the course of the campaign. Those on the Yes side assumed that the No side would have superior financial resources, which it could use to target voters in the unregulated online space. Initially, the No side appeared to be better organised, and they started the campaign earlier. In March the two No organisations, Love Both and Save the 8th, launched a provocative poster campaign with images of foetuses, asserting that one in five babies in the UK are aborted. The Together for Yes (TFY) campaign—a coalition of three feminist and women's rights groups—was slower to get started. Initially, it has less money and fewer volunteers. In a private interview with one of the leaders of the TFY campaign, they said they knew from polling that people did not want the status quo, but that the No side would try to paint repeal in such an extreme way so that people might take fright. The pro-choice campaign was conscious that its preferred moral frame was not one that would appeal to persuadable voters (Atikcan & Hand, 2024).

It knew also that people were concerned about women's health, fatal foetal anomalies, and rape cases. It knew—again because its private polling said so—that messaging about choices and human rights would not appeal to the "concerned centre" undecideds or soft Yes voters who would eventually turn out in large numbers for the Yes side. Though some found it difficult to not campaign on a human rights frame, the campaign was successful in maintaining message discipline (TFY, 2019, pp. 36, 75).

The result was a campaign that from the start sought not to alienate. The framing was on "Care, Compassion and Change," which was safe, perhaps to the point of banality. Apart from a small independent postering campaign by Rosa, a small radical-left feminist group, there was almost no framing of the referendum in terms of women's rights. While TFY was very professionally organised and put together big canvass teams remarkably quickly, the posters took a bit of deciphering. It dealt with legal and medical questions adeptly, but there was little emotion. Still, the attempt to raise €50,000 was beaten in hours, and, eventually, it raised over €500,000, much of it from small donations.

A scandal broke mid-campaign into the treatment of cervical cancer test results, which can only have reinforced the message about women's health, but the fear remained of what was to come from the No side. Yet for all the threats of US money pouring into the campaign, the No side did not work. It started quickly and appeared well organised, but on the airwaves, where much of the real work is still done, the No side got sucked into campaigning on hard cases. It debated whether to concede on these hard cases and one of the leaders said publicly that it had no problem with the abortions that took place under 2015 legislation, causing pushback from within the campaign. It was admitted that compromise to some central position was impossible for the No campaign to hold itself together (private interview).

In the first RTÉ television debate, the Yes side came off second best. Two doctors led the debate, with the expectation that they would be respected authoritative voices focussing on the harm the amendment did to women's health, but they sounded clinical. The Yes side then moved to politicians who were better at handling public debate. On the Yes side, the parties took a bigger role in the last week of the campaign. Fine Gael handled rebuttals for the Yes campaign. There was a recognition that Mary-Lou McDonald of Sinn Féin was the best performer for Yes in the first debate, and then we saw other leading politicians come in, who also performed well.

For the No side, one of their campaign directors felt they had better posters, a better ground operation, and were better organised, but he observed that "our campaign fired up their base" (private interview). The Life Institute (one of the organisations that made up Save the 8th) saw its failure to win the framing battle. That campaign director claimed—perhaps fairly—that the media accepted the Yes side's framing of the harm the 8th amendment did to women.

The emotion came from women and their families affected by the 8th amendment. According to one of the TFY campaign team (private interview), the focus was on securing the middle ground through women's stories:

> The focus on legislation wasn't at all our preference, but we worked hard to shift the emphasis towards hard cases and especially to the stories. Most of the stories are out of the TFY Story Lab, which works with groups and individuals to train and prepare them to tell their stories in effective ways, and to place them in the media. We also had "warmer" posters and leaflets.

In later TV debates, those women in the audience telling their "hard case" stories probably did more to connect with people than the campaign leaders on the stage. The hard cases, it turned out, were remarkably common. No campaigners found themselves having to defend a cruel position. The No message of protecting human life was a very difficult sell when the messengers sounded so inhumane.

And one weapon—one that was probably overestimated—was removed from the No side when many social media companies refused to accept paid ads for the referendum. The Irish market was small, so financially it was not a sacrifice for the goodwill the move engendered. The No-side spent its energy on conspiracy theories of a corrupt media elite under the control of the government. While the media probably was biased in favour of change, suggestions that Taoiseach Leo Varadkar controlled Google seemed silly. The No campaign used its last week on the idea that the government's proposed legislation was too extreme. But at this stage, it was the No side that appeared extreme.

From the last weekend of the campaign, there was a sense of a swing to Yes, and certainly that the expected swing away had failed to materialise. Yet on the doorsteps, there were larger numbers canvassing than at any other recent campaign. The reactions were reported as overwhelmingly positive for the Yes side. The campaign also saw 118,389 new voters register—almost double the 66,000 new voters registered for the 2015 marriage equality referendum. While we do not know the composition of the new voters, it is reasonable to assume that these were overwhelmingly young voters, expected to vote to support repeal.

There was a cascading effect on the Yes side, with evidence that its success has brought more people on board. When Michael Creed, the conservative minister for agriculture, came out with Farmers for Yes, it felt significant. He would not have dreamed of taking this position two years earlier, maybe not two months earlier. As the No side was perceived as increasingly extreme in its positions, a photo opportunity with "TDs for No" on the Wednesday before the referendum was much less well attended than the same one a week earlier. The most senior TDs who had earlier come out for No, Dara Calleary and Michael McGrath (both later cabinet ministers), did not appear. One TD who identified as pro-Life issued a statement in advance of polling day saying that:

> [I] no longer think it is credible to pretend that everything is fine as it is. We cannot ignore all the stories we hear of pain and hardship experienced by so many at the most difficult of times….I still hold the same beliefs I always did, I just don't believe I have the right to enforce them onto others. (Ó Cionnaith, 2018)

While he was convinced to switch his vote, it might have been that other natural No supporters found themselves less likely to vote at all.

## 6. Tests, Data, and Results

A key argument here is that the campaigns mattered, perhaps less in shifting opinions on abortion, but in shifting the turnout; that turnout was substantively different in 2018 than in other polls. In this section, we look at a variety of evidence that points to substantively different turnout patterns in the 2018 referendum. It is obvious that there is significant variance across referendums in terms of turnout. Among the 43 referendums held, turnout has varied by between 29 and 71 percent (see Figure 2).

It could be that turnout just reflects the salience and mobilisation efforts by campaigns, but has no impact on the composition of the voting public or the result. Our focus is on how campaigns affect turnout and how turnout can affect referendum results. To evaluate this, we look to public opinion polls. Public opinion polls cannot account for differential turnout. Instead, they look at the population at large. Therefore, it is hypothesised that differences in turnout across referendums will impact the "accuracy" of the opinion polls for those referendums. To compare polls prior to referendums with referendum results we use a regression model. Our first model looks at how turnout and the number of days between the poll and the referendum influence a poll's accuracy (the absolute difference between the poll result and the referendum result). The analysis suggests that referendums with higher turnout are significantly more likely to be more accurate, that is to have a lower difference between poll and referendum results. By contrast, referendums with a lower turnout are more likely to have bigger differences between the polls and the actual results. The model in Table 3 uses 136 polls across 30 referendums in Ireland for which polling is available. We expect polls to be 8.5 percentage points closer to the result where turnout is 70 percent compared with referendums in which

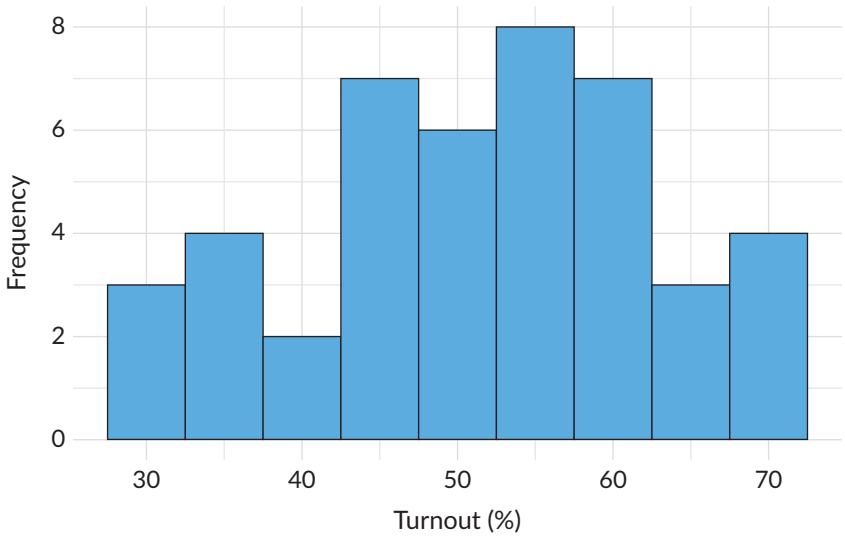


**Figure 2.** Distribution of turnout in Irish referendums.

**Table 3.** Regression estimating the effect of turnout on polling error.

| | Model 1: Poll error | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Estimate | Std. Error | P-Value |
| Intercept | 22.892 | (4.055) | < 0.0001 |
| Days until referendum | 0.005 | (0.005) | 0.2947 |
| Turnout | –0.213 | (0.071) | 0.0031 |

turnout is 30 percent. This shows a clear link between turnout, the composition of the voting electorate, and hence the outcome.

The next regression models (Table 4) also reveal this to be true. An increase in turnout typically benefits the Yes side. The models evaluate the relationship between the percentage that voted in favour of a referendum with the turnout of that referendum, the number of people who stated that they would vote Yes, and the number of people who stated that they were undecided in polls prior to the referendum. The first model uses 122 polls across 29 referendums, excluding the referendum on abortion. The second model uses 136 polls across 30 referendums, including the referendum on abortion. In both cases turnout is significant. The higher the turnout, the higher the vote in favour of passing the initiative proposed by the government. The results suggest that we should expect support for Yes to be almost 10 points higher in referendums where turnout is 70 percent, compared with referendums where turnout is 30 percent.

In another model, we interact turnout with the percentage of "Don't Knows" on the Yes vote. The idea here is that if the interaction is positive, i.e., where opinion polls say many potential voters are undecided, but the eventual turnout is high, then we can say that the "Don't Knows" tend to break to Yes, which is contrary to the narrative in Ireland that undecided tend to become No voters. The interaction term is not significant, but the effects plot (Figure 3), shows that there is a positive relationship between the number of undecideds and support for a Yes vote at high levels of turnout, but that there is no effect when turnout is lower.

**Table 4.** Regression models predicting the final Yes vote.

| | Model 2a: Excluding referendum on abortion | | | Model 2b: Including referendum on abortion | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Estimate | Std. Error | P-Value | Estimate | Std. Error | P-Value |
| Intercept | −9.760 | (8.147) | 0.2330 | −8.772 | (8.066) | 0.2790 |
| Opinion poll yes | 0.733 | (0.086) | < 0.0001 | 0.680 | (0.084) | < 0.0001 |
| Opinion poll undecided | 0.695 | (0.104) | < 0.0001 | 0.662 | (0.102) | < 0.0001 |
| Actual turnout | 0.244 | (0.079) | 0.0030 | 0.306 | (0.077) | 0.0011 |

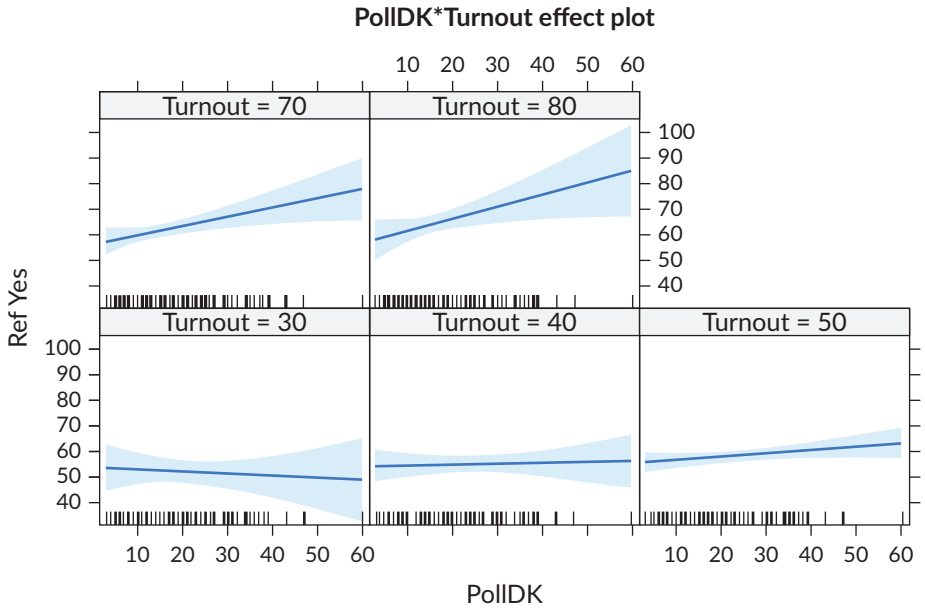


**Figure 3.** Effects plot of "Don't Knows" and turnout on the Yes vote. Note: DK = "Don't Knows."

The influence of the campaign in driving turnout is also observable in the self-reported "probability to vote." Two polls were conducted by *Ireland Thinks*, one at the start of the campaign period finishing on April 18th over one month from polling day, with a second completed on the Wednesday of polling week, two days before the vote. Figure 4 gives the self-reported likelihood to vote among those intending to vote Yes and those intending to vote No at both points in time. Those intending to vote No appear to be no less likely than those intending to vote Yes at the start of the campaign. However, from the second poll, it would appear that a sizeable number of those who would favour the No position had decided not to vote. Yes supporters became somewhat more likely to vote. This further supports the hypothesis that turnout was influenced by the campaign.

Turning specifically to the composition of the voters in 2018 we can see that estimates of turnout among different groups are much different to those in the 2016 election. Turnout patterns are highly gendered. Based on exit poll results we calculated the turnout for specific groups by comparing it to the voting age population in each category from census data. Overall, we estimate female turnout at almost 80 percent, up from 66 percent in 2016. Our estimate of male turnout fell from 78 percent to about 65 percent. We can see that in the (admittedly small) 18–24-year-old group, turnout increased from 41 percent to 66 percent.

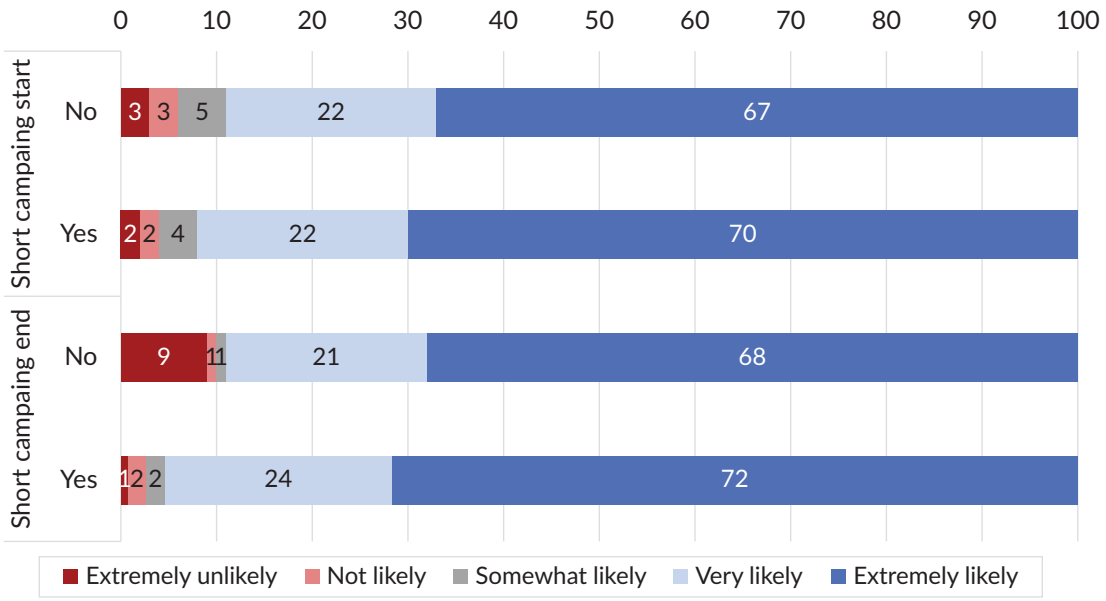


**Figure 4.** Probability to vote at the start and end of the campaign, by vote choice.

If we compare constituency-level turnout in the 2018 referendum to that of the general election in 2016 there are some things we would expect to see if turnout composition were uniform. Turnout at the constituency level in the two polls is positively correlated, though the 0.66 correlation coefficient is somewhat smaller than we would expect. The correlation coefficient between the 1992 and 1997 general elections was 0.84. Where in the general election turnout correlations run with expectations, with a significant positive correlation with the proportion of over 65s in a constituency (corr. = 0.54, $p = 0.0004$). We also see that the proportion of households that are owned (0.78, $p < 0.0001$) and the proportion of the population that is Catholic (0.64, $p < 0.0001$) are positively correlated with turnout in that election. However, in the 2018 abortion referendum patterns changed significantly, which possibly means that the campaigns mobilised different people in the two polls and that turnout was an important factor in voting trends in 2018—though obviously we have to be cautious of an ecological fallacy. Unusually we observe no link between the proportion of older people in a constituency and the turnout in the referendum (0.08, $p = 0.62$). Contrary to the "normal" patterns, the link between Catholicism and turnout fell away (0.14, $p = 0.38$). Instead, there is a moderate, positive link between the proportion of the population that is female (0.5, $p = 0.0009$). In terms of explaining the Yes vote at the constituency level, we see the proportion of the population that is over 65 is negatively correlated with the Yes vote (–0.48, $p = 0.002$), as is the proportion of the population that is Catholic (–0.78, $p < 0.0001$). These pieces of evidence support the argument that the composition of actual votes was different in this referendum, and those who become more likely to vote are those for whom the issue is most salient.

What the campaign was about is also clearly important. The Yes campaign was criticised by some on its own side for being too safe, focussing on "care, compassion and change" and not rights. It spent much of the time talking about "hard cases" and there is some evidence that these frames are adopted by voters. The RTÉ (McShane, 2018) exit poll shows that people were much more in favour of the availability of abortion in conditions "between 12 weeks and 24 weeks if there is a serious risk to the woman's life or health" (67 percent somewhat agree or strongly agree); "in cases of fatal foetal abnormality" (71 percent); and "if the pregnancy is the result of rape or incest" (73 percent). By contrast, a bare majority agree with its availability "on request up to 12 weeks" (52 percent). This was the issue the No side continually tried to raise, and frame as "unrestricted"

and "too extreme," and which the Yes side reluctantly engaged with. Women were marginally more likely than men to agree to abortion provision in this circumstance (55 to 48 percent). Age was also important (76 percent of 18–24 year-olds versus 31 percent of over-65s).

When asked which of a list of "factors were important to you in making your decision how to vote in the Referendum?" respondents were most likely to say "women's right to choose." This is contrary to our expectations, as the frame of women's choice was rarely used in the campaign. Other frames, such as "risk to life and health" and "the question of fatal foetal abnormalities" receive slightly less support (55 percent and 40 percent respectively). It is possible that the messaging did not matter for significant parts of the pro-choice electorate, but this messaging may still have been important for moderates at whom it was targeted.

## 7. Discussion

Referendums on issues that tend to split on cleavage lines should not be subject to normal campaign effects. But campaign frames might activate certain ways to view an issue. Abortions seem an unlikely case for this. Yet, through the use of frames campaigns, might mobilise some voters and demobilise others. While we argue that the campaign for the repeal of the 8th referendum was not as important as is commonly reported in media, there is evidence that the unusual turnout patterns were a result of mobilisation efforts by the Yes side and a backfiring campaign on the No side. Thus, we find more support for the idea that mobilisation by campaigns is influential if not in this case on the result, at least on the size of the result. The size of the results matters because, in the aftermath of the repeal of the 8th referendum, few people on the losing side complained about the legitimacy of the result, in the way the Brexit result was contested and challenged. It also had an impact on the subsequent debate, as the large gap and the clear sense that people knew what they were voting for meant it was easier to pass a liberal abortion regime through the Oireachtas.

While the data available makes it difficult to test whether campaigns have strong persuasive effects in an extreme case cleavage referendum, the available evidence suggests that they do have mobilising effects and that the mobilisation was not uniform. Good campaigns can mobilise their own side's natural supporters, and, in fact, there is a suggestion that a campaign can energise their opponents if it is too polarising. Furthermore, there is no evidence that the long campaign of raising an issue and lobbying for action is not productive. If anything it was the determined pressure by feminist activists, who were able to make the Savita death a focussing event for change, that saw a shift in Irish public opinion and enabled mainstream politicians to confront an issue that most wanted to steer clear of.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

### Data Availability

All data are publicly available or can be requested from the authors.

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# The Impact of Socio-Political Cleavages on Constitutional Referendums: The Case of Chile 2022

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## Abstract

A constitutional referendum was held in Chile in 2022. The competing options were to "approve" or "reject" the proposed new constitution written by a Constitutional Convention, as the "reject" option triumphed, the 1980 constitution remained in force. This study identifies the basis of support for the winning option. To do so, we draw on the theory of sociopolitical cleavages. Specifically, we measure the effect of the religious division in force since the mid-19th century, the urban social class division of the early 20th century, the urban/rural division of the mid-20th century, and the authoritarianism/democracy division resulting from the dictatorship of General Pinochet (1973–1990). Based on an analysis of electoral data in Chile's 345 municipalities and a survey of 2,117 people taken before the referendum, we conclude the following: First, "reject" was the strongest among evangelical voters. Second, while "reject" performed better in the country's poorest municipalities, in the Metropolitan Region, which accounts for 40% of the population, the result was the opposite. Third, "reject" performed better in municipalities with a higher percentage of rural population. Fourth, "reject" was the preferred option for voters who were more inclined toward authoritarian rule. Consequently, while constitutional referendums can be explained by support for incumbents—in this case, for the president of the republic, who supported the Convention's constitutional proposal—this does not imply that sociopolitical cleavages are irrelevant. This study shows that even though a referendum may respond to short-term variables, such as low presidential approval, sociopolitical cleavages still robustly explain electoral outcomes.

## Keywords

Chile; cleavages; constitution; political party system; referendum

## 1. Introduction

Typically, the outcomes of a constitutional referendum are examined through heuristic and systematic political reasoning approaches. The heuristic approach suggests that voters rely on "informational shortcuts" when faced with a decision that involves significant information costs, such as understanding the constitutional proposal (Borges & Clarke, 2008; Garry et al., 2005). For example, voting patterns may be influenced by the approval ratings of the president or prime minister or the prevailing economic conditions at the time of the referendum (Leininger, 2019). By contrast, the systematic political reasoning approach posits that voters are rational and willing to bear these information costs by voting in line with the contents of the constitutional proposal (De Angelis et al., 2020). Our research, however, takes a more comprehensive approach, delving into the socio-political cleavages that have persisted in Chile over the years and their impact on the electoral outcome of the 2022 constitutional referendum.

We analysed the case of Chile, a country that developed a constitutional process between 2020 and 2022 after extensive days of protests that began in October 2019. To escape the crisis, the political class opened a process of constitutional change, replacing the constitution inherited from the dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet (1973–1990). In 2020, the first referendum was held and 78% agreed to write a new constitution. In 2021, a Constitutional Convention was chosen and its function was to draft a new constitution. Finally, in 2022, a second referendum was held in which 62% rejected this constitutional proposal. How much did the historical socio-political cleavages affect Chileans' voting intention, to what extent did religious identification, social class, area of residence (urban or rural), and attitudes towards the democratic regime explain the outcome of the constitutional referendum and to what extent did cleavage theory help to explain voters' electoral preferences when, instead of candidates, programmatic options are confronted?

We relied on two sources to answer these questions: First, a database of the country's 345 municipalities, including electoral information and socioeconomic and sociodemographic data. Among them are the percentage of the religious population, the percentage of people with low incomes, and the percentage of the rural population. Second, the results of an online survey applied to 2,117 people between 25 August and 3 September 2022 (the referendum was on 4 September 2022), conducted by the Millennium Nucleus Centre for the Study of Politics, Public Opinion and Media in Chile. This article is divided into four sections: First, we describe the theory of sociopolitical cleavage and its application to Chile. Second, we present our hypotheses. Third, we analyse the data. Finally, we present our conclusions.

## 2. The Theory of Cleavages

The theory of socio-political cleavages assumes that societies face conflicts and that these conflicts are processed by voters around critical issues, such as the relationship between the Catholic Church and state, capital and labour, and town and country, to name a few. These conflicts explain the formation of political parties and the structure of party systems (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967). In most Latin American countries, following Colomer and Escatel (2005), these cleavages are summarised along the left–right axis, which helps to understand the characteristics of party systems.

There is not much literature on sociopolitical cleavages and constitutional referendums. Of note, however, are the works by Baum and Freire (2001) on the regionalisation referendum in Portugal (1998) and Sinnott (2002)

on some referendums in Ireland. Meanwhile, in Latin America, referendums on constitutional change have been held by Peru (1993), Venezuela (1999), Ecuador (2008), and Bolivia (2009). In all cases, the process was driven by a political leader. Generally, their outcomes have been analysed regarding economic and institutional variables rather than sociopolitical cleavages (Altman, 2010; Durán-Martínez, 2012; Morales, 2021). However, there are some exceptions. Recently, in the case of Chile, Castillo et al. (2023) analysed the effect of religion on political preferences in the 2020 referendum. Alemán and Navia (2023) and González-Ocantos and Meléndez (2023) did so for the 2022 referendum. They concluded that socio-political cleavages had a limited impact on voting intention, with presidential approval being the most relevant variable. The work of Osorio-Rauld et al. (2024) and Pelfini and Osorio-Rauld (2024) on the conservative positions of the economic elite in the face of the 2022 constitutional referendum stands out, identifying the homogeneity of this elite as a political actor that broadly supports the "reject" option. Finally, Paredes et al. (2025) suggest that the failure of the constitutional process in Chile can be explained by the polarisation of elites in the Constitutional Convention, with the right obstructing the process and the left trying to impose its constitutional proposal.

### *2.1. The Theory of Cleavages in Chile*

According to Dix (1989), Chile was an exception in Latin America in the 20th century because of its high levels of party institutionalisation and programmatic structuring of electoral preferences around societal cleavages. Scully (1992) explains this ordering based on three generative cleavages: the clerical/anticlerical axis of the mid-nineteenth century; the urban social class axis of the early nineteenth century; and the rural/urban axis of the mid-20th century. Each cleavage created a new party system generally distributed in thirds (Table 1).

However, this approach has generated debate. For some, although parties were ordered along the left–right axis, the same was not true for voters (Montes et al., 2000; Torcal & Mainwaring, 2003), which explains the significant variations in electoral volatility between 1932 and 1973. The argument is that parties not only attracted voters partially through ideological-programmatic proposals but also through clientelistic strategies (A. Valenzuela, 1977). However, party competition was structured in three-thirds of the 20th century. In fact, after General Pinochet (1973–1990), the party system was relaunched with more continuity than change (Huneeus, 2001; J. S. Valenzuela & Scully, 1997).

Does this mean General Pinochet's dictatorship does not affect the party system? According to Torcal and Mainwaring (2003), the Pinochet dictatorship became the fourth societal cleavage in Chilean history—i.e., authoritarianism/democracy. Unlike previous cleavages generated by social conflicts, the political party elite promoted authoritarianism-democracy cleavage without cancelling the effect of historical socio-structural cleavages (Bargsted & Somma, 2016). J. S. Valenzuela et al. (2007) and Raymond and Barros (2012), for example, show the validity of religious cleavages in characterising the bases of support for Chile's two main political coalitions.

Consequently, as shown in Table 1, historical cleavages gave rise to different party systems that remained in force for several decades. Meanwhile, the authoritarianism/democracy political cleavage ordered—and continues to order—the Chilean electoral competition at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century.

**Table 1.** Cleavages and party systems in Chile.

| | Origin | The party system is arranged on a left--right ideological axis |
|---|---|---|
| *Socio-cultural cleavage* | | |
| Religious | Mid-19th century | PR, PL, PCo |
| *Socio-structural cleavages* | | |
| Urban social classes | Early 20th century | PC, PS, PR, PL, PCo |
| Urban/rural | Mid-20th century | PC, PS, PR, PDC, PL, PCo |
| *Political cleavage* | | |
| Authoritarianism/democracy | Late 20th century | PC, PS, PR, PPD, PDC, RN, UDI |

Notes: PR = Radical Party; PL = Liberal Party; PCo = Conservative Party; PC = Communist Party; PS = Socialist Party; PDC = Christian Democratic Party; PPD = Party for Democracy; RN = National Renewal; UDI = Independent Democratic Union.

### *2.2. The Constitutional Process*

In October 2019, a violent and widespread "social explosion" occurred in Chile, triggered by an increase in the price of public transport (Morales, 2020). Social protests continued for several months. Citizens' unrest was mainly due to the inequalities created by the development model. One of the central criticisms was of the pension system—unlike the current "individually funded" one, it was being demanded a fairer and more solidarity-based pension system. There was also criticism regarding the political class and business people, given successive cases of public and private corruption. Greater state intervention was demanded in matters related to pensions and the provision of basic goods and services. Consequently, what began as a protest against the increase in the price of public transport, quickly became a redistributive movement against the neoliberal model (Garretón & Morales-Olivares, 2023; Morales, 2020; Somma et al., 2020). This social mobilisation was preceded by protests by high school students in 2006 and university students in 2011, demanding free and quality education. For some authors, the situation in Chile before the "social explosion" was characterised by a high level of discontent with democracy (Cantillana et al., 2017; Huneeus, 2003; Joignant et al., 2017). This malaise was characterised by distrust in the representative institutions of democracy, dissatisfaction with politics, and disapproval of the governments in power. Therefore, the October 2019 protests should be interpreted in the context of the intense questioning of the functioning of democracy, including public and private actors.

Faced with the country's social and political instability, the parties initiated a process to change the 1980 constitution. The process was designed in four stages (Figure 1). First, an "entrance" referendum. In this referendum, citizens were asked whether they wanted a new constitution or not. The options were "approve" and "reject," with the former winning 78.3%. In the same referendum, but on a second ballot, it was questioned what would be the body in charge of writing the new constitution. The alternatives were two: "Constitutional Convention"—made up of 155 representatives directly elected by the citizens—and "Mixed Constitutional Convention," made up of 172 representatives (half would be elected directly by the citizens and the Congress would choose the other 86). The first option—Constitutional Convention–won by 79.2%. As with all elections since 2021, a system of automatic enrolment in electoral registers and voluntary voting was implemented.

The second stage was the election of representatives to the Constitutional Convention. Through an electoral proportional representation system, 155 people were elected in districts distributed between three and eight seats. These results were favourable for left-wing parties and movements (Tagle et al., 2023). Of the 155 seats, the right won only 37, representing 23.8% (Belmar et al., 2023). As decisions in the Constitutional Convention were made with an agreement of two-thirds, the right was left without veto power.

The third stage was the drafting of the new constitution, which was a year-long process. The central axes of the constitutional proposal were as follows: The first was plurinationality, which implied recognising the 11 original peoples of Chile, including autonomous territories for these peoples and justice systems according to their traditions and customs; the second was the elimination of the Senate of the Republic, which would be replaced by the Chamber of the Regions, but political power would be more concentrated in the Chamber of Deputies, establishing asymmetrical bicameralism; the third was the regional state, which implied greater autonomy for the regions and communes, which could then create public enterprises; the fourth was the voluntary interruption of pregnancy (abortion); the fifth was the expansion of social rights, which would extend to health, education, pensions, and housing; and the sixth is gender parity in the composition of all bodies of democratic representation.

The fourth stage was the ratification referendum. Chileans were asked whether they approved or rejected the Convention's constitutional proposal. Unlike the 2020 referendum, a system of automatic registration was implemented in the 2022 referendum, but with compulsory voting. As a result, voter turnout reached almost 86%, far higher than the 51% recorded in the 2020 referendum. In terms of results, in the 2020 referendum, as we said, more than 78% voted to "approve," which meant continuing to draft a new constitution by electing a representative body. In the 2022 referendum, which aimed to ratify the proposed new Constitution drafted by the Constitutional Convention, the "reject" option reached almost 62% of the vote. Moreover, almost 5.5 million more people voted in this referendum than in the 2020 one (See Contreras & Morales, 2024). Therefore, an increased turnout may have had an impact on the outcome. Indeed, when analysing data from 345 municipalities in Chile, the correlation between support for the "reject" option and the percentage change in turnout between 2020 and 2022 yields a correlation coefficient of 0.64 ($p < 0.01$).

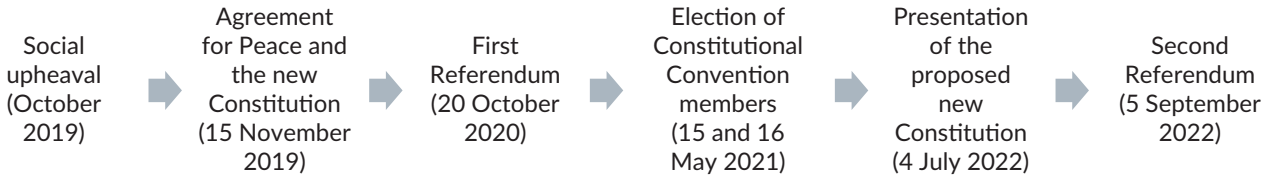


**Figure 1.** Milestones of the Chilean constitutional process, 2019–2022.

### *2.3. The Election Campaign*

The "approve" and "reject" election campaigns reflected high levels of political polarisation in the country. The dispute was not only over the contents of the constitutional proposal but also over the performance of the Constitutional Convention, including a series of scandals that were widely covered by the press. For example, some members of the Convention arrived at the working sessions in all sorts of disguises, undermining the seriousness of the process, and one of the members of the Convention admitted that he

had lied about having cancer, even though his electoral campaign had revolved around this health problem. According to the CADEM (2022) survey, in January of that year, the Constitutional Convention had almost 60% of citizens' confidence, while in April, it had only 44%, and in May, it was only 40%. Therefore, the performance of the Constitutional Convention may have impacted voters' choices, especially among new voters who were added to the electorate as a result of the reinstatement of compulsory voting.

Polarisation was also reflected in the composition of the coalitions backing "approve" and "reject." On the "approve" side were the left-wing parties that were part of President Gabriel Boric's government. Meanwhile, right-wing parties supported "reject." In the case of the Christian Democracy, a centrist party that was not part of the ruling coalition, it supported "approve," but some of its leaders supported "reject," which led to a major crisis that ended with the expulsion of some militants. In general, the "approve" campaign focused on the advantages of the constitutional proposal, especially in terms of economic equality, recognition of indigenous peoples, and plurinationality. Among other things, the campaign underlined that the constitutional proposal addressed the historic demands of Chileans expressed in the social outburst of 2019. Specifically, a new national health system with strong state participation, the regulation of water rights, especially in agricultural areas, and greater autonomy for municipalities and regions. The "reject" campaign, meanwhile, criticised the constitutional proposal for its "refoundational" spirit. The main objections were related to the new political system, among other things, the elimination of the senate. In addition, more conservative leaders expressed their disagreement with an article of the constitutional proposal that regulated the voluntary interruption of pregnancy (abortion). Finally, they opposed changes to the pension system. Chile has a system of individual capitalisation, in which workers own pension funds. The constitutional proposal moved towards a more solidarity-based pension system, which was interpreted by the opposition as an attempt to nationalise pension funds, taking them away from the workers.

In this programmatic discussion, it is possible to identify the validity of societal cleavages. First, a religious cleavage emerged along with a discussion on abortion (Morales, 2024). Both Catholic and Evangelical organisations quickly expressed their opposition to this proposal (Mayorga & Carvajal, 2022). The Episcopal Conference pointed out that this article of the Constitution was an "attack on human dignity," and that it placed an "insurmountable obstacle for many citizens to give their approval to the constitutional text that is being drafted" (Román, 2022). As Tec-López (2022) argues, in the case of evangelicals, and despite their heterogeneity, there seems to be a greater consensus than Catholics regarding the rejection of abortion and other legislation linked to equal marriage and gender identity. For this reason, as Morales and Pérez (2024) point out, it is understandable that in 2021, Evangelicals supported José Antonio Kast's presidential candidacy, a radical right-wing leader who defended a conservative agenda on issues related to the right to life, equal marriage, and sexual diversity, among others. In Chile, the link between evangelicals and right-wing parties dates back to the dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet (1973–1990). As Boas (2016) argued, in 1975, Pinochet was backed by the Council of Pastors, which brought together leaders from different evangelical churches: "Starting that year, the Council sponsored an annual inter-denominational service, the Evangelical Te Deum, which was regularly attended by Pinochet and other government officials" (Boas, 2016, p. 199).

The second part of the discussion revolved around social rights. The constitutional proposal included the rights to health, education, housing, and social security. The latter generated the most controversy. Chile has an individually funded pension system in which the worker owns pension funds. The constitutional proposal

stated that social security policy is defined by the state based on contributions from workers and employers. Therefore, the discussion was whether the money collected by each worker for their future pension would remain their property or whether it would be part of a large fund managed by the state. In this context, a movement called "Not with my money" emerged, which emphasised the danger of nationalisation of workers' pension funds. This movement also warned that the poorest workers who had contributed regularly to a private institution (Association of Pension Funds) would be the most affected, because if these workers' resources went to a "solidarity fund," they would be used to finance those who had not contributed regularly. Therefore, this movement argued that there would be a big problem, as it would increase the incentive to not contribute, given the existence of a solidarity pension fund. This discussion partially activated a social class cleavage, especially because there was tension between granting more and better social rights to citizens while tolerating a stronger state that would be under more pressure to collect resources to finance these social rights.

The third discussion, which could activate other cleavages, following González-Ocantos and Meléndez (2023) and Morales (2024), corresponded to plurinationality. This implied not only constitutionally recognising all the country's native peoples but also giving them territories and moving towards political autonomy. The discussion revolved around whether Chile would remain one state and one nation or whether it would become a state with several nations. In addition, these native peoples would have certain advantages in the acquisition of water rights, a basic commodity, especially in the context of drought and climate crises. All of this may have influenced the greater support for the "reject" campaign, especially in rural areas, for two reasons: First, there is a greater attachment to the more traditional patriotic values of national unity (Collier & Sater, 1996), which is in line with more significant support for right-wing parties (Herrera et al., 2019; Scully, 1992). Second, rural voters could perceive certain disadvantages concerning indigenous peoples in the acquisition of water rights, which is a fundamental element of farming. On Friday, 19 August 2022, several peasant organisations called for a march to protest the contents of the new Constitution (Cooperativa, 2022). According to some authors, plurinationality was the content most rejected by Chileans, which distanced the constitutional proposal from the median voter (Bargsted & González, 2022), bringing it closer to more conservative voters (Disi, 2023).

Finally, the authoritarianism/democracy cleavage was activated. The reason for this is simple: The constitutional referendum of 2022 was about repealing the 1980 constitution, written under the dictatorship of General Pinochet, and enacting a new one. Although in the 2020 referendum, the "reject" supporters reached only 22%, the scandals of the Constitutional Convention and the criticisms concerning the contents of the proposal attracted more moderate voters. This does not imply that "reject" voters in 2022 were in favour of the Pinochet regime. What we are saying is that the authoritarianism/democracy divide re-emerged in the constitutional debate, with some voters openly defending the 1980 constitution.

## 3. Hypotheses

We propose four hypotheses to measure the impact of socio-political divisions on the outcome of the 2022 constitutional referendum in Chile. The first hypothesis concerns the effects of religion on voting intention. The constitutional proposal included an article on voluntary termination of pregnancy (abortion). Therefore, we expect more significant support for "reject" from religious voters, especially evangelicals. According to Scully (1992), the religious divide in Chile originated in the political dispute between liberals and

conservatives in the mid-19th century. Part of this dispute was resolved with the 1925 constitution, which separated the church and state. However, the religious cleavage remained in force at the party and voter levels in the 20th and 21st centuries (Bargsted & De la Cerda, 2019; J. S. Valenzuela et al., 2007). Moreover, although intermittent, religious identification explained voting intentions in presidential elections between 1999 and 2017 (Raymond, 2021) with a much stronger effect in the 2021 presidential election. As Morales and Pérez (2024) show, evangelicals strongly supported the candidacy of the radical right in those elections and, in the 2022 constitutional referendum, according to recent research, evangelicals more strongly supported the "reject" option (Morales, 2024).

Accordingly, we have drafted one hypothesis for the aggregated data at the municipal level (Hypothesis 1A) and another hypothesis for the individual data based on the opinion survey (Hypothesis 1B). The first hypothisis is as follows:

> *Hypothesis 1A*: The higher the percentage of people who identify with a religion—especially evangelicals—the greater the support for "reject."

> *Hypothesis 1B*: Religious voters—especially evangelicals—were more supportive of "reject" than non-religious or other religious voters.

Our second hypothesis is related to social class cleavage. With the emergence of left-wing parties in the early 20th century and the rise of the working class, the Chilean political party system was reorganised around a new axis. The Communist Party and the Socialist Party sought to represent workers, while the right-wing parties continued to represent higher-income classes, especially oligarchy (Scully, 1992; S. Valenzuela, 1995). This created a new party system structured along a left–right axis that dominated the electoral competition until the 1973 coup d'état (López, 2004). With the advent of democracy following the dictatorship of General Pinochet (1973–1990), and as Huneeus (2001) shows, the poor and popular sectors changed their electoral behaviour, especially at the end of the 1990s. This occurred because of the consolidation of the Independent Democratic Union (UDI), a right-wing party officially founded in 1983 but forged amid General Pinochet's dictatorship (Klein, 2004). The popular sectors were no longer captive segments for left-wing parties, as the UDI began to gain support, so much so that it came close to winning the 1999 presidential election. Historically, as a conservative party with close ties to Opus Dei (Huneeus, 2000; Morales & Bugueño, 2001), the UDI has been the strongest right-wing party since its return to democracy in 1990. However, it suffered an electoral setback in the last elections because of the emergence of a radical right-wing party, the Republican Party. Given that the popular segments have gradually been won over by right-wing parties that were in favour of the "reject" option, we expect that the poorest municipalities and the poorest people will have been overwhelmingly in favour of this option. As with Hypothesis 1, we present one hypothesis for aggregated data at the municipal level (Hypothesis 2A) and another for individual data with opinion survey information (Hypothesis 2B):

> *Hypothesis 2A*: The higher the percentage of poor people per commune, the greater the support for "reject."

> *Hypothesis 2B*: Poorer voters were more supportive of "reject" than the rest.

Our third hypothesis concerns the urban/rural divide. According to Scully (1992), this cleavage emerged in the mid-20th century because peasants struggled with better living conditions. In 1957, the Christian Democratic Party (PDC) was formed, in part, to represent the rural areas of the country, which until then had been a captive electorate for right-wing parties mainly because of their links to the landowning elite (Loveman, 1976). The PDC won the 1964 presidential election and, during the government of Eduardo Frei Montalva, implemented agrarian reform and opened the way to peasant unionisation, which severely strained its relationship with right-wing parties (Fleet, 1985). As Herrera et al. (2019) show, since 1990, the PDC has maintained its roots in rural areas but is in constant competition with right-wing parties. Thus, in the 2021 presidential elections, rurality strongly predicted support for radical right candidates (Morales & Pérez, 2024). This occurred one year before the 2022 constitutional referendum; therefore, we expect rurality in predicting the 'reject' option. In this case, given that we only have aggregate data at the communal level, our hypothesis is as follows:

> *Hypothesis 3*: The higher the percentage of rural population per commune, the greater the support for "reject."

Our fourth hypothesis concerns the authoritarian/democratic divide that emerged from General Pinochet's violent dictatorship (1973–1990). The centre-left parties fought fiercely against the authoritarian regime, while the right-wing parties were part of a civilian coalition that supported Pinochet (Huneeus, 2001). This axis of competition has defined Chilean politics since 1990 (Torcal & Mainwaring, 2003), albeit in the company of other historical cleavages that explain the configuration of different party systems (S. Valenzuela, 1995). A key milestone was the 1980 constitution, written under dictatorship, but successively reformed under democracy. This was the central point of discussion in the 2020 referendum, in which citizens were asked whether they wanted to continue with the current constitution or change it accordingly. While the right-wing parties were in favour of the 2020 referendum, they were not in favour of the 2022 referendum. There were calls to dismantle the "Pinochet Constitution" from the left, intensifying the conflict between authoritarianism and democracy. For these reasons, we expect that voters who are more likely to support authoritarian rule are more likely to support rejection. Our hypothesis, for which we only have individual data from the opinion poll, is as follows:

> *Hypothesis 4*: Voters more likely to support authoritarian rule were more likely to support "reject."

Table 2 presents the hypotheses, including the cleavages and units of analysis, which consist of two elements: First, electoral data at the municipal level; and second, opinion poll data. Religious cleavage and social class cleavage can be analysed using both sources of information. We propose a hypothesis for each cleavage and the respective unit of analysis. The urban/rural cleavage, however, cannot be analysed using opinion surveys, as they only include the urban population. Therefore, we resorted to municipal data. In the case of the authoritarianism/democracy cleavage, we only have data from the opinion poll. We are aware of the limitations of municipal electoral analysis, mainly because they are not homogeneous geographical units, which could lead to problems of "ecological fallacy" in interpreting the data. However, this municipality analysis is essentially a measure of the robustness of the conclusions drawn from the individual analysis of public opinion data. The only cleavage that we analysed exclusively with municipal data was urban/rural cleavage. In this case, as observed in an important part of the Chilean electoral literature (Altman, 2004; López, 2004; Morales & Belmar, 2022), rural municipalities tend to be more homogeneous than urban ones, mainly because they are

territorial units with a small number of inhabitants compared to the national average. Incidentally, this reduces problems of ecological fallacy and makes statistical inferences more reliable.

**Table 2.** Units of analysis and hypotheses.

| | Unit of analysis and measurement | | Hypothesis | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Socio-structural cleavages** | | | | |
| | Municipality | Individual | Municipality | Individual |
| Religion | Percentage of people identifying with a religion | Religious identification | Hypothesis 1A: The higher the percentage of people who identify with a religion—especially evangelicals—the greater the support for "reject" | Hypothesis 1 B: Religious voters—especially evangelicals—were more supportive of "reject" than non-religious or other religious voters |
| Social class | Percentage of por | Social class identification | Hypothesis 2A: The higher the percentage of poor people per commune, the greater the support for "reject" | Hypothesis 2B: Poorer voters were more supportive of "reject" than the rest |
| Rurality | Percentage of rural population | | Hypothesis 3: The higher the percentage of rural population per commune, the greater the support for "reject" | |
| **Political cleavage** | | | | |
| Democracy | | Preference for democratic rule | | Hypothesis 4: Voters more likely to support authoritarian rule were more likely to support "reject" |

## 4. Data and Method

We constructed a series of multivariate linear least squares (OLS) regression models to test the hypotheses using official electoral data at the municipality level. In this case, the dependent variable is the percentage of votes for the "reject" option. We used multinomial logit (*mlogit*) models to test the hypotheses using opinion polling data. The dependent variable, in this case, is voting intention.

Table 3 shows the correlation matrix with municipal data between our dependent variable—the percentage of "reject" votes—and the independent variables. In the case of religion, we split it into three indicators: percentage of Catholics (70.8%), percentage of Evangelicals (14.9%), and percentage of inhabitants with no religion (8.9%). "Reject" vote share correlated significantly with all the independent variables, showing a positive relationship with the percentage of the evangelical population, the percentage of poor (*mean* = 10.8%) and the percentage of the rural population (*mean* = 11.9%).

**Table 3.** Correlation matrix.

| Variables | Reject (%) | Catholics (%) | Evangelicals (%) | No Religion (%) | Poverty (%) | Rurality (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Reject (%) | 1.000 | | | | | |
| Catholics (%) | −0.186*** (0.001) | 1.000 | | | | |
| Evangelicals (%) | 0.421*** (0.000) | −0.929*** (0.000) | 1.000 | | | |
| No Religion (%) | −0.393*** (0.000) | −0.640*** (0.000) | 0.321*** (0.000) | 1.000 | | |
| Poverty (%) | 0.499*** (0.000) | −0.316*** (0.000) | 0.488*** (0.000) | −0.247*** (0.000) | 1.000 | |
| Rurality (%) | 0.452*** (0.000) | 0.188*** (0.000) | 0.008 (0.876) | −0.486*** (0.000) | 0.335*** (0.000) | 1.000 |

Note: * Shows significance at $p < 0.001$. Source: Authors' elaboration with data from the Chilean Electoral System (SERVEL, 2024) and National Socioeconomic Characterisation Survey (CASEN, 2024).

We built an OLS regression model to test the hypotheses. The specifications are as follows:

$$R(\text{Reject})_j = \alpha + \beta_{1j}(\text{religion}) + \beta_{2j}(\text{poverty}) + \beta_{3j}(\text{rurality}) + \beta_{4j}(MR) + \beta_{5j}(MR \times \text{poverty}) + \varepsilon_j$$

Where $R$ represents the percentage of votes for the "reject" option; *religion* is the percentage of Catholics, Evangelicals, or people with no religion—used interchangeably in the respective model; *poverty* indicates the percentage of the population living in poverty; *rurality* refers to the percentage of the rural population; and *MR* is a dummy variable coded as 1 if the commune is *MR* and 0 otherwise. *MR* × poverty is an interaction term. We have included this interaction term for three reasons: first, *MR* is a remarkably diverse region and its composition is based on income levels and inequality (Corvalán & Cox, 2013); second, it accumulates close to 40% of the electoral rolls; third, left-wing candidates obtained better results in the constitutional convention and 2021 presidential elections in the first and second rounds, respectively.

The results are presented in Table 4. First, we note that the higher the percentage of Catholics per commune, ceteris paribus, the lower the percentage of rejection votes. Something similar happens with the variable *no religion* but with a more robust coefficient. In contrast, in the case of the percentage of Evangelicals, the coefficient is positive. That is to say that—ceteris paribus—an increase in the percentage of evangelicals was associated with an increase in the "reject" vote. However, both poverty and rurality showed positive signs. That is, "reject" performed better electorally in poor communes with a high concentration of the rural population.

Regarding the interaction term, the results are in line with expectations. As we have said, in *MR*, since at least 2020, the left has had better electoral results. The models indicate that while, on average, "reject" performed better in the *MR*, its support decreased in the poorest municipalities. To demonstrate this result more clearly, we constructed a graph of the predicted "reject" values based on Model 4 (Figure 2). In addition, we have constructed two appendices to show the results of the previous referendum. That is, the 2020 referendum was organised under the system of automatic registration for voters aged 18 and over and voluntary voting. Appendix 1 in the Supplementary File shows the referendum results, indicating the number of votes for each option, and the voter turnout. In a universe of almost 15 million voters, voter turnout was just under 50%. Meanwhile, in Appendix 2 of the Supplementary File, we replicate the same multiple linear regression model

**Table 4.** OLS models.

| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 | Model 5 | Model 6 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Catholics (%), *H1A* | −0.172*** | | | −0.160*** | | |
| | (0.0400) | | | (0.0382) | | |
| Evangelicals (%), *H1A* | | 0.323*** | | | 0.311*** | |
| | | (0.0472) | | | (0.0449) | |
| No Religion, *H1A* | | | −0.312* | | | −0.358** |
| | | | (0.173) | | | (0.164) |
| Poverty (%), *H2A* | 0.505*** | 0.327*** | 0.712*** | 0.691*** | 0.510*** | 0.892*** |
| | (0.111) | (0.112) | (0.103) | (0.111) | (0.111) | (0.102) |
| Rurality (%), *H3* | 0.102*** | 0.100*** | 0.0714*** | 0.0969*** | 0.0961*** | 0.0660*** |
| | (0.0154) | (0.0144) | (0.0163) | (0.0147) | (0.0137) | (0.0155) |
| *MR* | −7.979*** | −7.307*** | −6.342*** | 11.77*** | 12.16*** | 14.55*** |
| | (1.194) | (1.137) | (1.298) | (3.519) | (3.366) | (3.620) |
| *MR**Poverty | | | | −2.005*** | −1.980*** | −2.113*** |
| | | | | (0.338) | (0.324) | (0.344) |
| Constant | 71.30*** | 55.79*** | 58.83*** | 68.10*** | 53.66*** | 56.86*** |
| | (3.710) | (1.359) | (1.925) | (3.578) | (1.338) | (1.856) |
| Observations | 345 | 345 | 345 | 345 | 345 | 345 |
| *R*-squared | 0.433 | 0.474 | 0.408 | 0.486 | 0.526 | 0.467 |
| Log Lik | −1,164 | −1,151 | −1,172 | −1,147 | −1,133 | −1,154 |

Notes: The dependent variable is the percentage of "reject" votes; standard errors in parentheses; *** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$. Source: Authors' elaboration with data from the Chilean Electoral System (SERVEL, 2024) and National Socioeconomic Characterisation Survey (CASEN, 2024)

of Table 4. We find that socio-political cleavages influenced the outcome of the 2020 referendum, albeit with less intensity compared to the 2022 referendum. Additionally, the percentage of evangelicals had a positive effect on the "reject" option, as did the percentage of the rural population. Meanwhile, poverty had an inverse effect in 2020 compared to 2022. All of this demonstrates two things: First, Chile's historical socio-political cleavages continue to contribute to explaining electoral outcomes; and second, while some variables maintain some continuity in their effects, others significantly change their impact on electoral outcomes. Finally, we have constructed a third Appendix (see Supplementary File), which aims to show the effect of socio-political cleavages on the percentage of votes received by the two most popular presidential candidates in the first round of 2021. The results go in the same direction and illustrate how socio-political cleavages are important predictors of electoral outcomes.

We conclude that: First, socio-structural cleavages explain the outcomes of the 2022 constitutional referendum; second, "reject" obtained better results in municipalities with more evangelicals, supporting Hypothesis 1. This is not surprising if we analyse the contents of the constitutional proposal, which included an article on the voluntary interruption of pregnancy. Although, as Castillo et al. (2023) point out, there is a minority group of progressive evangelicals, in general, evangelicals are opposed to abortions. The opposite was true for municipalities with more non-religious inhabitants, who are often more liberal on such issues. In the case of municipalities with a higher percentage of Catholics, meanwhile, "reject" obtained less support, although with a weaker regression coefficient than the other two groups. Religious cleavage, then, not only

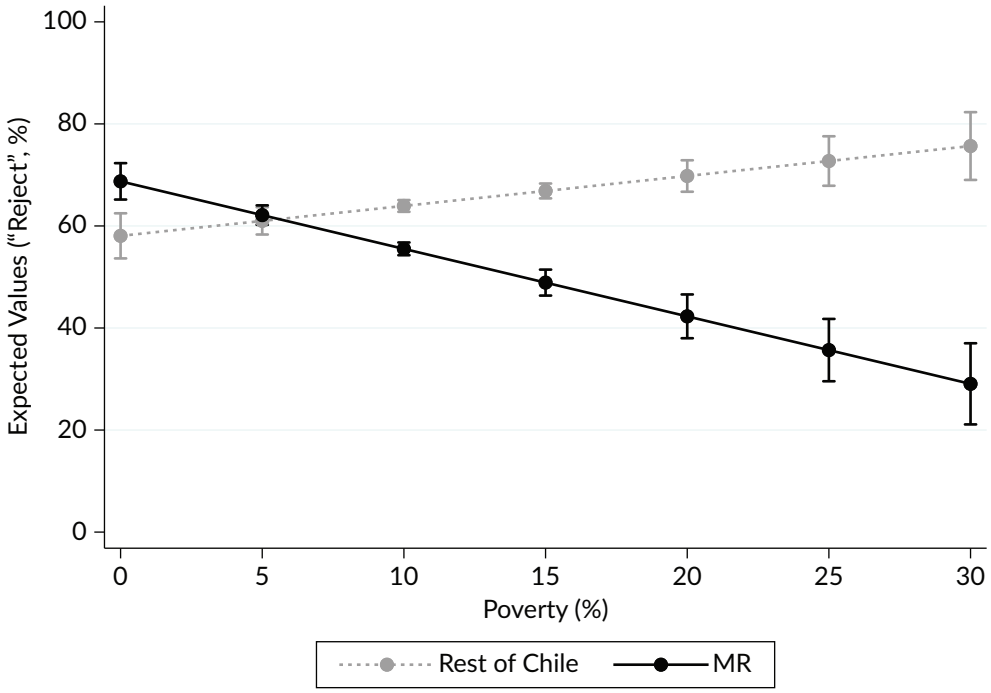


**Figure 2.** Predicted values of "reject" as a function of the percentage of poor people and the geographical area of the municipality (*MR*/Rest of Chile). Source: Authors' elaboration with data from the Chilean Electoral System (SERVEL, 2024) and National Socioeconomic Characterisation Survey (CASEN, 2024).

explains the outcome of the referendum but also helps to understand in more detail the specific impact of certain religions, especially Evangelicals.

Concerning social class cleavage, Hypothesis 2 was partially supported. "Reject" gained more support in the poorest municipalities, but in the *MR*, the opposite was true. The three highest-income municipalities in the country are located in this region. There, "reject" obtained an average vote of over 80%, while in the poorest municipalities of the *MR*, "approve" outperformed "Reject" by a narrow margin. Gabriel Boric extended his lead over José Antonio Kast in the 2021 presidential run-off in these municipalities. Moreover, in these municipalities, left-wing parties and movements achieved their best electoral results in the election of the Constituent Convention members (Belmar et al., 2023).

Finally, the data confirm Hypothesis 3 regarding the urban/rural cleavage. There is abundant evidence that in rural communes, conservative votes are inclined towards Christian Democracy and right-wing parties (Herrera et al., 2019). Given that the constitutional proposal implied a drastic change in the rules of the democratic game, this conservative vote probably did not feel represented. Furthermore, the constitutional proposal implied the cession of autonomous territories to the indigenous peoples. Most of the indigenous people live in rural areas. Therefore, voters in these municipalities may have seen the constitutional proposal as a threat to their private property and interests.

What do the results of opinion polls tell us? Table 5 presents the results of this study. "Reject" obtained 41.47%, the "approve" option 31.32%, while 27.21% opted for *do not vote*, *no answer*, or *do not know/no answer* options. When discounting the latter option and recalculating the percentages of each alternative, "reject" reached 57% and "approve" 43%, similar to the referendum result.

**Table 5.** Voting intention for the constitutional referendum.

| | Cases | % | % (Without NV/NADA/DK) | Referendum results |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Approve | 663 | 31.32 | 43.0 | 38.11 |
| Reject | 878 | 41.47 | 57.0 | 61.89 |
| NV/NA/DK | 576 | 27.21 | | |
| Total | 2,117 | 100 | 100 | 100 |

Notes: The question is: "In the election on 4 September, will you vote to Approve or Reject the Constitutional Convention's proposal for a new constitution?"; NV = No vote; NA = No answer; DK = Do not know. Source: Author's own elaboration based on the survey carried out by the Millennium Nucleus for the Study of Politics, Public Opinion and Media in Chile (MEPOP), which is not yet publicly available.

Figure 3 shows voting intentions according to religion, socioeconomic status (SES), and democratic support. Regarding religion, evangelicals, representing 10.9%, voted "reject" by 58.9% and "approve" by 13%. Among voters with no religion, who represent 31.4%, "I approve" outnumbered "I reject" by almost 8 points (38.2% versus 30.4%), a gap that increased very significantly among agnostics, who represent 8.6% of the sample. Among Catholics representing 39.6%, "reject" was the majority choice with 49.3%, while "approve" only

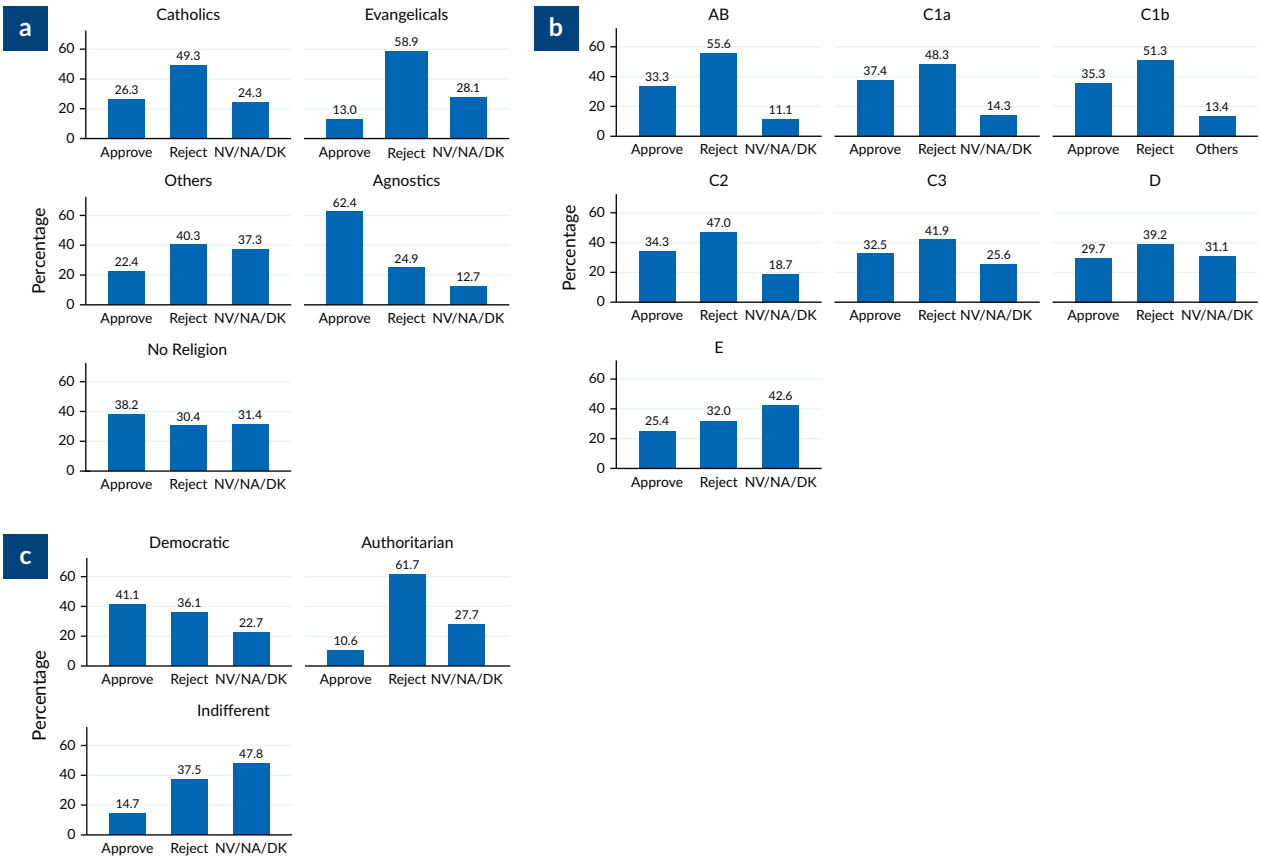


**Figure 3.** Voting intention by (a) religion, (b) SES, and (c) democracy support. Notes: For religion, the question is: Which religion or religious group do you feel closest or most identified with? For democracy, the question asked is: In your opinion, (a) democracy is preferable to any other form of government, (b) in some circumstances, an authoritarian government may be preferable to a democratic one, (c) for people like you, a democratic regime is the same as a non-democratic one; the chi-square tests were significant for all three variables.

garnered 26.3%. These results are in line with Hypothesis 1. Indeed, Evangelicals rejected the constitutional proposal more broadly.

Regarding social class cleavage, the results at the individual level contradict those at the municipal level. Voters were classified into seven groups ordered from highest to lowest income: AB (richer people, 1.3%), C1a (wealthy people, 6.9%), C1b (people with medium/high incomes, 5.6%), C2 (people with medium incomes, 13.7%), C3 (people with medium/low incomes, 24.1%), D (poor people, 35.0%), E (poorer people, 13.4%). "Reject" prevailed in all groups except the lowest income group, where the NV/NA/DK options predominated at 42.6%. Therefore, caution must be exercised when interpreting the results. Higher-income groups had stronger preferences than lower-income groups, which could partially distort the overall interpretation of the data.

Finally, we present voting intentions according to adherence to democracy as a form of government. Voters with the highest adherence to democracy (66.%) preferred "approve" over "reject," but the distance was only five points. In the group of voters who preferred an authoritarian regime (20.1%), "reject" reached 61.7%, while "approve" achieved 10.6%. In the group of voters "indifferent" (13.9%) to the political regime, the majority favoured the NV/NA/DK options, with 47.8%. Therefore, given that the new constitution was supposed to repeal the 1980 constitution, it is unsurprising that people prone to an authoritarian regime supported "reject" to a greater extent. This result supports Hypothesis 4 regarding the prevalence of the authoritarianism-democracy cleavage.

We built three multinomial logistic regression models to test the hypotheses. The dependent variable was *voting intention*: "I approve," "I reject," and "NA/NV/DK." The independent variables were divided into three groups. First, the control variables were *gender*, *age*, and *area of residence* (*MR* vs. the rest of Chile). Second, variables linked to sociopolitical cleavages are *religion*, *SES*, and *adherence to democracy*. Third, the political variables were self-placement on the left–right ideological axis and presidential approval. Additionally, we constructed an interaction term between *MR* and SES to be congruent with the municipal-level data analysis. The following equations summarise the characteristics of the model:

$$\begin{aligned}\text{Logit}\left(p_{\text{reject}}\right):\\ &= \ln\left(\frac{p(\text{referendum} = \text{Reject})}{p(\text{referendum} = \text{Approve})}\right)\\ &= b_1 + b_{2\ \text{gender}} + b_{3\ \text{age}} + b_{4\ \text{religion}} + b_{5\ \text{ses}} + b_{6\ \text{democracy}} + b_{7\ MR} + b_{8\ \text{ideology}} + b_{9\ \text{popularity}} + b_{10\ MR \times \text{ses}}\end{aligned}$$

$$\begin{aligned}\text{Logit}\left(p_{\text{NVNADK}}\right):\\ &= \ln\left(\frac{p(\text{referendum} = \text{NVNADK})}{p(\text{referendum} = \text{Approve})}\right)\\ &= b_{11} + b_{12\ \text{gender}} + b_{13\ \text{age}} + b_{14\ \text{religion}} + b_{15\ \text{ses}} + b_{16\ \text{democracy}} + b_{17\ MR} + b_{18\ \text{ideology}} + b_{19\ \text{popularity}}\\ &\quad + b_{20\ MR \times \text{ses}}\end{aligned}$$

Table 6 presents the results. Concerning the first hypothesis and in line with the analysis of municipal data, Evangelicals differ significantly from Catholics, registering more significant support for the "reject" option and the "NA/NV/DK" options, with the opposite happening in the group of agnostics. This evidence confirms the validity of religious cleavage. Literature that analyses the effect of religion on political preferences in Chile tends to compare religious and non-religious voters without going much deeper into the specific religion

they profess. More recently, Castillo et al. (2023) refined the contemporary effect of religious cleavage by emphasising the particular characteristics of evangelicals.

The second hypothesis is related to class cleavage. These results indicate that SES has a partially significant effect on voting intention. Only in model 1 are some differences in segments C3, D and E, suggesting that these groups were less likely to vote "reject." However, these differences disappeared when more variables were included in subsequent models. The coefficient of the interaction variable between *MR* and SES (Model 3) was also non-significant. These results present a challenge, as there is a contradiction between the municipal and individual data. This could be due to the high number of respondents who ticked the "NA/NV/DK" options, which makes a robust comparison between the two referendum options "approve" and "reject" difficult. We presume that many respondents who opted for the "NA/NV/DK" option ultimately voted "reject." This is because "not voting" implies that economic sanctions and invalid votes barely reached 2.1%.

The third hypothesis concerns authoritarianism/democracy cleavage. The results indicate that "democratic" voters were less willing to vote "reject" compared to the "indifferent" group, which is the reference category. Meanwhile, authoritarian voters do not differ significantly from "indifferent" voters except in the first model, where they are more likely to vote "reject." These results were consistent with those of the descriptive analysis. Moreover, the effect of this cleavage holds, even in models that theoretically add robust political variables, such as the ideological axis and presidential approval. Indeed, left-wing voters were less likely to vote "reject" than right-wing voters. As for presidential approval, those who supported Boric were less likely to vote "reject."

**Table 6.** Multinomial logit.

| | Model 1 | | Model 2 | | Model 3 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Reject | NA/NV/DK | Reject | NA/NV/DK | Reject | NA/NV/DK |
| Women | −0.275** | 0.269** | −0.220 | 0.249 | −0.296* | 0.176 |
| | (0.114) | (0.125) | (0.167) | (0.165) | (0.174) | (0.171) |
| Age | 0.00130 | −0.00977** | 0.0127** | 0.00128 | 0.0135** | 0.00211 |
| | (0.00405) | (0.00446) | (0.00611) | (0.00597) | (0.00613) | (0.00599) |
| *Religion (H1B) R.C. = Catholics* | | | | | | |
| Evangelicals | 1.002*** | 0.826*** | 0.814** | 0.664** | 0.811** | 0.661** |
| | (0.226) | (0.249) | (0.324) | (0.326) | (0.324) | (0.326) |
| Others | −0.0908 | 0.432* | 0.0480 | 0.520* | 0.0306 | 0.503* |
| | (0.214) | (0.222) | (0.304) | (0.292) | (0.303) | (0.291) |
| Agnostics | −1.556*** | −1.415*** | −1.132*** | −0.945*** | −1.127*** | −0.938*** |
| | (0.208) | (0.262) | (0.314) | (0.323) | (0.314) | (0.324) |
| No religion | −0.876*** | −0.223 | −0.550*** | −0.107 | −0.542*** | −0.100 |
| | (0.134) | (0.143) | (0.195) | (0.189) | (0.195) | (0.189) |
| *SES (H2B) R.C. = AB* | | | | | | |
| C1a | −0.443 | −0.0894 | −0.119 | 0.113 | −0.000344 | 0.199 |
| | (0.502) | (0.743) | (1.023) | (1.102) | (1.058) | (1.141) |
| C1b | −0.444 | −0.121 | −0.356 | −0.0294 | −0.00719 | 0.290 |
| | (0.511) | (0.757) | (1.038) | (1.120) | (1.092) | (1.177) |
| C2 | −0.591 | −0.0153 | −0.450 | −0.128 | −0.0727 | 0.220 |
| | (0.485) | (0.717) | (1.001) | (1.078) | (1.060) | (1.140) |

**Table 6.** (Cont.) Multinomial logit.

| | Model 1 | | Model 2 | | Model 3 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Reject | NA/NV/DK | Reject | NA/NV/DK | Reject | NA/NV/DK |
| C3 | −0.799* | 0.241 | −0.882 | −0.120 | −0.428 | 0.306 |
| | (0.477) | (0.705) | (0.989) | (1.066) | (1.060) | (1.140) |
| D | −0.805* | 0.406 | −0.837 | −0.0787 | −0.285 | 0.442 |
| | (0.476) | (0.703) | (0.987) | (1.063) | (1.076) | (1.155) |
| E | −1.008** | 0.679 | −1.161 | 0.0159 | −0.521 | 0.621 |
| | (0.499) | (0.715) | (1.005) | (1.077) | (1.110) | (1.185) |
| *Democracy (H4) R.C. = Indifferent* | | | | | | |
| Democratic | −1.170*** | −1.609*** | −0.642** | −0.930*** | −0.660** | −0.948*** |
| | (0.198) | (0.194) | (0.257) | (0.244) | (0.258) | (0.245) |
| Authoritarian | 0.786*** | −0.146 | 0.409 | −0.124 | 0.393 | −0.139 |
| | (0.248) | (0.252) | (0.322) | (0.313) | (0.323) | (0.314) |
| *MR* | −0.345*** | −0.0768 | −0.258 | 0.00700 | 0.818 | 1.046 |
| | (0.114) | (0.124) | (0.167) | (0.163) | (0.689) | (0.699) |
| Presidential approval | | | −4.416*** | −2.908*** | −4.423*** | −2.915*** |
| | | | (0.306) | (0.202) | (0.306) | (0.202) |
| Left | | | −1.577*** | −2.085*** | −1.567*** | −2.077*** |
| | | | (0.247) | (0.227) | (0.247) | (0.227) |
| Centre | | | −0.0768 | −0.885*** | −0.0718 | −0.880*** |
| | | | (0.216) | (0.206) | (0.216) | (0.206) |
| Right | | | 2.227*** | 0.256 | 2.245*** | 0.274 |
| | | | (0.336) | (0.340) | (0.337) | (0.341) |
| SES*MR | | | | | −0.205 | −0.197 |
| | | | | | (0.128) | (0.128) |
| Constant | 2.593*** | 0.889 | 2.629** | 2.070* | 2.240* | 1.701 |
| | (0.589) | (0.793) | (1.123) | (1.184) | (1.175) | (1.242) |
| Observations | 2,117 | 2,117 | 2,117 | 2,117 | 2,117 | 2,117 |
| Pseudo-*R*: | 0.114 | 0.114 | 0.388 | 0.388 | 0.388 | 0.388 |
| Log-Likelihood: | −2,030 | −2,030 | −1,404 | −1,404 | −1,402 | −1,402 |
| Chi-squared | 524 | 524 | 1,777 | 1,777 | 1,780 | 1,780 |
| Prob Wald: | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

Notes: The dependent variable was *voting intention for the constitutional referendum*; standard errors in parentheses; *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$; R.C. = Reference Category; in the case of ideology—left, centre, right—the reference category is "none."

## 5. Conclusion

Although constitutional referendums are usually analysed using heuristic and systematic political reasoning approaches, cleavage theory contributes to a better understanding of their outcomes. In the case of Chile, we have shown that the four socio-structural and socio-political cleavages significantly impacted the success of the rejection of the 2022 referendum. While the results are more precise and robust when analysing municipal data, opinion poll data allowed us to delve deeper into the specific characteristics of voters according to religion, social class, and attitudes towards the democratic regime.

Concerning religious cleavage, we found that Evangelicals rejected the constitutional proposal more strongly than the others. Traditional literature that has examined the prevalence of religious cleavages in Chile usually compares religious and non-religious voters. It is unusual to make a precise distinction between each religion. In this case, Evangelicals' rejection of the constitutional proposal could be explained by the incorporation of an article on abortion and the modification of the political, economic, social, and cultural structure of the country.

Social class cleavages have provided contradictory evidence. Municipal analysis shows an apparent positive correlation between the percentage of poor people and the "reject" vote. The exception, however, was *MR*. In this region, "reject" was more robust in higher-income municipalities. What is relevant here is that variations in poverty levels help to understand variations in support for "reject." However, the individual analysis points in different directions. Our statistical model does not indicate a robust effect of social class on voting intention. We suggest that this result may be due to the uneven distribution of "NA/NV/DK" responses, which is much more pronounced in lower-income segments, preventing an accurate comparison between "approve" and "reject" voters.

Meanwhile, the authoritarianism-democracy cleavage yields no significant surprises, and its effect is theoretically expected. Democratic voters were less likely to vote "reject" compared to the "indifferent" and "authoritarian" groups. The "authoritarian" voters were evidently against repealing the 1980 constitution and also against replacing it with a constitutional proposal drafted mainly by left-wing parties and movements.

The results of this research contrast with the most recent approaches to the reasons behind the "reject" triumph, which attributes it to an incumbent vote reflected in presidential approval (Alemán & Navia, 2023; González-Ocantos & Meléndez, 2023). While it is true that the most robust variable explaining support for "reject" corresponded to presidential approval, historical socio-political cleavages were very relevant for understanding Chileans' voting intentions. These cleavages were, in part, activated by the coalitions that backed "approve" and "reject." As noted, some religious organisations opposed the constitutional proposal for including an article on abortion. This was taken up by the "reject" parties, expressing their defence of the "right to life" as an elementary issue. Rural organisations also emerged, expressing their rejection of plurinationality, emphasising that it put Chile's historical traditions at risk and native peoples at a clear advantage over the rest. The "reject" campaign used these arguments, indicating that, among other things, the new constitution sought to establish different justice systems for Indigenous peoples and the rest of the country, which violated the principle of equality before the law. Finally, as discussed in the electoral campaign section, there was also a debate on the ownership of pension funds. The leaders of the 'reject' campaign argued that with the new constitution, there was a possibility of nationalisation of the funds. In practice, this opened the debate on whether the state or the market should be involved in pension policies.

Another relevant issue, from our perspective, is that in the 2022 referendum, voting was compulsory. Therefore, unlike the 2020 referendum, the parties expected massive voter turnout. While the "approve" option was strongly linked to President Boric, the campaigns revolved around the contents of the constitutional proposal. The parties had to convey their messages to a much wider audience, synthesising the constitutional proposal as much as possible. This led, on certain occasions, to some "reject" leaders spreading "fake news" about the contents of the new constitution. This may have had a marginal impact on the final result, especially in groups of voters who were less informed and less interested in the constitutional process. Consequently, Chile also serves as a case study to analyse the impact of different

electoral rules on political outcomes. As we pointed out, the 2020 referendum consulted on constitutional change and the representative body in charge of writing the new constitution. These were two general questions that did not involve programming content. However, the 2022 referendum with compulsory voting opened up public debate on relevant issues, such as social rights, the right to life, private property, the political system, and plurinationality, among others.

In sum, this study highlights the validity of historical socio-political cleavages in explaining the outcomes of constitutional referendums. Although some studies have found that certain cleavages were extinguished or suspended, our results differ from this hypothesis. Without ignoring the effect of contigent variables, such as presidential approval, or more powerful political variables in explaining electoral behaviour, such as self-positioning on the left-right ideological scale, our research confirms the presence of historical cleavages that continue to explain political outcomes. Moreover, we suggest that these socio-political cleavages, which also serve to explain the results of the presidential elections, were activated much more clearly in the context of constitutional change. This is because the public debate covered all kinds of issues and the proposed constitution aimed to change the political system, the economic system, and even the values on which the republic was built.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

## Data Availability

The database and syntax can be found at the following URL: https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/WUHNBH

## Supplementary Material

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

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# Depoliticizing Transnational Cleavage-Related Issues Through Social Media Advertising: The 2022 Danish Defense Referendum Campaign

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## Abstract

Denmark has an extensive but troubled experience when it comes to referendums related to the EU, with the Danes rejecting the pro-integration options in three votes up to 2022. As Denmark is the "home of issue voting," these outcomes are symbolic of the transnational cleavage permeating its society, which has been argued to make the abolition of Denmark's opt-outs impossible. Nevertheless, the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 resulted in an apparent shift in the balance between the sides of this cleavage as Denmark subsequently voted overwhelmingly in favor of abolishing its EU defense opt-out. Scholarly work has argued that voters responded to efforts from the pro-abolition camp to depoliticize the issue of European integration, which raises the question of how the campaigning actors were able to achieve this. This contribution examines the role of social media advertising in this regard. Prior studies have focused primarily on social media discourse and its impact on voter behavior in referendum contexts, portraying it as a site for polarization and politicization, rather than depoliticization. We map the advertising expenditures of campaigning actors in the run-up to the referendum using data from the Meta Ad Library, and analyze their messaging using structured framing analysis to show how both sides in the campaign deal with the issue of European integration. Results show the pro-side being much more present than the contra-side, and offer empirical evidence for passive and active depoliticization strategies by the former vis-à-vis the transnational cleavage-related issue of European defense cooperation.

## Keywords

cleavage referendums; Denmark; digital advertising; European integration; social media

## 1. Introduction

The two most recent EU-related referendums have had wildly different outcomes. The watershed vote on EU membership in the UK in 2016 has left strong marks on British society that reverberate to this day. The politicization that was present throughout the campaign and its immediate aftermath made Brexit the most dominant cleavage in the country, becoming "the receptacle for broader political, cultural and identity-based divides" (Brändle et al., 2022, p. 235). Only recently have there been signs that the all-encompassing influence of Brexit on British politics and public opinion has been waning, having been a key issue in the 2017 and 2019 general elections (see for instance Fieldhouse & Bailey, 2023). This is confirmed by the fact that despite the change from Conservative to Labour leadership after the July 2024 general elections, the new government expressed that it will not reverse Brexit (Morton, 2024). In other words, the referendum had as its immediate outcome the cultivation and exacerbation of a deep divide within British society centering around EU membership that only recently has found somewhat of a resolution, even though its wider impact regarding the contestation of other European integration issues still lingers to this day (Morton, 2024).

Six years after the internal shock of this referendum, the Union had to deal with new pressures from outside its territory following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In this context, Denmark decided to abolish its opt-out concerning the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP), thus triggering the first EU-related referendum since the British decided to terminate their membership of the Union. From a historical perspective, chances for success seemed slim: Much like the UK, Denmark has mostly been an outlier when it comes to their political positioning to the EU (Favell & Reimer, 2021). On three earlier occasions, the Danes had rejected the pro-integration options in EU-related referendums, and since the Danes were generally considered to be opposed to more integration, abolishing the defense opt-out should have been a "mission impossible" (Beach, 2021, p. 551). However, the decision ultimately found large support among voters, with 66.9% voting in favor of removing the opt-out.

As such, Denmark's vote was seemingly able to (at least temporarily) shift the balance between the two sides of its transnational cleavage (Hooghe & Marks, 2018), i.e., its historical and societal divide concerning European integration, resulting in the apparent resolution of the cleavage-related issue of closer European cooperation regarding defense policy. This is especially noteworthy considering that the UK referendum saw this cleavage being deepened into the most dominant division of its contemporary society as a result of heavy politicization and polarization, both during the campaign (Del Vicario et al., 2017; Tolson, 2018; Zappettini, 2021) and in its immediate aftermath (Brändle et al., 2022; North et al., 2021). One could argue that in the Danish referendum, voters responded to the pressures of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, but research on voter behavior by Brun Pedersen et al. (2023) suggests that this was not the case. Instead, the pro-abolition-side was seemingly able to resonate with voters by emphasizing normative values and strategic benefits, thus *de*politicizing the opt-out and effectively steering the debate away from the topic of European integration. Theoretically, this is surprising, as both referendums, while different in scope, can be categorized as dealing with "constitutive issues" or the widening/deepening of the EU based on the typology of Hoeglinger (2016), meaning that both referendums would be expected to see high politicization (Grande & Hutter, 2016, p. 68).

Considering the above, this study looks to uncover how exactly the pro-abolition-side was able to depoliticize the defense opt-out in the Danish 2022 referendum campaign. Our central argument postulates that, presumably under the pressure of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, a large coalition of political actors was able to present a strong and cohesive message that successfully framed the opt-out in a way that decoupled it from European integration. We test this argument by examining the political advertisements of these actors during the referendum campaign, specifically on social media. Several studies have shown that this medium was instrumental in creating the polarization and politicization that characterized the Brexit referendum's campaign and its aftermath (such as Brändle et al., 2022; Del Vicario et al., 2017; North et al., 2021). These works, like most that discuss social media as an arena for politicization in referendum contexts (see Buchanan, 2016; Morisi & Plescia, 2018; Munir, 2018), focus on the *discourse* surrounding referendums, i.e., the discussions and interactions between users as well as specific engagement through comments, likes, and shares. However, much less attention has been paid to social media *advertising*, even though it offers campaigning actors much greater control over who sees their messages and how prominently these are being shown to those users (see for instance Baviera et al., 2022), including when compared to more traditional campaigning avenues such as television or newspaper ads. Considering also the high level of internet penetration (99%) and social media adoption (85.3%) in Denmark at the time (Kemp, 2022), and that the 2022 vote was arguably the first fully mediatized referendum in the country's experience, we argue that social media advertising offered plenty of depoliticizing potential to campaigning actors in its campaign. This would be especially true if they were able to cultivate a strong and united presence, which has been shown to affect referendum outcomes (De Vreese & Semetko, 2004; McAllister & Biddle, 2024; Silagadze & Gherghina, 2018; Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2004).

In what follows, we first focus on the empirics of the Danish EU referendums and link them to the transnational cleavage theory by Hooghe and Marks (2018). We also discuss the role of social media in referendum campaigns and formulate several hypotheses on how campaigning actors might have achieved depoliticization of the European integration issue through advertisements on this medium in the 2022 referendum. Note that for readability purposes, we will use "pro-side" and "pro-abolition-side" interchangeably throughout the rest of this study as designations for the side that was in favor of abolishing the opt-out, while "contra-side" and "contra-abolition-side" indicate those against the abolition. The subsequent methodological section sets out how we attempt to test our hypotheses using data from the Meta Ad Library. We focus specifically on advertisement expenditure as a proxy for the extent to which both sides are present in the campaign. We then examine the different communication strategies used by both sides through content analysis of their campaign messaging. Specifically, we use structured framing analysis, where the macro-frames are derived from the modes of justification for mentioning the EU/European integration as distinguished by Brändle et al. (2022), and the sub-frames are distinguished inductively from the content of the advertisements. After discussing our findings, the article concludes with reflections on the wider relevance of this Danish case-study, as well as its limitations and avenues for future research.

## 2. Background and Theory

### *2.1. Danish EU Referendum Experience, Issue Voting, and the Transnational Cleavage*

The Danish experience with EU-related referendums spans 50 years and nine votes in total, starting in 1972 with the vote to accede to the EU. This relatively large number stems mostly from the constitutional

requirement that transfers of sovereignty to international organizations have to be ratified by a binding popular vote if there is a majority in the Danish parliament (*Folketing*) that does not constitute a 5/6th majority (Danmarks Riges Grundlov, 1953, S. 20). In 1992, the Danes surprisingly voted against the ratification of the Treaty of Maastricht, which eventually resulted in the Edinburgh Agreement, granting Denmark four opt-outs from the Maastricht Treaty: for the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), for the CSDP, for Justice and Home Affairs (JHA), and for citizenship of the EU. This renegotiated relationship between Denmark and the EU was approved in a second referendum in 1993, but the opt-outs would become the subject of two subsequent votes before 2022. However, attempts to abolish the EMU (2000) and JHA (2015) opt-outs ended up being unsuccessful.

As such, Denmark has seen three occasions in which an EU referendum was considered unsuccessful by the pro-integration side, and all were with relatively slim margins (49.3% yes-votes for Maastricht I, 46.8% for abolishing the EMU opt-out, and 46.9% for abolishing the JHA opt-out). Scholars have questioned what could have determined these outcomes. One strand of literature argues that EU referendums at large are effectively second-order electoral contests, in which voter behavior reflects sentiments towards national politics rather than European integration (see for instance Franklin, 2002; Ivaldi, 2006). By contrast, research from Hobolt (2009, pp. 65–83) and Svensson (2002) offers evidence based on post-vote surveys that in Danish EU referendums up to 2000, voters based their choices on EU attitudes, which was also shown to be the case in the 2015 vote (Beach, 2020). Denmark has therefore been dubbed "the home of issue voting" (Beach, 2021, p. 550), where voters see the referendum issue as important enough to exclusively base their vote on, instead of other considerations such as government satisfaction (Hobolt, 2009, pp. 65–83).

Historical evidence prior to 2022 thus points to the existence of a long-term and polarized political conflict, or "cleavage" (Flora et al., 1999), vis-à-vis European integration in Danish society. Cleavage theory has historically conceptualized such societal divides along a set of dimensions related to, amongst others, religion and class (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967) based on "closed social milieus that bonded voters to parties" (Marks et al., 2021, p. 174). As time passed, and these social milieus and their institutions declined, political conflict became more value and culture-driven, aligning with issues such as immigration, lifestyle choices, and multiculturalism, effectively pitting the "new middle-class winners of the transformation of Western European societies [against] the group of losers of the very same process" (Kriesi, 1998, p. 180). More recently, Hooghe and Marks (2018) identified the rise of transnationalism as the key driver of the contemporary cultural divide, with phenomena such as immigration, international trade, and European integration increasingly transcending national borders (Hooghe et al., 2019). These developments have created a "transnational" cleavage (Hooghe & Marks, 2018) between transnationalism's losers, who see their national citizenship and way of life being devalued in the face of increasingly divergent belief and norm systems while simultaneously facing greater competition for jobs and housing, and its winners, who are left with the benefits of these processes.

### *2.2. The 2022 Defense Opt-Out Referendum Campaign*

The existence of this transnational cleavage in Denmark was recently argued by Beach (2021, p. 550) to make removing opt-outs "very difficult" and a "mission impossible," as European integration was likely to remain highly salient and thus more susceptible to issue voting than second-order dynamics (Svensson, 2002). Nevertheless, on 6 March 2022, two weeks after Russia invaded Ukraine, the Social Democratic

government announced that a defense agreement had been reached with several other parties, which stipulated an increase of defense spending to 2% of GDP and the organization of a referendum on the CSDP opt-out. The referendum had widespread support amongst parties as the Liberal Party, the Socialist People's Party, the Social Liberal Party, and the Conservative People's Party all co-signed the defense agreement, while the Liberal Alliance, the Christian Democrats, and the Independent Greens recommended a yes-vote. As such, the pro-side represented a large parliamentary majority, with the aforementioned parties making up 81% of seats in the *Folketing* (see also Brun Pedersen et al., 2023). In addition, several large associations representing Danish business (Dansk Erhverv, 2022), industry (Dansk Metal, 2022), and trade unions ("FH anbefaler et ja," 2022) campaigned for abolition, as well as other political organizations such as the European Movement ("Væk med forsvarsforbeholdet," 2022), with support from most major media outlets. In contrast, the side campaigning against abolishing the opt-out consisted solely of The Danish People's Party, the New Right Party, and the Red-Green Alliance, with limited media outlet support. As such, there was a clear discrepancy in representation between the two sides in the campaign, and Denmark's regulatory framework surrounding referendum campaign financing did not mitigate this imbalance. Referendum campaign spending is not limited in any way, and Denmark does not provide public funding to campaigning actors besides the general subsidies to parties (Ministry of the Interior and Health of Denmark, 2024), giving the pro-side full reign to use their superiority in resources to their advantage.

Initial polls after the referendum's announcement suggested that public opinion was also in favor of abolition with about 40% of the population indicating they would vote for the opt-out to be removed, as opposed to 25 to 30% against and around 30% undecided. However, this did not fully reflect the aforementioned overwhelming majority amongst political and civil society actors, and evidence from the 2015 referendum suggested that this could be cause for concern for the pro-side. Here, a similar initial level of support for the pro-integration-option eroded as the campaign progressed, since the large proportion of undecided voters broke towards the contra-side of the vote (Brun Pedersen et al., 2023). However, such developments did not unfold during the 2022 campaign, which, despite four television debates, was considered largely underwhelming by observers and analysts when compared to general elections and previous EU-related referendums: Besides a slightly narrower gap between the pro- and contra-sides in public opinion by the beginning of May, polls showed a comfortable lead for the pro-abolition-side throughout the campaign that did not wane when the roughly 35–40% of voters that was still undecided made up their mind late in the campaign (Brun Pedersen et al., 2023). A turnout of 65.8%, compared to 72% in 2015 and 87.6% in 2000, further illustrates that the referendum was less salient in the public sphere than previous EU referendums in Denmark, and in the end, over 66% of voters decided in favor of abolishing the opt-out.

One could assume that the shift in behavior of undecided voters described above is related to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia, second-order effects, and/or a sudden repositioning of the Danish electorate regarding European integration. However, panel survey data from Brun Pedersen et al. (2023) shows that voters did not take Russia's invasion into account, that issue voting remained dominant, and that the transnational cleavage endured. Instead, they resonated with arguments of the pro-side that emphasized solidarity with and responsibility towards EU-neighboring countries, as well as strategic benefits that could result from the abolition in terms of geopolitics and international cooperation regarding defense policy. As such, it seems more likely that the Russian invasion of Ukraine impacted campaigning actors, rather than voters, resulting in a strong and unified pro-abolition-side in the campaign. The actors in this camp were then able to effectively depoliticize the transnational cleavage and convince voters of the aforementioned arguments through strong and clear messaging.

### *2.3. Social Media Advertising and Referendum Campaigns: A Site of (De)Politicization?*

Voter behavior in the Danish 2022 opt-out referendum was thus likely influenced by campaigning effects, which have been argued to be larger in referendum than in traditional electoral processes (De Vreese, 2016). This is because complex issues are often reduced to a single, binary question (De Vreese & Semetko, 2004, p. 3), while voters deal with insecurity about "which actors will campaign or who will take which position" (Udris & Eisenegger, 2023, p. 1). In such a context, research has shown that elite cues can influence referendum outcomes, especially when they are strong and clear (De Vreese & Semetko, 2004; McAllister & Biddle, 2024; Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2004) and when there is a large parliamentary majority backing a specific side in a referendum (Silagadze & Gherghina, 2018). As noted by Beach (2021, p. 544), "how issues are framed by media and political elites can be very important, shifting public opinion on the issue in the short term in ways that can affect the final outcome." However, research from Hobolt (2006, pp. 641–642) indicates that Danish voters, because of their "well-informed and stable opinions about European integration," are generally less susceptible to partisan cues when it comes to EU referendums. This can offer an explanation for why undecided voters tended to end up voting against abolishing the opt-out in 2015. As the polling date drew nearer, they fell back on their preconceived notion towards the EU, instead of falling victim to persuasion attempts from campaigning actors.

This raises the question of why this did not materialize in the 2022 referendum, especially because in 2015, distribution along the campaigning sides in terms of political and civil society actors was similar. A key difference between 2015 and 2022 might have been that the latter was the first Danish vote that was fully mediatized through social media. As mentioned in the introduction, internet penetration (99%) and social media use (85.3%) were high in Denmark in 2022 (Kemp, 2022), whereas the latter was a lot lower even in 2017 (67%; see Kemp, 2017). Scholarly attention to the role of social media in referendum campaigns has proliferated dramatically in recent years, with studies clustering around cleavage referendums since the 2014 Scottish independence referendum (Baxter & Marcella, 2017; Buchanan, 2016; Langer et al., 2019; Munir, 2018; Tickell, 2014). Other cases include the aforementioned Brexit referendum (Bossetta et al., 2023; Brändle et al., 2022; Dobreva et al., 2020; Heft et al., 2017) and the Irish marriage equality (Gray, 2019) and abortion referendums (Reidy & Suiter, 2023; Statham & Ringrow, 2022). While none of these studies have distinguished a clear campaign effect in these votes (see particularly Reidy & Suiter, 2023), social media as a whole has been shown to be influential in opinion formation (Bernhard & Kübler, 2023), turnout (Morisi & Plescia, 2018), and even vote choice (Munir, 2018).

As such, social media provide a potential avenue for campaigning actors to pursue the depoliticization of the transnational cleavage-related issue of European defense cooperation in the referendum campaign, but discussing the medium in such a context might seem counterintuitive. After all, referendum campaigns are characterized by two centralized camps that are often diametrically opposed to one another, while there also exists a general belief that social media creates polarizing echo chambers in these contexts "as people purchase or follow those sources that most closely reflect their pre-existing views" (Smith, 2021, p. 20; see also Del Vicario et al., 2017). Brändle et al. (2022) even characterized social media as a site for politicization in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum, specifically for (online) social movements. Where traditional mainstream parties attempted to depoliticize the issue, these movements instead used social media as a way to bypass partisan politics and create continued and even intensified politicization of the transnational cleavage in British society. Nevertheless, we still have reason to believe that social media could also work in

the opposite direction. For one, the debate surrounding the existence of echo chambers in referendum contexts is still ongoing, with studies showing that social media can also cultivate lively exchanges within and between online communities (see for instance Arlt et al., 2019; Balcells & Padró-Solanet, 2020). More importantly, many of these studies focus specifically on social media *discourse*, i.e., engagement between users through comments, likes, and shares, but another, lesser-explored avenue arguably offers more depoliticization potential, namely social media *advertising*. Political advertising, particularly through newspaper and television ads, has a lengthy tradition in campaigns for elections (Franz & Ridout, 2007; Kaid, 2004) and referendums (Bowler & Donovan, 2002; De Vreese & Semetko, 2004). With the rise of the so-called hypermedia landscape (Lilleker et al., 2015), however, political elites increasingly turn to social media for advertising in elections (see for instance Fowler et al., 2021). While research has not yet adequately explored whether this is true in referendum contexts as well (Udris & Eisenegger, 2023), we argue that it is a relevant avenue for attempting to explain how the pro-abolition-side in the 2022 Danish opt-out referendum was able to depoliticize a cleavage-related issue. This is because it offers campaigning actors more control over the receptors of their messaging and how prominently these are being shown to them (see for instance Baviera et al., 2022) than social media discourse or television and newspaper ads.

Based on our central argument that social media advertising acted as the channel for explicit depoliticizing efforts by campaigning actors in this context, we formulate several hypotheses on *how* this unfolded. First, for such efforts to have any large-scale impact, the pro-abolition-side had to have had a larger presence in the social media campaign than the contra-side to begin with, especially considering the previously discussed effect of strong and clear elite cues on referendum outcomes. It is likely that their messaging would have resonated less with voters if they had been drowned out by contrarian voices, who we assume were more interested in politicizing European integration in order to persuade voters towards voting no. Our first hypothesis is thus as follows:

> H1: The pro-abolition-side in the 2022 Danish defense opt-out referendum had a larger presence in the social media campaign than the contra-abolition-side.

Additionally, based on the findings from Brun Pedersen et al. (2023), we expect the pro-abolition-side to use two distinct strategies when it comes to depoliticization, a *passive* one and an *active* one. The former simply entails ignoring the EU completely as a topic in their messaging, focusing instead on more universal principles and values such as the aforementioned solidarity with EU-neighboring countries or general strategic benefits that are linked with the abolition of the opt-out. The active strategy, in contrast, will see the pro-side discuss European integration and the EU as an issue, but attempt to "frame" it in a way that avoids centering the debate around "more or less EU," i.e., along the transnational cleavage. "Frames" are symbolically expressed principles or schemes of interpretation that set the context around an issue and help make sense of it (Goffman, 1975). Importantly, "employing framing allows its advocates to create resonance in target audiences" (Kuznetsova, 2018, p. 55). In identifying the frames vis-à-vis the EU, we purposely adapt the modes of justification that were identified by Brändle et al. (2022, p. 245) when examining how social media was used to politicize the transnational cleavage in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum. This distinguishes between three ways of justifying why the EU is discussed on social media posts: "problem-solving (utilitarian/efficiency), collective self-understanding (values-based), and justice/fairness (rights-based)" (Brändle et al., 2022, p. 245). If we adapt this to the issue of European integration in the context of the defense opt-out, *utilitarian* framing will focus on the impact of European integration (or the

lack of it) on, for instance, cybersecurity or defense policy/spending. *Values-based* framing will discuss the EU in terms of universal principles, norms, and/or fairness, such as solidarity, unity, democracy, or freedom, but also trust and honesty. Finally, *rights-based* framing will deal with how European integration affects sovereignty, decision-making power, and veto rights. We expect the pro-side to focus primarily on a values-based approach towards framing the EU issue, while the contra-side will likely focus more on its utility and/or how it affects Danish sovereignty and rights. Notably, these expectations differ from the findings of Brändle et al. (2022) discussed above, even though we use the same modes of justification. This is largely informed by the different outcome of the Danish referendum compared to the Brexit vote, but also the fact that we focus on social media *advertising* rather than its discourse, as the latter is arguably more conducive to polarization and politicization due to increased opportunities for interaction and engagement. Thus, we formulate two additional hypotheses:

> H2a: The pro-abolition-side in the 2022 Danish defense opt-out referendum focused less on the EU and European integration as a topic in its social media campaign messaging than the contra-abolition-side.
>
> H2b: If they did discuss the EU and European integration, the pro-abolition-side in the 2022 Danish defense opt-out referendum predominantly used a values-based approach to framing the issue, while the contra-abolition-side focused on utility- and rights-based framing.

## 3. Methods

In order to test our hypotheses and examine whether and how social media campaigning contributed to the depoliticization of a transnational cleavage-related issue in the 2022 Danish referendum, we collect data using the API of the Meta Ad Library (Meta, n.d.), which offers historical information on the level of individual advertisements of Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp in terms of their content, when they ran, who paid for them, and how much was paid. We looked at all 16,673 ads published in the period starting from 6 March 2022, the day the referendum was announced, up to the polling date, i.e., 1 June 2022. Departing from this raw dataset, we checked each ad to see if it was related to the referendum. We only withheld ads that actively campaigned in favor of one of the sides in the referendum; if the advertisement was related to other topics, or was related to the referendum but could be considered neutral (for instance only calling for people to go out and vote), it was excluded from the case selection. We ended up with 853 ads, which were then coded inductively based on what type of actor was responsible for the ad, distinguishing between independent individuals, parties (i.e., the centralized accounts), local branches of parties, youth organizations of parties, politicians, and other political organizations.

We examine the extent to which actors on both sides of the campaign were active, as well as the issues they focused on, by looking at the amount of money that was spent on these advertisements in Danish Kroner (DKK). We elect this approach over examining the absolute number of ads as the latter does not adequately reflect the extent to which a certain message is present on social media. In contrast, actors who spend more on their ad make it decidedly more visible (or at least have an intention to). It is important to note that the Meta Ad Library does not display an exact expenditure amount, but a lower and upper limit within which the true figure lies. This "error margin" scales up as the estimated amount gets higher; for instance, if true spending is around DKK 50, it is reported in the Ad Library as spending between DKK 0 and DKK 99. Then, if spending ≥ DKK 500, the distance between the lower and upper limit raises to DKK 500, which further raises

to DKK 1,000 if spending ≥ DKK 5,000, and an error margin of DKK 5,000 if spending is between DKK 10,000 and DKK 44,999. While many advertisements fall in the smaller error margins, there exists a severe risk of over- or underestimating the differences between individual expenditure amounts if one were to only take the lower or the upper limit into account. In fact, since the lower limit often includes 0, a lot of expenditure would end up not being captured. To mitigate these risks, we will take into account the average that lies between these limits. While this solution does not completely solve the measurement error here, we follow Scarrow's (2007, p. 206) argument that when it comes to comparing expenditure amounts, "big differences may be more important than details."

We then perform a content analysis to determine whether the advertisements mention the EU, and if not, what other topic they bring forward regarding the defense opt-out, if any. Ads mentioning the EU undergo structured framing analysis, which allows for distilling both the information presented to the audience on a topic-level, but also its method of presentation or meaning-making (Iyengar, 1991). We make a distinction between macro- and sub-frames, and deductively operationalize the former based on the aforementioned modes of justification that were identified by Brändle et al. (2022, p. 245). After an initial review of the content of the ads by two of the authors, we inductively determine a set of sub-frames that make up these macro-frames through a process of continuous reevaluation and in-depth discussions. One of these authors, along with a third author (who was not involved in the initial discussions), then individually coded the advertisements along these sub-frames (intercoder reliability after the initial round of individual coding = 86.16%), which resulted in additional finetuning of the sub-frame scheme. The final overview of sub-frames is discussed in the results section, while the final dataset, including the different codes, can be found in the Supplementary Material.

## 4. (De)Politicization in the Danish Defense Opt-Out Referendum: Actors, Justifications, and Framing

In order to first test H1, we examine the extent to which both sides in the campaign were active on social media in terms of expenditure on advertisements on Meta. Figure 1 illustrates the total expenditures of different actor types across the two sides in the referendum campaign, showing that the pro-campaign-side's total expenditure amounts to DKK 1,547,193. This is significantly higher than the contra-side's total of DKK 601,931. The difference seems primarily driven by the large amount of parties and individual politicians campaigning in favor of the abolition, while other actor types such as independent individuals, local parties, and youth organizations show comparatively lower contributions. For instance, individual contributions are minimal for both sides, at around DKK 900 for the contra-side and DKK 800 for the pro-side. Notably, youth organizations campaigned relatively intensely in favor of the abolition (DKK 12,300), but had an insignificant impact on the contra-side. These findings highlight a significant financial advantage for the pro campaign, thus confirming H1.

Figure 2 then shows the extent of *passive* depoliticization regarding the EU issue in the campaign by showing the percentage of the total expenditure of each side on Meta advertisements that is spent on advertisements that mention the EU or European integration. Additionally, for the advertisements that do not deal with this topic, the figure shows the percentage of the total expenditure spent on other issues in those campaign messages. Note that when an ad does not mention the EU, it can be coded as having multiple themes, and while this occurred relatively rarely, this makes the percentages reported in the figure

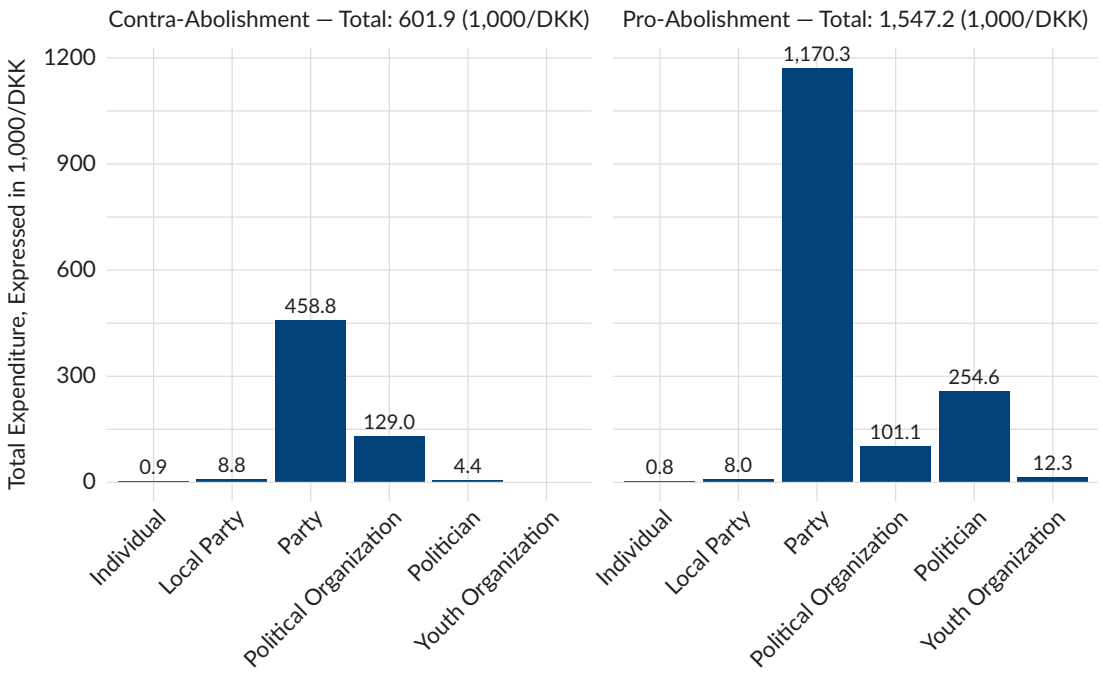


**Figure 1.** Expenditure on Meta advertising by actor type, expressed in 1,000/DKK.

not add up perfectly to 100%. If no issues/topics were present, and instead the ad was a mere call to action to vote in favor/against the abolition, the ad was coded as "None." The figure shows that both sides often mention the EU and European integration in their messaging, but it nevertheless confirms H2a as the pro-side refrained from mentioning the EU more often than the contra-side. Instead, actors in favor of the opt-out being removed often focused on geopolitics (dependence on the US, the influence of China and Russia, the relationship with and possibilities within NATO), security (the threat of Russia, cybersecurity, protecting citizens), sovereignty and participation (making an active contribution to European defense policy and cooperation, taking responsibility, the *Folketing* staying relatively sovereign when it comes to defense policy), and unity and solidarity (invoking togetherness, standing with other European countries, promoting solidarity with neighboring countries of the EU including Ukraine). In contrast, the side campaigning against the abolition focused their messaging largely on the EU. Only relatively small amounts of funds were spent on campaign messages that instead provided justifications related to finances, geopolitics (the fact that NATO should be the primary channel for international defense cooperation), possibilities that already existed within the opt-out, security, and sovereignty and participation (making the case that Denmark should retain its sovereignty when it comes to defense policy). Most of the non-EU-related ads of the contra-side were mere calls to action (i.e., the "None" category), further suggesting that this camp focused its messaging entirely on European integration.

How do actors engage with the EU and European integration in their campaign messaging if they choose to include the issue? To answer this question and thus test H2b, we coded the EU-related advertisements of these actors using the aforementioned distinction between utilitarian, values-based, and rights-based modes of framing, where multiple codes could be possible. Figure 3 shows for both sides the percentage of their total expenditure on EU-related ads that was spent on each mode of framing. Most notably, in terms of values-based framing, contrary to what was expected, the contra-side actually spends a slightly higher share of their total expenditure on EU-related ads compared to the pro-side. Additionally, the pro-side spends

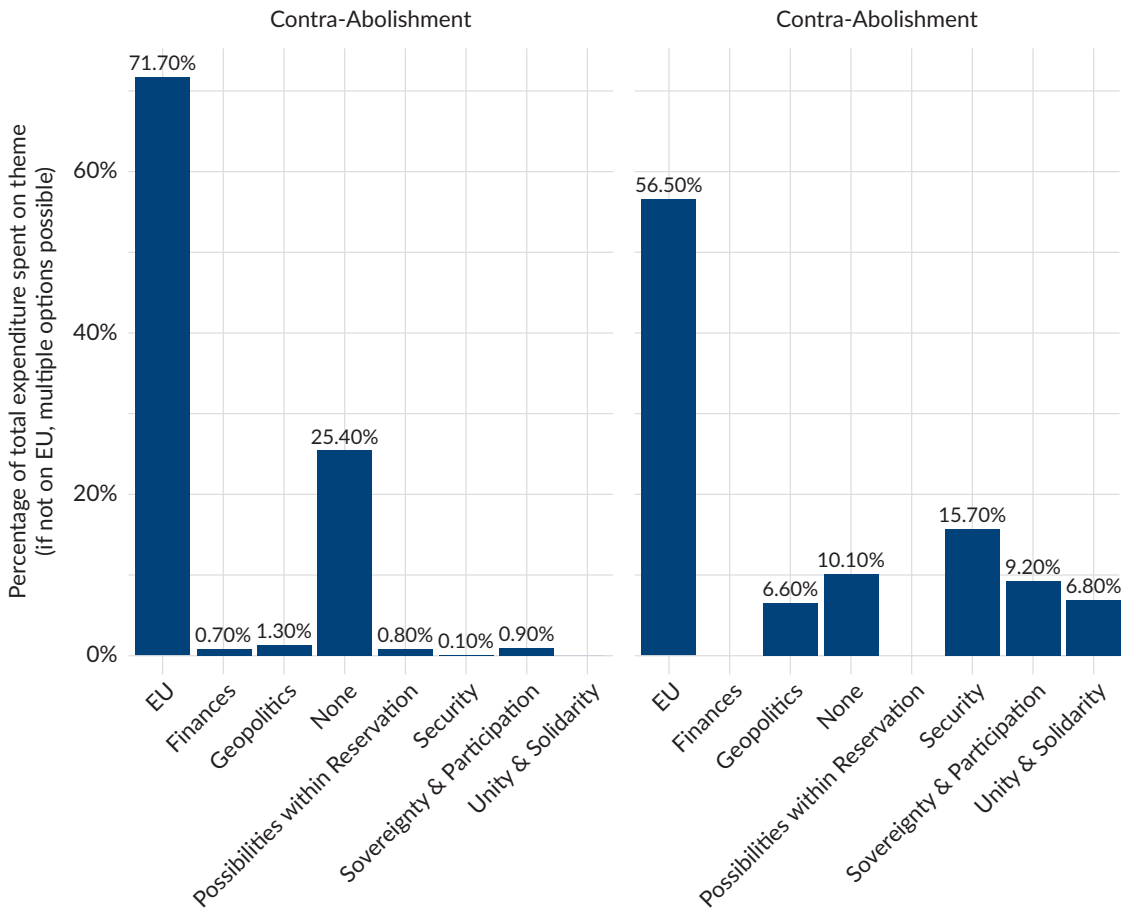


**Figure 2.** Percentage of total expenditure spent on ads relating to the EU vs. expenditure spent on other campaign messaging topics. Note: for the latter, multiple options are possible.

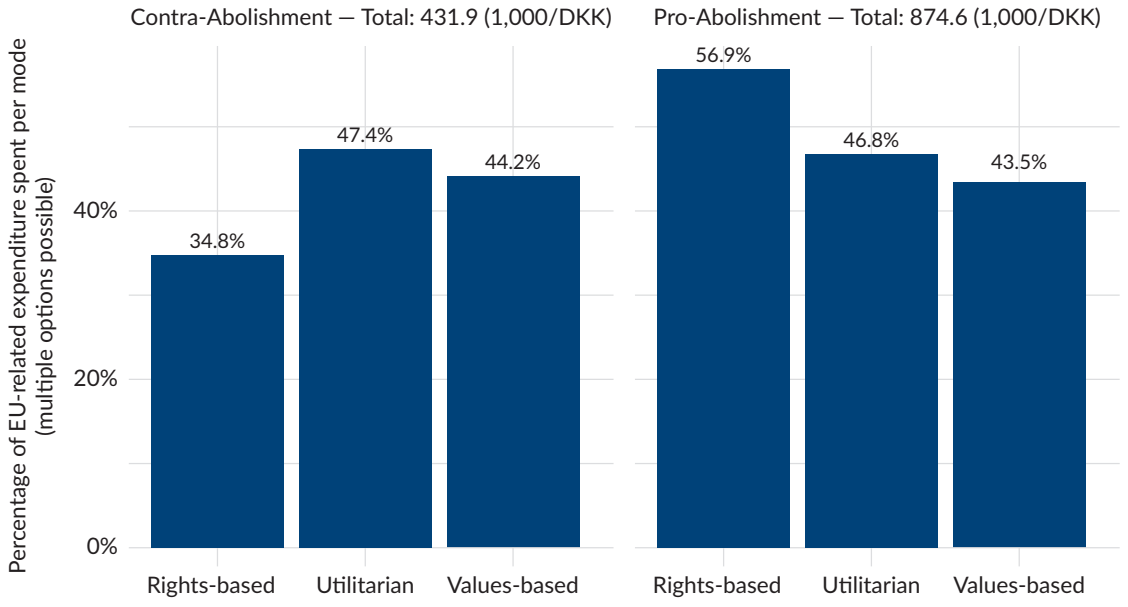


**Figure 3.** Percentage of EU-related advertisement expenditure spent on different modes of framing the EU (multiple options are possible).

almost 10 percentage points more on rights-based framing compared to the contra-side. This means that, relatively speaking, the contra-side actually seems less preoccupied with issues of sovereignty than the pro-side. At the same time, both sides relatively equally approach the EU from a utilitarian perspective.

These preliminary findings effectively reject H2b, but the sub-frames making up these macro-frames, as presented in Table 1, paint a clearer picture of how campaigning actors went about their messaging. In terms of values-based framing, the pro-side focuses primarily on unity and solidarity, emphasizing that a united Europe is better equipped to protect its core values of democracy, rule of law, and minority rights. At the same time, European collaboration allows for Denmark to take responsibility towards the EU's neighboring countries, which are often depicted as a shield against Russian aggression and other external threats. A sense of solidarity and mutual support towards these countries, as well as fellow member states, is continuously encouraged and supported, and it is emphasized that combatting tyranny and protecting freedoms are best achieved through EU-level cooperation. For the contra-side, on the other hand, their values-based framing of the EU consists mostly of pushing a fundamental distrust in the EU's intentions. The integrity of European-level actors and pro-EU Danish parties is continuously questioned, with these players being accused of lying and creating false narratives in order to "trick" the Danes into voting in favor of the abolition of the defense opt-out. At the same time, the morality and ethics of the defense policy of the EU is questioned, with campaigners often accusing the EU of breaching human rights in their military missions, particularly in Africa, while also arguing that some of these missions aim at protecting goals that

**Table 1.** Macro- and sub-frames regarding the EU and European integration in campaign messaging on social media.

| Contra-Abolition-Side | Pro-Abolition-Side |
|---|---|
| **Values-Based** | |
| Distrust towards EU and pro-EU parties' intentions | Unity, solidarity & responsibility towards EU neighbors & fellow member states in face of Russian aggression |
| Question morality and ethics of EU defense policy | Protecting freedoms through EU-level cooperation |
| **Utilitarian** | |
| EU interests do not overlap with Danish interests | Danish interests more easily achieved through EU cooperation |
| Less money available for domestic issues | Decreases dependence on the US |
| Weaken geopolitical position | Stronger Denmark is better equipped to face global threats |
| Focus on other already existing defense cooperations (e.g. NATO, UN, Joint Expeditionary Force) instead of EU | Fills gaps that NATO does not cover |
| Irreversible decision, opt-out as safeguard against unwanted future EU obligations | |
| **Rights-Based** | |
| Vote is about "more or less EU" | Vote not about "more or less EU" |
| EU as overreaching, diametrically against Danish sovereignty | Abolition results in increased Danish influence in EU decision-making vis-à-vis defense policy |
| Abolition results in mandatory participation in EU defense missions and creation of EU army | Final control remains with *Folketing* |

are detrimental to the climate. As such, some campaigners argue that a vote against the abolition is in fact a vote in favor of the climate.

Considering utilitarian framing, the contra-side focuses primarily on how the EU furthers interests that do not overlap with Danish interests. Furthering integration when it comes to defense will lead to higher military budgets and contributions to EU missions, and therefore less money for domestic issues such as welfare or combatting climate change. The actors argue that cooperation through NATO provides enough security, making it so that European cooperation is not necessary. In addition to NATO, participation in the British Joint Expeditionary Force, the German Framework Nations Concept, and the Nordic Defence Cooperation are also used as arguments why European cooperation would be redundant. Rather, leaning more towards European cooperation is argued to actually deteriorate the relationships Denmark has with strong military powers such as the US, UK, and other allies, along with a diminished participation in UN peacekeeping missions. Finally, the step towards more defense cooperation in the EU is depicted as irreversible, with the opt-out acting as a safeguard against unwanted future obligations. The pro-side, on the other hand, seems to directly interact with a lot of these claims from their opponents, arguing instead that Danish interests are continuously well protected and even easier to strive for through working with the EU. Denmark actively shapes defense initiatives and policies that can directly impact the country and the region. Additionally, a stronger Europe able to handle its own security independently helps decrease the dependence on the US, a country that might see Donald Trump get reelected (at that time). European collaboration makes Denmark stronger and better equipped to face global threats, while also protecting its values and interests. Additionally, proponents of abolishing the opt-out argue that EU defense cooperation complements rather than weakens NATO by addressing gaps that NATO does not cover, such as infrastructure, cybersecurity, and research.

Finally, in terms of rights-based framing, the contra-side focuses heavily on the question of Danish sovereignty and their decision- and veto-rights. The EU is framed as the antithesis to Danish sovereignty, and actors stress the importance of maintaining control over defense policies instead of being subordinate to European-level decisions that are overreaching. Some advertisements explicitly frame the referendum as a choice between "more or less EU": Instead of Denmark making independent decisions considering their defense policy, the EU will gain influence, mandate participation in EU military missions, and create an EU army that will forcefully deploy Danish soldiers far beyond European borders. The pro-side, then, seems to continuously be in a state of "myth-busting" and reassurance. One of the core phrases they use is that of the vote not being about "more or less EU," arguing that the EU will not receive more influence but, instead, Denmark will be able to achieve voting and veto rights in European decision-making on defense policy. Participation in missions will remain a final decision of the *Folketing*, there is no plan for an EU army, and Denmark retains control over its military contributions.

## 5. Discussion

Our results indicate, first and foremost, that the pro-side cultivated a presence in the social media campaign that was about three times larger than the contra-side, in line with H1. This is not a very surprising result considering the superiority of the former in terms of resources and campaigning actors, as discussed above. However, we can now get a sense of the importance of social media advertising within the overall campaign strategy of political parties by comparing their expenditure with their reported total campaign spending. The latter can be retrieved from the yearly financial reports they have to provide to the Ministry of Social

Affairs (Ministry of the Interior and Health of Denmark, 2019), but the aforementioned laissez-faire referendum campaign finance regulations do not require parties to provide dedicated in-depth reports. As a result, some of the parties which have clearly been actively campaigning on Meta platforms, i.e., the Social Democrats (DKK 296,652), the Danish People's Party (DKK 95,175.5), the Liberals (DKK 268,459), the Conservative People's Party (DKK 397,324.5), and the Liberal Alliance (DKK 43,397.5), do not report any expenditure regarding the referendum in their yearly financial report for 2022. Additionally, the New Right Party reports having spent only DKK 45,370 on the referendum, but their total social media advertising runs up to DKK 182,557.5, over four times as much as they had reportedly spent on the entire campaign. We can therefore not be completely sure that what is reported by the other three parties is fully accurate, but it will give us a rough indication. On the pro-side, the Social Liberal Party spent DKK 156,643.5 of its total expenditure of DKK 1,193,786 on social media advertising, or 13.1%, while the Socialist People's Party spent 30.5% (DKK 268,308 vs 879,903). On the contra-side, the Red-Green alliance spent DKK 195,267 on social media ads, compared to DKK 406,731 in total (i.e., 48%). Based on the fragmented and largely incomplete reporting, it is difficult to make sweeping conclusions regarding the importance of social media advertising within the grand campaigning strategies of political parties. One could argue that parties might not have reported all their expenditure in the official reports, making the actual share spent on these ads even lower. However, we only have data on Meta platforms, while parties could also have campaigned on Twitter (now X), YouTube, or other platforms, which would result in the reverse conclusion. All in all, we can say that social media advertising was far from a negligible aspect of parties' campaign strategy, but its true importance, including to other campaigning actors, remains largely unclear.

Nevertheless, if other avenues of campaigning were more important to these parties than social media advertising, such as newspaper or television ads, they likely offered similar messaging compared to these ads, in particular those from the pro-side. After all, our results indicate that their ads conveyed similar arguments to the ones that ended up resonating with voters (Brun Pedersen et al., 2023), suggesting that parties were effective in, at least momentarily, depoliticizing the transnational cleavage. They did this passively, first and foremost, by mentioning the EU and European integration significantly less than the contra-side, in line with H2a. Yet, the gap between the two sides in this regard (56.5% vs 71.7%), while considerable, is not as high as could be expected. This suggests that while passive depoliticization was an important strategy of the pro-side, more attention was nevertheless paid to actively framing the defense opt-out in a way that decouples it from European integration, as was hypothesized in H2b. However, on a first glance, our results go against this expectation: Both sides relatively equally approached the EU from a utilitarian perspective, but the contra-side surprisingly relied more on values-based framing than the pro-side, whereas the pro-side relied more on a rights-based framing than the contra-side. We argue that this outcome could be the result of an anticipation effect: The pro-campaign might have expected that their opponents were likely to focus heavily on the question of Danish sovereignty and their decision- and veto-rights within the EU. Evidence for this is provided by looking at the sub-frames that made up these modes of framing on the macro-level, as the pro-side adopted a "myth-busting" approach when dealing with the EU from a rights-based perspective. Furthermore, the framing analysis provided additional empirical evidence for active depoliticization efforts by the pro-side, as the sub-frames show a clear desire to refrain from discussing the opt-out in terms of "more or less EU." European integration in itself is hardly discussed in terms of it being positive or negative. Rather, in line with the findings of Brun Pedersen et al. (2023), the pro-side emphasized either the concrete benefits of the opt-outs, or the need for unity and solidarity with EU neighboring countries, as well as the responsibility to protect democratic freedoms and values.

## 6. Conclusion

Referendums are an integral part of the EU's political history, including the recent era of "polycrisis." Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 spurred Denmark to reconsider its EU defense opt-out, requiring a referendum that ultimately found overwhelming support in favor of its abolition. This was despite previous EU-related referendum experiences in which its societal transnational cleavage led to unsuccessful attempts at removing opt-outs regarding the EMU (2000) and the JHA (2015). This article explored how in the 2022 Danish referendum the pro-abolition-side, presumably under the impetus of Russia's invasion, was seemingly able to shift the balance regarding the two sides of the transnational cleavage in Danish society. More specifically, it set out to uncover whether advertising on social media contributed to a *de*politicization of a specific issue of Denmark's European integration cleavage—European defense cooperation. We hypothesized both a larger presence of the pro-side in the social media campaign, as well as the use of two distinct strategies of depoliticization by these actors: avoiding the topic of European integration (passive depoliticization), and framing the issue in ways that avoid centering the debate around "more or less EU" (active depoliticization). We mapped the advertising expenditure of the campaigning actors using data from the Meta Ad Library and analyzed their messaging through content analysis. For the latter, we used structured framing analysis, where the macro-frames distinguished between three modes of justification for mentioning the EU (Brändle et al., 2022): a utilitarian framing emphasizing the efficiency and problem-solving character of joining the EU's CSDP, a values-based framing focusing on universal principles and norms, and a rights-based framing that linked European integration with Danish sovereignty. Our results show that it is not straightforward to say that social media ads from campaigning were the main vehicle through which depoliticization was achieved, but that it was a non-negligible avenue nonetheless in which the pro-side cultivated a much larger presence than the contra-side, and used both passive and active depoliticization strategies. In the case of the latter, we found additional proof that the pro-side was successful in this regard, as the framing of the defense opt-out overlapped with the arguments that ended up resonating with voters according to research from Brun Pedersen et al. (2023).

Our findings raise questions regarding their generalizability, i.e., whether campaigning sides in other EU-related referendums or votes regarding other cleavages could effectively use similar strategies to overcome cleavage-related issues. As mentioned in the introduction, the Danish referendum, while different in scope and context, is similar to, for instance, the Brexit vote, in that they fall into the category of "constitutive issues" (i.e., the "widening" and "deepening" of the EU), which tend to provoke stronger opposition compared to more policy-related European matters such as market-making and social regulation (see Bartolini, 2005; Hoeglinger, 2016 for further discussion on these subdimensions of European integration). Both referendums should therefore have generated largely the same degree of politicization, especially since Denmark, like the UK, was considered as generally more internally divided on European integration issues compared to other EU member states (Favell & Reimer, 2021), but this was clearly not the case. It seems likely that the existence of a potentially existential threat, i.e., escalating aggression from Russia, played a fundamental role in this regard, not in terms of how voters reacted to it (as shown by the research from Brun Pedersen et al., 2023), but instead regarding the behavior of political actors. Through the prism of securitization, a large and wide coalition was formed of political parties and movements, business interests, and trade unions, all with common strategic priorities and all acutely aware of the potential implications of Russia's invasion of Ukraine for national security and EU cohesion. This strongly represented and united front on one side of the referendum campaign made it easier to convince voters of their

narratives, despite not resolving the underlying transnational cleavage. In turn, similar forces should arguably be able to reach similar outcomes in other referendums.

However, some caution is warranted, as European integration is a highly dynamic, complex, and multifaceted issue that can result in a "pattern of politicization that is more complex and less straightforward than for most other political issues" (Hoeglinger, 2016, p. 29). This observation is particularly relevant for the aforementioned constitutive issues as they "may cut across existing party alliances, while policy-related issues tend to be more firmly embedded along traditional left–right conflict lines" (Hutter et al., 2016, p. 137). An example of this can be found in the fact that in the Danish referendum, green and left-wing parties could be found on the contra-side, whereas the theoretical basis of the transnational cleavage assumes mainly radical right-wing parties mobilizing voters against further EU integration. It is therefore important to consider the specific particularities of each case alongside broader trends that may be extrapolated when future research extends its scope to similar referendums, such as the (non-binding) North-Macedonian (2018) and Moldovan (2024) EU membership referendums. Such perspectives should also take into account a clear limitation of this article, namely that its analysis only takes into account Meta platforms, which include Facebook and Instagram, but misses other popular applications such as Twitter (now X) and TikTok, as well as the Google ecosystem for online advertisements, Google Ads. Additionally, as mentioned before, the exact extent to which campaigning actors used social media advertising as an avenue within their wider campaigning strategy remains uncertain. Nevertheless, our article contributes to the cleavage literature by examining a case where depoliticization is likely to have occurred regarding a highly salient and polarized political conflict, i.e., the transnational cleavage-related issue of European defense cooperation in Danish society. It also contributed to a better understanding of the role of social media in referendums about European integration issues, showing that through political advertising, it can act as an arena of depoliticization, rather than merely as a site of polarization and politicization.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

## Supplementary Material

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

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