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**European Union Voting and the Dutch ‘Double No’: The 2005 and 2016
Referendums**

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Abstract: What caused Dutch citizens to vote ‘no’ in the 2005 and 2016 referendums? How do these referendum outcomes compare to voting patterns in European Union (EU) member states more generally? How are national-level referendums related to European integration? In a comparative analysis, we explore such questions based on information and data on two Dutch referendums, exploring the driving forces of voter opposition in light of more general theories of EU-related voting. We find that perceived threats to identity and culture mattered in the ‘Dutch double no’, while economic cost-benefit calculations and the actual contents of the votes played a less dominant role.

Keywords: Comparative policy analysis; referendums; EU voting; public policy; European integration

1. Introduction

While referendums are ‘natural’ to direct democratic institutional settings, they can also be of a high relevance in representative democracies, where policies are generally enacted by elected representatives. For the case of the Netherlands, it can be of utmost importance to see what caused outcomes in the case of referendums, as they are very rare events in this political system. There have been important initiatives for the introduction of different types of referendums in the Netherlands in the past decades, with some generating just temporary constructs. The latest attempt for this was in 2019, with a bill aimed to introduce a (binding) corrective referendum.⁴ Although this is still in the making, opposition within the Dutch government on the issue is present; arguments against are that the choice option in a referendum (voting ‘yes’ or ‘no’) simplifies the complexity of political decisions and may also increase societal

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⁴ This referendum allows citizens to reject a law *ex post* (when it has already been enacted by the House of Representatives and Senate). See <https://www.nederlandsegrondrechten.nl/dossiers/dossier-referendum>.



disequilibria. Moreover, the relatively high threshold of five million voters to defeat a referendum can be problematic¹. Among the most meaningful referendums in the Netherlands were the 2005 (consultative)² and the 2016 (advisory) referendums³. Both were turned down by the electorate.

In the 2005 referendum, held on 1 June, Dutch voters declined ratification of the European Constitutional Treaty, a document which would replace existing treaties within the Europe Union (EU) to move towards an actual constitution. It aimed to clarify the nature, objectives, and values of the Union, consequently specifying the boundaries to its powers; it also aimed to enhance the effectiveness and modes of operation of its institutions⁴. Given the wide-ranging repercussions of the Treaty, several EU states were to hold referendums on its introduction. The Netherlands was among them, approving in 2004 a bill to hold a consultative referendum -- even before the Dutch parliament had decided on the matter. Just before the Netherlands, French voters had, on 29 May 2005, turned down the Treaty in a national referendum⁵. Thereafter, however, many EU state parliaments did ratify the Treaty.

Turnout in the Dutch 2005 referendum was 63.3 percent; votes against were 61.5, whereas those in favour amounted to 38.5 percent⁶. Despite being consultative, the unequivocal 'no' to the referendum induced the government to withdraw domestic ratification of the treaty.

What factors might have influenced Dutch voters to oppose this project? Why did the electorate in one of the founding states of the European Economic Community, EEC (and later the EU) refuse the European Constitutional Treaty? Such questions are interesting, not least in view of trends of Euroscepticism that have plagued Europe. This was notably the case after the global financial crisis and the subsequent instability in the region generated by the sovereign debt crisis. These events were followed by an anti-EU sentiment, possibly also influencing the Brexit referendum.

In 2016, Dutch voters participated in another important referendum regarding European integration; again, its outcome was 'no'. This latter referendum was initiated because since 1 July 2015, Dutch voters were allowed to request an advisory referendum, based on the Dutch consultative referendum law (Advisory Referendum Act). It gave the right to 300'000 Dutch citizens to initiate a non-binding referendum on Dutch laws and treaties after these had been approved by both chambers of parliament. With this, it created a veto possibility for the electorate⁷. The referendum law was initiated soon after the 2005 referendum took place, but it was only approved by the parliament and senate in 2013. It was in effect between 2015 and 2018 and aimed to improve some aspects of the previous 'temporary', consultative referendum law⁸. Despite its abolition in 2018 on grounds that it did not meet governmental expectations due to controversy surrounding its method of application and different interpretations of

¹ https://www.eerstekamer.nl/wetsvoorstel/35129_initiatiefvoorstel_van_raak.

https://www.parlement.com/id/vkvmknrk9vy2/correctief_referendum.

² A consultative referendum is non-binding, held at the government's initiative. See https://www.parlement.com/id/vkgejl6266ux/soorten_referenda or https://www.parlement.com/id/vh8lnhrskl1ys/raadplegend_referendum

³ An advisory referendum is non-binding, held at citizens' initiative. E.g., see https://www.parlement.com/id/vkgejl6266ux/soorten_referenda.

⁴ On main aims of the treaty, see <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/Europe2004/textes/2005-01-10-brochure-constitution-en-v02.pdf>. For an in-depth analysis of this referendum, e.g. see Lucardi (2005).

⁵ On consequences of the French and Dutch referendum outcomes, see Toonen et al. (2005) or Startin and Krouwel (2013).

⁶ For more figures, see https://www.europa-nu.nl/id/vgvqpnqs5qbn/referendum_over_eu_grondwet_in_nederland.

⁷ On 'the rise and fall' of the Dutch referendum law, see Van der Meer et al. (2022).

⁸ For example, the new consultative referendum law reduced the required signature threshold by half. And allowed signatures to be gathered on streets and online via private websites. See <https://www.meerdemocratie.nl/dutch-consultative-referendum-law-overview>.

results¹, the advisory referendum rendered some important (albeit controversial) outcomes during its three years of existence.

The first referendum in this context was in 2016 and concerned the association agreement between the EU and Ukraine². It would conclude a long negotiation process to promote deeper political ties, stronger economic links, and respect for common values between the two parties, notably by the establishment of a free trade area (DCFTA)³. The referendum aimed to verify whether Dutch citizens were for or against the legal provisions supporting the EU association agreement (Jakobs 2016a). Voter turnout in this referendum was 32.3 percent, with 61 percent thereof being opposed and 38.2 percent in favour. In view of this result, the Dutch government felt compelled to reject the EU-Ukraine deal (to a certain embarrassment of the Dutch government and its representatives in EU institutions, who had clearly supported the agreement).

The choice of Dutch voters to vote ‘yes’ or ‘no’ in these referendums was influenced by a variety of factors. While this could have simply been the contents of the two votes, it is likely that individual or socio-economic characteristics of voters (such as their level of education, age, gender or income) might have played a role. Cultural or political factors, such as voter political identity, attitudes towards European integration or the Euro, assessments of domestic government performance or the influence of campaigning and media, might also be relevant. Research on public support for the European Constitutional Treaty – which later evolved, in a shortened and adapted version, into the 2009 Treaty of Lisbon⁴ -- provided various interpretations of the ‘no’ notably by French and Dutch voters. Whereas the issue at stake in the referendum was the same (i.e., ratification of the Constitutional Treaty), Dutch and French voters may have had different incentives to decline the referendum (e.g., see Guiraudon, 2005)⁵.

For the Dutch case, information such as that contained in the 2005 Dutch Referendum Study was helpful for empirical analyses of the subject (see Aarts & Van der Kolk, 2006)⁶. Lubbers (2008) conducted a multivariate logistic regression aiming to provide insights into the driving forces for the ‘no’. By comparison, there seems to be comparatively little (empirical) academic research on the Ukraine referendum⁷. However, it is possible to find data to discern some trends in voting behaviour that allow comparison with the 2005 vote.

This manuscript explores these two Dutch referendums, aiming to distil the most important arguments as to why they were rejected by voters and how they might connect to each other. We also aim to embed results into theorizing on European integration and voting behaviour on EU-related votes more generally. Building on such theoretical approaches, but adding to this work by our analysis applied specifically to the two Dutch cases, our paper explores the applicability of theoretical concepts to the two Dutch referendum outcomes. We will resort to Dutch studies alongside more generally available work. While there certainly are important differences between the two referendums, we aim to discern whether common threads are observable in the voting behaviour and whether the theoretical concepts

¹ See https://www.parlement.com/id/vh8lnhrsk1yq/raadgevend_referendum.

² For legal background analysis, see Nijeboer (2005); also see Van den Akker (2021).

³ See for example <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eastern-partnership/ukraine/>

⁴ On differences between the two treaties, see <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/5/the-treaty-of-lisbon>.

⁵ The French case is explored in depth, for example, by Berezin (2006), Brouard and Tiberj (2006) and Milner (2006).

⁶ The 2005 Dutch Referendum Study was a survey conducted by the organizers of the 2006 Dutch Elections Studies and supported by the Dutch Department of Internal Affairs (see Aarts and Van der Kolk 2006). It was based on representative samples of the Dutch electorate and included a pre- and post-referendum panel study. The first one consisted of five independent weekly sub-samples. 1,568 respondents participated in the pre-referendum study and 1,284 in the one conducted after the referendum. The survey was conducted among large households, with two-thirds of the interviews via computer-assisted, web-based interviewing and the remaining third via telephone. Respective data were gathered in April and May 2005 – close to the actual referendum date.

⁷ The legal background and context of this referendum are discussed by Van der Loo (2016).

generally presented are applicable to these two specific cases. Were the votes and their outcomes simply a ‘sign of the times’, opposition to the actual issues discussed, or did they conceal broader trends of dissatisfaction with the EU? Or were the referendums hardly related to EU developments? We will aim to provide more insights into such aspects.

Our paper is structured as follows. The subsequent section provides an overview of literature and theoretical approaches focused on some of the most common explanatory factors for citizens to vote ‘no’ in EU-related votes. In section three, we apply such theories explicitly to the 2005 and 2016 Dutch referendums to see to what extent more general theorizing may be applicable in these cases. The fourth section compares results of the two referendums and discusses the way they seem to have been perceived and interpreted by the electorate. Our comparison allows us to assess whether the ‘no’ votes reflect specific and independent contexts of each referendum or whether there are underlying factors connecting them to other driving forces. Finally, we conclude with a summary of -- and reflections on -- our findings.

2. Votes on European Integration: Literature and Theoretical Approaches

Several theoretical approaches seek to explain voting behaviour in EU-related votes, including referendums (e.g., Inglehart et al., 1991; Janssen, 1991; Gabel, 1998; Hug, 2002; Carey, 2002; Garry et al, 2005; Hooghe, Marks & Wilson, 2002; De Vreese, 2004; de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2005; Hooghe & Marks 2005; EPRS 2016; Atikcan, 2021)¹. A direct comparison of these approaches is, however, not straightforward, as they differ both in terms of analytical framework and methods used. Nonetheless, it is possible to group approaches into five main categories that might also be relevant to explain the two Dutch ‘no’ votes: political awareness, economic (utilitarian) considerations, identity-related factors, national-level political dynamics, and the influence of referendum campaigns. Tables 1a and 1b group these approaches into respective categories, with Table 1a mainly focused on authors and Table 1b on potential explanatory factors.

Table 1a. Overview of Three Explanatory Categories for the Dutch ‘No’

Issue-voting attitude factors	aspects or	Economic calculations of costs and benefits (both personal and national) from closer EU integration (Hooghe & Marks, 2005) or differences in economic welfare (Gabel, 1998) Perceived cultural threat from closer EU integration (Hooghe & Marks, 2003 & 2005; Carey, 2002) and anti-immigration sentiment (de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2005) Identity (national attachment, exclusive national identity, or multiculturalism) (Hooghe & Marks, 2005) Effects of referendum content on EU integration (Garry et al., 2005)
Second-order domestic political concerns	effects or	Dissatisfaction with the government - national policies (Gabel, 1998; Hooghe & Marks, 2005; Hooghe, Marks & Wilson, 2002; Garry et al. 2005). Partisanship (Gabel, 1998) or political cues (Hooghe & Marks, 2005; Steenbergen et al. 2007) Political orientation (Hooghe & Marks, 2005; Hooghe, Marks & Wilson, 2002)
Referendum related factors	campaign-	Framing of complex or emotional issues (Atikcan, 2021) Stronger agenda-setting power and influence of ‘no’ campaign (Atikcan, 2021)

¹ On contents and characteristics of European referendums more generally, see Dehousse (2006), Hobolt (2009) and Mendez et al. (2014). On direct democratic patterns, notably see Qvortrup (2013).

Table 1b. Reasons for the Dutch ‘No’, Clustered by Explanatory Factors

Political awareness	Cognitive mobilisation (Gabel, 1998, 335; Inglehart, Rabier, and Reif 1991, 147; Janssen 1991, 467)
Economic (utilitarian) factors	Economic calculations of costs and benefits (both personal and national) from closer EU integration (Hooghe & Marks, 2005); differences in economic welfare (Gabel, 1998)
Identity	Perceived cultural threats from closer EU integration (Hooghe & Marks, 2003 & 2005; Carey, 2002) and anti-immigration sentiments (de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2005); identity (national attachment, exclusive national identity, multiculturalism) (Hooghe & Marks, 2005)
National-level political arguments	Partisanship (Gabel, 1998) or political cues (Hooghe & Marks, 2005) Division within the government as regards EU integration (Hooghe & Marks, 2005) Political orientation (Hooghe & Marks, 2005; Hooghe, Marks & Wilson, 2002)
Referendum campaign	Framing of complex or emotional issues: stronger agenda-setting power and influence of ‘no’ campaign (Hobolt and Brouard, 2011; Atikcan, 2021)

Various hypotheses have been explored in national-level EU referendum contexts and often compared to results generated by analyses of other referendums. As Table 1a demonstrates, Garry et al. (2005) use the term ‘issue-voting aspects’ to refer to citizens’ attitudes (supporting or opposing EU integration): voting behaviour can be influenced by various aspects, such as voters’ understanding of EU integration, political and economic developments, potential (future) security-related European issues, or EU membership and further plans for expansion. The substance of the referendum and how it affects such integration processes can often be rationally calculated. Thus, it is “primarily voters’ views on the development of the EU that drive voting in a referendum on an EU treaty” (Garry et al., 2005: 203). Moreover, attitudes towards EU integration can be affected by political awareness, economic (utilitarian) considerations, or identity.

Political awareness is a voter's knowledge about European integration and its consequences. Gabel (1998), using the term ‘cognitive mobilisation’, found that a high level of political awareness and well-developed skills in terms of political communication and understanding were generally associated with larger support for EU integration. Similarly, a constituent’s level of education was found to be relevant, in the sense that highly educated citizens could adapt to increased occupational competition as a result of a liberalized EU labour market. Thus, highly educated and informed citizens were found to be more likely to support EU integration.

Similarly, de Vreese (2004), building on concepts developed earlier by Ronald Inglehart (e.g., Inglehart et al. 1991), found empirical evidence for the assumption that persons with higher ‘EU knowledge’ and those more familiar with the EU were also more in favour of European integration. This corresponds with the finding that citizens with lower degrees of awareness feel more threatened by European integration (Inglehart et. al., 1991, 147; Janssen, 1991, p. 467).

By comparison, utilitarian or economic considerations include calculations of individual-level or more general costs and benefits of European integration, including individual gains and expected advantages for one’s member state. Such factors have been found to affect the general attitude of citizens on EU-related issues (e.g., Gabel, 1998; Hooghe & Marks, 2005). Calculations and expectations, however, generally depend on the economic welfare level of citizens (Gabel, 1998): different socio-economic groups experience costs and benefits of specific European developments in different ways. Accordingly, ‘income’ has been found to be a potentially strong explanatory factor in analyses focused on public opinion and European integration, as material costs and benefits shape citizens’ attitudes (Gabel, 1998,

p. 336). Hence, citizens expecting economic benefits to materialize from European integration are also more likely to support it (De Vreese, 2004, p. 12; Hooghe & Marks, 2005, p. 422).

Moreover, the perceived erosion of national identity and of welfare systems has been found to constitute a strong determinant of voter attitudes (Hooghe & Marks, 2005, p. 437). A feeling of attachment to a national identity and the perception of a threat to one's own culture, especially in terms of anti-immigration sentiments (de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2005), are likely to determine support for EU integration and thus, voting behaviour in EU-related referendums¹.

However, there can also be 'second-order effects' related to a referendum (Gerry, et al., 2005) citizens' attitudes towards their national government (or its policies) can impact voting on EU-related referendums. According to this explanatory strand, citizens' vote choices on EU-related issues will not always reflect their attitudes towards the EU, but rather broader satisfaction or dissatisfaction with domestic parties and the performance of their own government. Other authors have also explored this, assuming that citizens' political orientation and their affiliation with political parties co-determine their vote. This includes the position of political parties on EU integration in general or on the specific content of a referendum (Gabel, 1998; Hooghe, Marks & Wilson, 2002; Hooghe & Marks, 2005). As Garry et al. (2005: 205) state: "If the referendum is rejected, the outcome may then be overturned by the parliament". Thus, even if they focus on EU-related issues, referendums can be seen as an opportunity for citizens to evaluate domestic government performance.

Finally, another factor not broadly theorized, but deserving attention, focuses on campaign-related aspects.² According to Hobolt and Brouard (2011) and Atikcan (2015, 2021), campaigns have a decisive opinion formation or priming function, affecting the way citizens perceive issues contained in a referendum. Especially for votes related to the complexity of the EU institutional framework or more emotionally loaded topics (such as those related to identity), campaigns can play an important role in terms of narratives and the framing of referendums (Atikcan, 2015, 2021). Additionally, the 'no' side in campaigns often has a relative advantage and more agenda-setting power, as it merely has to "raise doubts" amongst voters on specific aspects of the referendum (Atikcan, 2021: 115); it does not need to develop convincing arguments supporting the referendum's contents. Within such strands of reasoning, however, individual or socio-economic explanations are not generally seen as separate explanatory factors, but interpreted as characteristics potentially affecting citizen perceptions, thus underlying other factors within the main explanatory categories given in Tables 1a and 1b.

Next to more general trends, the 2005 and 2016 referendums are likely to have had specific and independent causes leading to voters' 'no', including socio-economic conditions at the time of the vote, and of course the referendum's actual contents. Nevertheless, both referendums were connected to processes of European integration. Hence, it is interesting to see to what extent more general trends of theorizing on EU voting can be applicable to these two Dutch EU-related referendums.

3. The 2005 Constitutional Treaty Referendum

In the Netherlands, the level of support for the EU was fairly stable -- and in fact rather high -- in the years immediately preceding the referendum on the European Constitutional Treaty. Eurobarometer

¹ On this, also see Carey (2002), Hooghe & Marks (2005) or de Vreese et al. (2005).

² Steenbergen et al. (2007) focus on the role of 'cues' in relations between elites and the larger public, also in the context of the French and Dutch 2005 referendums. For how European issues were reported in Dutch media in the 2005 referendum, see Kleinnijehuis et al. (2005).

data, for example, show that the share of Dutch citizens judging the EU to be ‘a good thing’ was between roughly 60 percent (fall 2003) and 77 percent (spring 2005), respectively. Similarly, the share of Dutch citizens indicating their country was benefitting from EU membership was 67 percent in fall 2001. A value that decreased to 54 percent by fall 2003, before increasing again to above 60 percent by spring 2006.¹ Hence, general support for the EU was fairly widespread in the Netherlands when the 2005 referendum was held (see Figure 1).

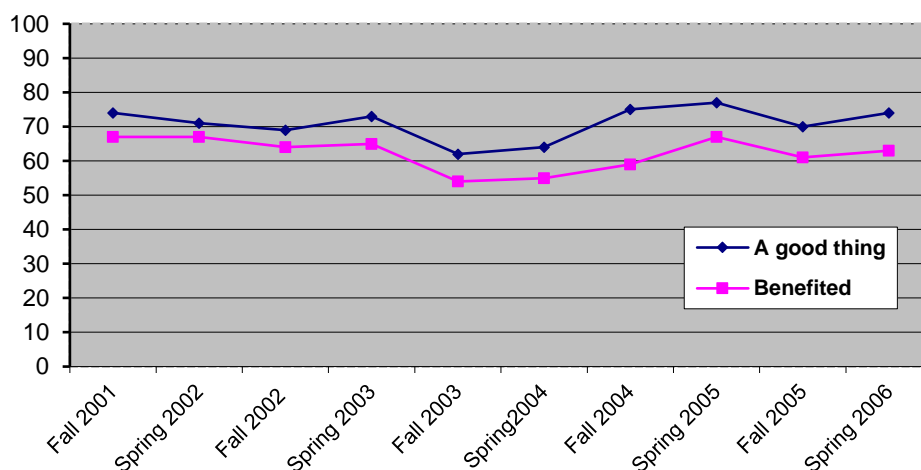


Figure 1. Perceptions of the Benefits of European Union Membership, Netherlands, Fall 2001 to Spring 2006

Note: The Eurobarometer questions were: Q1: “Taking everything into consideration, would you say that (your country) has on balance benefited or not from being a member of the European Community (Common Market)?” Q2: “Generally speaking, do you think that (your country’s) membership in the European Community (Common Market) is a good thing, a bad thing or neither good nor bad?”

Sources: Eurobarometer 56.2, 57.1, 58.1, 59.1, 60.0, 61.0, 62.0, 63.4, 64.2 and 65.0.

Nonetheless, the generally positive attitude towards the EU may also have contained elements of lower satisfaction not immediately discernible from such figures².

It was in 2005 that Dutch citizens were for the first time asked to directly express their opinion on an EU Treaty by means of a referendum and decide whether the Union should ratify the European Constitutional Treaty (Ezlinga, 2005: 88). According to some authors, this may have created a sense that the vote was on the future of the European integration process more generally (Cuperus, 2005). What were Dutch voters’ main concerns when casting their votes in 2005? Which of the factors presented and discussed in literature on European integration may have been most relevant to this vote?

Empirical research has found that Dutch no-voters in 2005 were predominantly female, and often members of young, low-educated, lower class and low-income groups (Van der Kolk and Aarts, 2005: 185; Social and Cultural Planning Office of the Netherlands 2005, p. 29; Cuperus, 2005, p. 2). Results of these studies largely correspond with earlier findings demonstrating that similar Dutch population groups were less in favour of Dutch EU membership than other segments of Dutch society. According to such findings, females, older citizens, low-education and low-income groups exhibited more negative attitudes regarding EU membership compared to other Dutch citizens (Social and Cultural Planning Office of the Netherlands 2003, p. 17; 2004, p. 22). Accordingly, Dutch no-voters, during the European Constitutional Treaty referendum, were found to be similar in demographic and socio-economic terms

¹ Figures are based on Eurobarometer surveys 56.2 to 65.0.

² For more detailed data, see European Commission (2006).

to previously ‘Euro-sceptic’ segments of the Dutch population. Nonetheless, authors do not necessarily agree that gender or age were indeed crucial factors affecting vote choice in 2005. For instance, in his study, Lubbers (2008) claims the only significant individual-level determinant was the level of education (found to be clearly negatively correlated to voting ‘no’).

Beyond individual-level characteristics, scholars have focused on the effects of contextual circumstances on individual voter preferences. By comparing votes in different Dutch municipalities, for example, Tammes and Oude Nijhuis (2011) show that the general level of disposable income of a municipality and its rates of unemployment, the dominant religion, proximity to the Dutch border, population density (including the extent of urbanization), and the presence of non-Western immigrants were among crucial contextual factors affecting the strength of the ‘no’ vote in Dutch municipalities. Nonetheless, the authors also conclude that based on their estimates, even if turnout rates had been different, “the Treaty had hardly any chance of getting approved” (p. 464). According to the authors, the Treaty was more clearly rejected in municipalities that had a higher turnout. This suggests that individual-level characteristics are unlikely to have mattered for the 2005 ‘no’. Explanations would need to be sought in other theoretical assumptions presented above, such as those related to levels of political knowledge and awareness, general economic circumstances, identity or national-level political arguments.

Among the main factors affecting support for enhanced European integration, as discussed above, are utilitarian calculations, since citizens’ voting preferences may notably depend on (economic) cost-benefit reflections. According to this line of thought, the Constitutional Treaty would have affected people from various socio-economic backgrounds in different ways. Generally, the Dutch economy was rather stagnant in 2005. The then centre-right government of the Netherlands seemed divided and with this, somewhat weakened. Moreover, a given dissatisfaction with the Euro and with the fact that the Netherlands was one of the main EU net contributors was widespread (e.g., Cuperus 2005: 2; Taggart 2005: 3). Another potentially important factor was a perception among voters that the Dutch social security system would be negatively affected by the adoption of a European Constitution. But some studies found that utilitarian (or economic) considerations were generally not -- or at least not directly - related to vote choice in 2005 (Vollaard & Boer, 2006; Lubbers, 2008).

Dutch citizens, however, tended to be concerned about some broader trend and the effects of EU integration. For example, rejection of a potential future EU constitution may have been a result of broader dissatisfaction among Dutch voters with the general pace and direction of EU integration, as there was a given dissatisfaction with the Euro, with EU enlargement and notably, on-going negotiations with Turkey on potential EU membership (Aarts & Kolk 2006, p. 244; Toonen et. al. 2005, p. 6; Cuperus 2005, p. 3). This was combined with a sense that such developments had been ‘imposed’ on citizens (Crum, 2005).

One of the main concerns was related to themes such as immigration and identity (Lubbers, 2008). Potential effects of Turkish EU membership was one of these. Vote choice in the referendum may also have been a reaction to general regional and global developments, including effects of globalization and a sense that the EU could not ‘shield’ citizens from its consequences (Cuperus, 2005; Lubbers, 2008). Such themes caused opposition to, rather than support for, the Constitutional Treaty in what otherwise was an EU member state with a public supportive of European integration (see Figure 1). Intensification of European integration and potential expansion of EU membership are hence likely to have affected the ‘no’.

The prospect of possible Turkish EU membership was also salient in domestic political discussions. This very issue, in fact, led the conservative Dutch politician Geert Wilders, then member of the right-wing Dutch People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), to leave the party and establish his own 'Freedom Party'. Wilders later became internationally known for his strong anti-immigration (and in fact, anti-Islamic) stance, generating strong criticism within the Netherlands and beyond. Throughout the referendum campaign, Wilders emphasized potential unfavourable consequences of Turkish EU membership (Kleinnijenhuis et al. 2005, p. 131).

Issues related to ethnic diversity and EU immigration policies can be important in Dutch domestic politics. Several Dutch citizens at the time seemed to be dissatisfied with the way the EU dealt with immigration-related aspects, claiming it should implement stricter rules (Cuperus 2005, p. 4; Keohane 2005). However, according to De Vreese (2004), EU immigration policies at the time were likely less relevant than the rather disparaging attitudes towards immigrants. Clearly, how citizens perceive immigrants is closely related to how they distinguish their own national identity from that of others. De Vreese found empirical support for the hypothesis that Dutch citizens having negative attitudes towards immigrants were more likely to also reject the idea of further European integration -- and with this, of a European Constitution (De Vreese, 2004, pp. 6, 12).

In fact, for the Dutch 2005 case, several authors have demonstrated that voters feared a definite European Constitution would lead to the gradual replacement of their national identity in favour of a European identity (Cuperus 2005, p. 3; Taggart 2005, p. 3; Van der Kolk & Aarts 2005, p. 193). Related to this, citizens fearing their social security system might get negatively affected, or even disappear, were much more likely to vote 'no' (Van der Kolk & Aarts, 2005, p. 192).

Moreover, Lubbers (2008) found a strong negative correlation between levels of (political) education and the casting of a negative vote in 2005. However, this can partly be explained by the length of the document voters had to decide on: in essence, citizens had to "vote on a 341-page treaty" aiming to establish a constitution for Europe. This was for many voters simply a "colossal, abstract text" (Lubbers, 2008).

In addition, drawing on earlier theoretical insights, it can be assumed that the prospect of success in a more competitive EU labour market -- possibly further intensified by enlargement -- influenced voters' perspectives concerning the perceived benefits of European integration. One can extrapolate this to the expected benefits of a new European Constitution. However, some highly educated people might have had negative emotions towards enhanced European integration and a strengthened EU, but were more reluctant to admit this (Toonen et al. 2005, pp. 13).

Based on earlier analyses, the outcome of the 2005 referendum may hence have been a reflection of a fear of further EU integration, of uncertainty brought about by the 2004 EU expansion, and potentially, the addition of even more EU members in the future. In this vein, the Dutch 'no' in 2005 was affected more by anti-immigration and identity perceptions than, for example, economic considerations (Lubbers, 2008). Accordingly, voting 'no' likely was less an expression of negative sentiments towards the European Constitution than opposition against other, specific aspects of European integration, which to some appeared to be a non-stable, non-transparent, and somewhat unpredictable project. This has opened up room for manoeuvre for nationalist and right-wing populist counter-mobilization strategies to the referendum (Cuperus, 2005).

To a certain extent, the Dutch ‘no’ likely also reflected developments in domestic politics more generally.¹ A large portion of Dutch society at the time, according to the ‘second order approach’, may have simply seen the EU as an ‘extension’ of domestic politics (Toonen et al., 2005, p. 12). Similarly, identification with a domestic political party advocating a ‘no’ campaign may have led voters to also oppose the European Constitution (Lubbers, 2008). Otjes & Voerman (2016) provide a detailed overview of positions of Dutch political parties on EU treaty reform over time, demonstrating that several political parties had also positioned themselves against the European Constitutional Treaty².

It is certainly conceivable that Dutch voters used the referendum to demonstrate their discontent with the Dutch government (Keohane, 2005). In their empirical analysis, Aarts and Van der Kolk (2005, p. 200) find an association between votes against the Constitutional Treaty and negative sentiments towards the Dutch government, although the assessed effect is limited. Lubbers (2008), however, finds distrust of the Dutch parliament to be one of the main determinants of the 2005 Dutch ‘no’.

Similarly, some researchers have stated that the success of the right-wing, nationalist politician Pim Fortuyn in the 2002 Dutch national elections essentially amounted to a revolt that was driven by citizens’ dissatisfaction with the ‘political establishment’ (e.g., Cuperus, 2005: 3). According to Cuperus (2005), the Netherlands at the time of the 2005 referendum was more or less in a trust and identity crisis. Accordingly, since the established, partially unpopular, government supported the ‘yes’ campaign, ‘political cynicism’ could have been a main motivation for voters to reject the European Constitutional Treaty. However, these findings contrast with those of other authors (e.g., van der Brug 2003; van der Brug and Fennema 2003) who find that the ‘Fortuyn revolt’ cannot simply be explained in terms of a protest against the political establishment, but was rather caused by the policy issues the position addressed (which had largely been neglected by the ‘establishment’). Nonetheless, in a global comparison, political trust in the Netherlands was still quite high at the time of the 2005 referendum, as was the share in public opinion being supportive of European integration.

4. The 2016 Referendum on the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement

With a turnout of about 30 percent, only a small portion of Dutch voters actively participated in the referendum on the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement³. Somewhat surprisingly, the threshold needed for this consultative referendum to be valid – 30 percent – was in fact reached. Several voters seemed to have assumed that the required threshold would not be met, and hence, some deliberately abstained. Others thought that as it constituted an advisory referendum, politicians could simply ignore its result, and hence, abstained. Besides, some voters simply had little interest in the issue and a low level of knowledge about the substance of the referendum (Van der Kolk, 2016). However, it is flawed to assume this attitude would have provided more room for those in favour of the referendum to actually affect its outcome. According to Van der Kolk (2016), opponents of the association treaty voted less frequently, as a share of the total, than referendum supporters did. Consequently, with a higher turnout, a majority would still have rejected the agreement. What could have driven voters’ decisions to reject this referendum?

¹ It might have demonstrated a ‘political crisis of the Netherlands’ and was potentially aimed against a (perceived) implicit ‘imperial overstretch of the European project’ (Cuperus, 2005).

² Otjes and Voermans (2016, table 1) show that only parties in the center of the political spectrum supported the Constitutional Treaty, joined by ‘Groenlinks’ (the Greens), whereas the remaining political parties were opposed. Crum (2007) describes the alignment of political parties on the Constitutional Treaty and how the mainstream parties did endorse it.

³ Jakobs (2016a) discusses potential reasons for this exceptionally low turnout rate.

Regarding individual-level characteristics, research has found that young voters went less to the polls in the 2016 referendum than older voters, but vote choice itself did not depend on age (Jakobs 2016b). Men voted more frequently than women did (in fact, with a six percent average difference between these categories). Generally, highly educated citizens voted less, but were more inclined to support the association agreement. However, many voters focused less on the substance of the referendum, but linked it with corruption problems in Ukraine and a potential future Ukrainian EU membership (Jakobs, 2016b).

The 2016 referendum likely was influenced by similar trends as the earlier 2005 vote: a fear that Ukraine might eventually become an EU member, and hence, concerns related to the freedom of movement of citizens within the EU.¹ While voters with established negative attitudes towards the EU likely also disliked the European Constitutional Treaty (Van der Kolk and Aarts, 2005: 189), this also applied to the prospect of an association agreement with Ukraine. According to Jakobs (2016b), the 2016 referendum was primarily a vote on Ukraine and not so much on the EU or the actual agreement itself. A share of 34.1 percent of the no-votes, in his analysis, were driven by the prevalence of corruption in Ukraine, seen by voters as potentially affecting the Dutch contributions to the agreement. If the referendum can be interpreted as a vote about the EU at all, it was largely against the prospect of Ukraine joining the EU, with 16.6 percent in the author's sample voting 'no' because they were concerned about future Ukrainian EU membership. Among the respondents, accession of Ukraine to the EU was unpopular: only 9.4 percent were in favour, while 62.8 percent were against it. According to the author, however, only about 7.5 percent of votes could be interpreted as being anti-EU more generally. Moreover, a wider social discontent (Steenvoorden, 2016) may have affected such attitudes.

Identity as an explanatory factor has been found to clearly matter in the 2016 referendum, and to be an important driver of opposition to potential Ukrainian EU membership. In fact, according to Steenvoorden (2016), immigration constituted a major dividing line between voters for and against the agreement in the Netherlands. Lower educated citizens tended to be pessimistic about the state of society and the economy more generally and saw immigration as potentially undermining their own culture. By comparison, highly educated voters were found to be relatively more optimistic, trusting, and also, less likely to support populist thoughts. An intermediate position was taken by middle-skilled workers, although their voting patterns aligned more with the low-skilled than high-skilled electorate.

Similarly, in 2016, 'trust' in politics may have been a crucial factor. But according to van der Meer (2016), it was notably distrust of either Ukraine or Russia that was most relevant: voters who had a low level of trust in Ukraine tended to vote 'no' in the referendum, whereas those who did not trust Russia were likely to vote 'yes'.² In contrast, trust in the EU as well as in the Dutch government and its parliament was quite extensive at the time. It may have influenced voting results to some extent, whereas distrust in either Ukraine or Russia was clearly more important (Van der Meer, 2016).

Cuperus claims that voters who located themselves on the extreme ends of the left-right political spectrum were most inclined to vote 'no' in the 2005 referendum (Cuperus, 2005, p. 2). Distrust in the national government (and of the EU) also seemed to be associated with (extreme) locations on the left-right policy scale. Whereas 'second-order effects' seem to have been limited in 2016, the Ukraine referendum nonetheless displayed elements of voting 'for or against the domestic government'. Although the referendum was only consultative and did not have to be followed up by the Dutch government, it was still difficult to either ignore choices of the electorate or potentially jeopardize an

¹ With the war in Ukraine in 2022, such attitudes in public opinion have likely changed, also in the Netherlands.

² Van der Meer's analysis seemed to already anticipate cleavage lines materializing more intensively a few years later.

agreement the EU as an entity had negotiated with Ukraine. After all, the Dutch government was clearly supportive of the association agreement. Hence, a no vote on an agreement the government supported was a serious blow to its stance. In fact, the Dutch government was clearly surprised by the negative referendum outcome, which occurred in spite of its campaign efforts supporting it.

Moreover, some ‘societal pessimism’ seemed to be present, including a feeling that the Netherlands was not in a good shape in economic terms. However, there were no real party-line divisions in the context of the 2016 referendum. According to Steenvoorden (2016), those voting ‘yes’ tended to be among the more ‘optimistic’ citizens who were generally satisfied with the societal and political situation in the Netherlands. Those voting ‘no’, by comparison, displayed more negative tendencies about these circumstances. Accordingly, the perception of the state of Dutch politics and its economy might have been a driving force for vote choice in the context of the Ukraine referendum.

In 2016, the government strongly campaigned in favour of the referendum and was put into a difficult situation when it was declined. Some claim, however, that the campaign did not reach its very aims, since many voters were not sufficiently informed about the Ukraine-EU agreement to make a decision (Van Klingereren, 2016). This is likely to have affected vote choice, or even decisions not to vote. According to Van der Kolk (2016), 19 percent of the electorate deciding not to vote in 2016 did so due to a lack of knowledge about the substance of the referendum. But opposition groups against the referendum also conducted campaigns, with some focusing efforts against the specific contents of the agreement with the Ukraine, as did the Socialist Party (SP) and the Party for Animals. Among major concerns were a possible increase in domestic unemployment due to the agreement. In the context of the campaign, moreover, only multinationals were seen as benefiting from the deal and not local Ukrainians. Similarly, the agreement was viewed as potentially fragmenting Ukrainian society and contained criticism against EU and NATO efforts in terms of geographically surrounding Russia (Teffer, 2016). Moreover, voters who trusted the EU (and Ukraine) had a higher propensity to vote ‘yes’, but citizens who intended to vote for the two main populist parties -- notably the socialist SP and the populist, radical-right PVV -- were more inclined to vote ‘no’ (Jacobs et al., 2018).

Finally, for some scholars, the ‘no’ campaign was a mechanism triggering a wider debate on the EU itself, with this putting more pressure on the government of Prime Minister Mark Rutte, formed by a coalition of Liberals and Social-Democrats, to take on a more Eurosceptic stance. This notably concerned issues related to migration, the Schengen free-movement zone and Euro area policies (Maurice, 2016).

It would be an exaggeration, however, to claim the ‘no’ was a result of distrust in either the EU or the Dutch government (Van der Meer 2016). In spite of the 2016 referendum outcome, in May 2017 the Dutch Senate approved ratification of the EU-Ukraine association agreement. With this, in contrast to the 2005 outcome, the referendum did not affect the further course of European integration.

5. A Common Denominator?

Comparing the two referendums and the driving forces leading to their rejection, based on empirical studies using Dutch information and data, potential explanatory factors can be classified based on a categorization of theoretical approaches as presented above.

Generally, the economic situation in the Netherlands in 2005 is likely to have been perceived as more favourable by many Dutch voters than in 2016. Similarly, in the years preceding the 2005 referendum, Euroscepticism in the Netherlands was not widespread (see Figure 1). But in 2016, the effects of the

global financial and of the European sovereign debt crises likely impacted the ways in which citizens perceived the (benefits of the) EU. In 2016, Euroscepticism was more widespread and likely affected vote choice.

While there are many differences in terms of substantive and legal aspects between the referendums held in 2005 and 2016, some factors nonetheless seem to have been relevant to both. Among them is that the contents of these referendums were fairly complex, and accordingly, it was difficult for voters to understand the full range of consequences of an acceptance or a rejection. Moreover, other topics – including general attitudes towards European integration, a fear of immigration, and the prospect of Turkish or Ukrainian EU membership – appear to have strongly affected voter choices. While these were not aspects forming the core elements of the referendums, they nonetheless may have strongly influenced the outcomes. Both referendum campaigns, moreover, focused on emotional issues and fear of new developments, likely working in favour of those advocating ‘no’.

Table 2 provides an overview of potential driving forces for vote outcomes, based on earlier literature and theoretical approaches, combined with insights as discussed above.

Table 2. Comparing Driving Forces for Vote Choice in the Dutch 2005 and 2016 Referendums

Year of referendum		
Explanatory factor	2005	2016
Level of Euroscepticism	Low	High
Distrust in government	Medium	Low
Economic situation	Perceived as stable	Perceived as challenging
Economic cost-benefit calculations	Low	Low
Immigration	Fear of Turkish EU membership	Fear of Ukrainian EU membership
National identity and culture	Fear of loss due to European Constitution	No direct but indirect effects perceived
Protest vote on government	Medium	Low
Age and distribution	Older voters more inclined to vote ‘yes’; females more likely to vote ‘no’	No clear age divisions in vote choice and no relevant gender disparities
Complexity of referendum substance	High	High
Emotional issues in campaign	High	High

The propensity to vote ‘no’ on the Constitutional Treaty in 2005 can be expected to have increased somewhat with voter age (e.g., Lubbers 2008), while this was much less relevant in the 2016 Ukraine referendum. In both cases, however, a voter’s inclination to vote ‘no’ likely decreased with higher levels of education. In addition, females seem to have voted ‘no’ more frequently than their male counterparts in the 2005 referendum, but not in 2016.

The evaluation of the incumbent government’s performance usually plays a role in European elections and referendums (e.g., Gabel, 1998, p. 339; De Vreese, 2005, p. 4). According to this logic, the Dutch ‘no’ in both 2005 and 2016 could be interpreted as a more general verdict on Dutch government performance. However, notably the no-vote on the European Constitution is likely to rather have been an expression of broader trends of distrust in politics, politicians, and political institutions than of the Dutch government specifically.

Individual political ideology is likely to have been important in both referendums. While the economic situation was likely seen as more challenging in 2016 than in 2005, individual political preferences articulated correspond largely with theoretical models suggesting that parties on the extreme left or right of the political spectrum are also the most Eurosceptic ones, whereas moderate political parties are more

supportive of European integration (e.g., Hooghe, Marks and Wilson, 2002: 968).¹ But these effects do not seem to have been strong.

Besides voters' personal characteristics, citizens with an inclination to vote 'no' are generally expected to be influenced by their attitudes towards the EU and European integration and by (rational) cost-benefit analyses. But as our analysis has shown, such general attitudes usually found to matter in EU-related votes were less prevalent in the two Dutch referendums studied here. Finally, while more extensive in 2016, Euroscepticism was no main driving force. Compared to 2005, there may have been more of an appeal to emotions by those campaigning against the 2016 referendum. Among crucial determinants in both elections were a fear that own culture and identity might suffer, due to strengthened EU integration, or effects of further EU expansion.

6. Conclusions

Generally, voter attitudes towards the EU are expected to be important factors determining vote choice in EU-related votes. Accordingly, voters more supportive of European integration are expected to also be more inclined to support initiatives such as the European Constitutional Treaty or the (consultative) referendum on the EU-Ukraine association agreement. This paper has found evidence for such mechanisms, but they seem to be subordinate to other ones. The 'no' on the Dutch 2005 referendum was caused by a mix of factors, some EU-related, but others having a weak connection to the actual referendum contents.² An important factor, by comparison, was fear of an eroding national identity (and potentially, of the domestic social security system); this certainly also played a role in the 2016 referendum, and was amplified by the 'no' campaign at the time.

Referendums are seldom used in the Netherlands. The first one held – in 2005 – and the subsequent 2016 referendum were different, but both, in one way or another, focused on topics related to the EU. What determined the 'no' on the European Constitutional Treaty and in the (consultative) referendum on the EU-Ukraine association agreement? Were factors at the individual voter level, such as income, age or gender, important or did general attitudes towards EU-related issues matter, such as opinions on the perceived benefits of the EU, the Euro or of EU immigration policies? Were perhaps factors unrelated to European integration the most important? It is valuable to evaluate the two Dutch referendums in the light of theoretical approaches and literature on EU-related voting more generally.

While there are many similarities between the two referendums, such as offering citizens a (rare) occasion to voice their views in a direct democratic format, the driving forces for non-acceptance may nonetheless have been rather different. As this paper has shown, voters less in favour of European integration were amongst those more inclined to vote 'no', particularly in 2005. The level of Euroscepticism in the Netherlands was also rather low in 2005 compared to 2016. Clearly, Euroscepticism cannot fully explain the 2016 referendum outcome. Rather, there seemed to be mistrust of either Ukraine or Russia at the time that mattered.

As our study has shown, fears related to immigration were notably present in 2005, coupled with a concern of the consequences of potential Turkish EU membership. In 2016, by comparison, corruption in Ukraine and a fear of its potential future EU membership were found to be relevant. Opposition to the domestic government might have been part of the inclination to vote 'no' in either case, but in neither

¹ Voermans (2005) offers a detailed analysis of Dutch political parties and their stances towards European integration.

² See Aarts and Van der Kolk (2006), Cuperus (2005), Vollaard and Boer (2005), Toonen et al. (2005); Social and Cultural Planning Office of the Netherlands (2006) and Lubbers (2008).

year can this factor be seen as a main driving force for the rejection of the referendum. A mixture of factors seems to have contributed to the 2005 and 2016 ‘Dutch no’ which in both cases, however, were not closely connected to the actual substance of the referendums.

‘Second-order effects’ could also be discerned in both cases, in the sense of an evaluation of the incumbent government. In 2005, this concerned the ‘Balkenende Two’ cabinet; in 2016, the government of Prime Minister Rutte. Voters positive about the performance of the government and those feeling satisfied with the societal and political situation of the Netherlands in 2016, had a higher probability to vote ‘yes’ in the referendum. Generally, satisfaction with the government seems to have been higher in 2016 compared to 2005.

In 2005, voter attitudes as regards possible Turkish EU membership were relevant, with those opposed being clearly more inclined to vote ‘no’. Scepticism of the situation in Ukraine, including reported corruption levels, were certainly a driving force for the 2016 outcome. Voter location on the left-right policy dimension, however, does not seem to have mattered much in either of the two referendums (except that more radical parties, in general, tended to display lower levels of trust in both the national government and the EU).

Voter age or gender divisions did not matter significantly in either referendum, but small effects were nonetheless discernible: younger age groups were inclined more than their older counterparts to reject the European Constitutional Treaty in 2005, but age divisions did not really matter in the 2016 referendum. By comparison, notably in the 2005 case, women were more inclined to reject the referendum than their male counterparts.

In summary, some explanatory factors prevalent on EU-related research more generally have been confirmed by this study focused on the two Dutch referendums, whereas others were absent. Among factors less applicable to both cases are economic cost-benefit calculations. Other issue-voting aspects and attitudes, including perceived cultural threats from closer EU integration and anti-immigration sentiments, were clearly present. Similarly, campaign-related activities mattered, albeit somewhat more in 2016 compared to 2005. The actual contents of the referendums and their effect on EU integration, due to the complexity of the subject, only had indirect effects. Voter anticipation of what enhanced European integration or further enlargement might imply were most important in terms of evaluations of indirect and non-material repercussions, notably those related to national culture and identity.

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