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And yet it matters: referendum campaigns and vote decision in Eastern Europe

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ABSTRACT

Referendum campaigns are important and earlier research closely analysed their general functioning, effects on turnout, and the importance of media and information for voting behaviour. However, the role of referendum campaigns as such (with all its components) in shaping voting behaviour was widely neglected. This article seeks to partially fill this gap in the literature and argues that referendum campaign is an important predictor of the voting decision as long as people perceive it as informative and follow it. We investigate this effect in the context of three referendums organized in 2015–2016 in Bulgaria, Poland and Slovakia. The results indicate that these two variables explain the decision of citizens to support referendums across different settings. Their effects are consistent and significantly stronger than alternative explanations employed in the literature such as the limited effect of campaigns, second-order elections, partisan cues or amount of information received.

KEYWORDS

Referendum campaigns; policies; voting; Eastern Europe

Introduction

Referendum campaigns differ from election campaigns in a number of ways: run longer and thus increase the likelihood of unforeseen events, are influenced by domestic and international factors, have higher levels of electoral volatility and uncertainty among voters, lower perceived importance and involvement, and political parties may be internally divided over the policy subjected to popular vote (de Vreese & Semetko, 2004; Franklin, Marsh, & Wlezien, 1994; Hobolt, 2005; LeDuc, 2002; Silagadze and Gherghina 2018). For all these reasons, referendum campaigns are considered influential and earlier research closely analysed their general functioning, effects on turnout, and the importance of media and information for voting behaviour (Christin, Hug, & Sciarini, 2002; de Vreese, 2004; de Vreese & Semetko, 2004; Kriesi, 2006; Schuck & de Vreese, 2009; Siune & Svensson, 1993). In spite of the consensus regarding the importance of referendum campaigns, little scholarly attention has been devoted to them as explanatory variables for the way in which people vote in referendums. So far, most approaches followed either the path of policy and institutional explanations that ignored campaign or the path of intra-campaign features and developments that left out the campaign as a general process.

In this sense, a broader line of enquiry sought to explain voting behaviour along the debate issue voting versus second-order voting with empirical evidence supporting alternatively both theories (Mendez, Mendez, & Triga, 2014). Issue-voting implies that the citizens' vote is influenced by their attitudes towards the policy to be decided upon (Siune & Svensson, 1993; Siune, Svensson, & Tonsgaard, 1994). The second-order voting postulates that the attitudes towards the national political parties in general and to the incumbent government, in particular, are decisive for the vote. Referendums thus become second-order national elections where considerations about first-order national politics determine the political behaviour of citizens (Franklin et al., 1994; Franklin, 2002; Hobolt, 2007; LeDuc, 2002). In addition to these views, previous research reveals the importance of political cues communicated by elites during the referendum campaign especially for voters with little prior information (Lupia, 1994; Zaller, 1992). The lower the level of information among the electorate on an issue, the more determining the political cues for their final decision. Party endorsements serve as heuristics that help voters to arrive at competent decisions despite their lack of factual knowledge (Font & Rodriguez, 2009; Hobolt, 2007; LeDuc, 2009).

The line of enquiry focusing on intra-campaign features investigated mainly the reasons for which citizens oppose the referendum initiatives. The findings indicate that voting decision was influenced by the type and shape of messages – including here media framing – received during campaign (Hobolt, 2005; Schuck & de Vreese, 2009), the low level of information that made them oppose the status quo in the presence of a particular heuristics (Christin et al., 2002; Highley & McAllister, 2002; Kriesi, 2005) or to the risk aversion that determines voters to prefer safe and known over uncertain options (Hobolt, 2009). In the particular case of European referendums, another feature emerges, namely the challenge of a two-dimensional political space. The domestic and transnational dimensions are interlinked, both playing a role in constituting a two-dimensional political space in which the political parties operate and the campaign takes place (Shu, 2009).

The rich empirical evidence provided along these two lines of enquiry neglected the role of referendum campaign as such (with all its components) in shaping voting behaviour. To partially fill this gap in the literature, our paper argues that referendum campaign is an important predictor of the voting decision as long as people perceived it as informative and follow it. We investigate this effect in the least likely setting of supporting a referendum proposal, previous research revealed that it is easier to mobilize people against a referendum proposal. The explanatory potential of campaign is tested against the usual suspects described above in the context of three referendums organized in 2015–2016 in different East European countries (Bulgaria, Poland and Slovakia).¹ The referendums under scrutiny shared several features: each of them had three separate questions out of which at least one was not very related to the other two, none of them was valid due to low turnout, and none of them was initiated by political parties (the Bulgarian and Slovak referendums were bottom-up, while the Polish referendum was initiated by the country president). We also selected these referendums due to their diversity of topics with the aim to identify whether the explanatory power of campaign is context sensitive or holds across various topic and countries. The referendums refer to issues of a very different nature: electoral reform, political funding, same-sex marriage and adoption rights, education pertaining to sexual behaviour or euthanasia in schools, or positive interpretation of taxation. We use individual-level data from an online survey conducted in March–April 2017.

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows. The first section presents the mechanisms through which a referendum campaign may influence voting preferences. In doing so, it combines findings from research on referendums with ideas inspired by findings on election campaigns. The second section presents the methodology and data used in this study, while the third one provides background information about the cases investigated in this paper. Next, we present the results of descriptive and inferential quantitative analysis with emphasis on the similarities and differences between countries. The conclusions summarize the key findings, discuss the implications of this paper and open the floor to further avenues for research.

How referendum campaigns make a difference

Referendum campaigns influence voters' preferences towards the policy through a combination of mechanisms. One of the most straightforward and arguably the most investigated is the hypodermic model that assumes an effect due to campaign features. Among these features, the information delivery is prominent due to its potential to decrease the unknown to ballot proposals (de Vreese & Semetko, 2004; Hobolt, 2005; LeDuc, 2002; Schuck & de Vreese, 2009). The information allows for a systematic processing that will be the basis of voters' calculus. Under these circumstances, citizens are more likely to make a calculus regarding their alternatives and perceived consequences based on what they learn and much less on heuristic processing based on risk propensity (Morisi, 2016). In this sense, campaigns generate large quantities of information about different aspects of the policy under consideration such as costs, benefits, implications, reasons for change or for the status quo, etc. The longer and more intense the public debates, the simpler it is for voters to make up their minds as there is a lot of available information on the issue (Font & Rodriguez, 2009). Since the issue at stake in a referendum is divisive and polarizing, most of the information is substantive with limited superficial features encountered in regular elections. Regarding the latter, media is under fire by both academics and politicians for its sensationalistic and market-based journalism that ignores the ideological components and issue-solving approaches. Nevertheless, there is empirical evidence that even under the circumstances news coverage and advertisement during campaign has a great informational value for citizens (Iyengar & Simon, 2000). Moreover, campaign has a socializing effect for the audience. Since the issue to be voted upon is intensely discussed, people become aware about its content, nuances and consequences and are likely to make an informed decision.

In addition to the campaign features, existing citizens' attitudes should be factored in to understand the complexity of campaign effects. An important strand of literature dealing with elections claims that voters make up their minds before the campaign starts based on their partisan affiliation or candidates' sociological characteristics (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954; Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960). This is also due to the fact that voters get socialized to parties, know very well the competitors and voted for some of them in the past. The studies supporting the minimal-effect hypothesis of campaign (Finkel, 1993; Gelman & King, 1993) argue that election outcomes can be predicted without accounting for the campaign. According to this perspective, voters have preferences in place before the election period and the campaign only helps to activate those latent preferences.

Some of these conclusions from election campaigns can be transferred to referendum campaigns as long as specific elements such as socialization and experience with competitors are not included. We are interested in highlighting that predispositions and information do not operate independently from each other, but rather predispositions determine what information or third-party opinion a citizen accepts, since people tend to ignore the information or opinions that do not agree with their prejudices and orientations (Marcinkowski, 2007; Zaller, 1992). Even when accounting for predispositions and previous preferences, a referendum campaign may have an effect on the vote choice. The resonance model explains how messages received during campaign reinforce voters' prevailing predispositions or preferences (Iyengar & Simon, 2000). In this case, citizens who already favour the proposal of the referendum will acquire during campaign further arguments that may give them confidence that the initial attitude was the right one; and such a belief is easily translated into a vote choice.

Two inter-related functions of referendum campaigns that transcend the two models are the agenda setting and simplification of choices. Voters do not pay attention to all the details surrounding a political issue and instead focus on a few elements that appear important at the moment. However, what is important is not a matter of objectivity or subjective choice on the side of citizens, but it is mainly a media-driven decision. Journalists decide what to cover and what to ignore and thus they model saliency within the electorate. The framing and priming of events during a campaign influences perceptions by evoking different images in the minds of particular segments in society, leading to issue interpretations (de Vreese, 2004). Such effects can be observed both in the presence of existing opinions (Domke, Shah, & Wackman, 1998) and in their absence. In particular, priming ensures that the issues considered salient by voters – saliency that can also emerge during campaign – become the criteria of evaluation in the minds of the electorate (Iyengar & Simon, 2000). To use a recent example, the discourse of the Leave camp in the Brexit referendum picked-up on the salient issue of Britain being a net contributor to the European Union. It played this card heavily during campaign and thus the assessment of people evolved around that issue set up by one of the camps. In brief, the agenda-setting, framing and priming simplify the choices for people by providing them with readily available information.

These arguments illustrate how a campaign yields a multi-faceted effect on the voting behaviour. We argue that such effects are likely to occur especially in the case of voters who support the referendum proposals. This happens for at least three reasons. First, the cognitive benefits brought by campaigns reduce the costs of uncertainty and diminish the risk propensity. Since people are more strongly motivated to avoid costs than to achieve gains (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981), those who wish to avoid costs and have a predisposition prior to the campaign, will be rather immune to the content of campaign. Perceived risk is a motivator of self-protective behaviour (Schuck & de Vreese, 2009) and thus such voters will be oriented to oppose the referendum proposals. Through its learning, persuasive and socialization processes a referendum campaign reduce uncertainty about outcomes and remove the burden from the shoulders of those seeking gains. Moreover, even those who are risk averse and under normal conditions would oppose a proposal due to its uncertain consequences (Christin et al., 2002), will face less uncertainty once exposed to campaign. Second, the efforts made by the camp supporting the referendum are on average greater than those of the opposing camp. The political elites (in case of top-

down) or citizens (for bottom-up) behind the referendum are aware that quite often they start with a handicap: people have to be persuaded to support their initiative. This challenge increases when the pursued issue has low saliency in society. Consequently, the promoters of the policy subjected to referendum are likely to be more active than the opponents. The most visible result of such a visibility is a greater level of information and more persuasive ads launched to the public. Third, voters who oppose the referendum proposals may adopt a strategic behaviour and skip voting. Since many referendums require a participation quorum for validation, those who oppose the proposals have a greater say if they do not turn out. This is what could be observed in Italy where political parties opposing the referendum proposals demobilised voters and encouraged them to stay away from polls (Uleri, 2002). The existence of such a strategic behaviour indicates that those who pay attention to campaign are more likely to be open or undecided regarding a support for the referendum proposals. Following all these arguments, we hypothesize that:

H1: Citizens who perceive the campaign as informative will support the referendum proposals.

H2: Citizens who follow the campaign will support the referendum proposals.

Controls

We test the explanatory potential of the hypothesized effects against the variables highlighted in the literature as main predictors for voting behaviour: opinion before the campaign, support for government, partisan cues, access to information relative to the referendum issue and socio-demographics (education, age and gender). As previously explained, an influential body of literature posited that the beliefs formed before campaign play an important role in the final voting preference. The theory of second-order considerations claims that people often decide on their vote choice in referendums with evaluations of the incumbent government in mind. They do so either because they feel that there is not much at stake (Franklin, 2002) or because they wish to use the referendum as a punishment tool. Partisan cues were found by earlier studies as quite important determinants for voter choice. On complex issues, voters use the shortcuts received from the political parties they support (Font & Rodriguez, 2009; Kriesi, 2005; LeDuc, 2009). Party endorsements may allow citizens to imply their own position on a ballot issue without detailed information about it (Hobolt, 2007). Access to information is a variable meant to capture the amount of information to which individuals have access during campaign. Our hypothesized effect goes far beyond the amount of information in campaign and that is why we include the simple exposure to information related to the referendum (via different media environments) as a control variable. Finally, we control for socio-demographic variables since they may also have an impact on the support for the referendum proposals.

Research design

To test the hypotheses, we use individual-level data from an online survey conducted in March–April 2017 with a total number of 511 valid responses in three countries: Bulgaria (257), Poland (121) and Slovakia (133). The number of answers in the statistical analysis is

lower than 511 because respondents skipped some questions or provided answers that were not included in the study (see below). We selected the most recent multiple question referendums in Eastern Europe. The variation in their topics was important because results are more robust when observing similar patterns across different types of decisions.

The survey had the same questions translated into the national language of every country. The focus of the analysis is those who voted and a probability representative sample would have been ideal to generalize findings. However, setting up such a sample was not possible because there is no official statistics regarding the features of those who turned out to vote in these referendums (socio-demographics). Instead, we use a convenience sample with a snowball distribution of the link through Facebook and e-mail addresses. While the number of answers may not look very high relative to the turnout in each of these referendums, it is less important in the context of the current analysis. Our primary goal is to understand the process through which campaigns influenced voting choice rather than making generalizable statements. We are aware that there is a self-selection bias in which those with access to Internet and skills to use devices could fill in the survey. However, all three countries have high levels of Internet access, ranging between 60 and 80% (World Bank 2017). For analysis, we use a combination of bivariate statistics and ordinal regression with a pooled and country level models.

Variable operationalization

The dependent variable of our study is the support for referendum proposals. It is measured as the answer to the following question: 'How did you vote on the referendum issues?'. Available answers were coded on a four-point ordinal scale as follows: all yes (1), two yes and one no (2), one yes and two no (3), and all no (4). A fifth option was also listed (blank vote) but since this is of no importance in the current context, it was removed from the analysis. The independent variable informative campaign (H1) is operationalized through the answers provided to the following question: 'Thinking about the referendum campaign, was it informative in providing with all necessary information about the topics?'. The available answers were coded on a four-point ordinal scale as follows: very informative (1), quite informative (2), hardly informative (3), not at all informative. The variable following campaign (H2) is measured through the ordinal answers to the question 'How much did you follow the referendum campaign?', coded as follows: very much (1), much (2), to some extent (3) and not at all (4).

The opinion before the referendum and partisan cues were operationalized as the answer to the following question: 'When voting in this referendum, to what extent did your opinion before the referendum campaign play a role in your decision?' and 'When voting in this referendum, to what extent did the position of the party for which you voted in the (year closest to referendum) parliamentary elections play a role in your decision?'. The answers were coded on a four-point ordinal scale as follows: very much (1), much (2), to some extent (3) and not at all (4). For these two items, a 'not available' answer was listed since the individual could miss the election or did not have the right to vote due to age limitations. All 'not available' answers were removed from the analysis and treated as missing data.

Government support is measured through the answers to the question 'How satisfied are you with the way the (country) government does its job?' and coded as follows: very

satisfied (1), quite satisfied (2), hardly satisfied (3) and not at all satisfied (4). The amount of information during campaign is a six-point scale index cumulated after summing up the answers to the question: 'Where did you get information about the referendum topics from?'. The respondent had a multiple choice with several options and every time an option was mentioned it received a code of 1: TV, newspapers or radio, online news portals and Internet forums, Facebook, posters and leaflets, discussions with friends. The resulting index ranges from a value of 0 reflecting the situation in which a respondent did not get information from any of the five environments to a maximum of 5 in case the respondent used all the available environments.

Gender is a dichotomous variable in which male is coded 1 and female 2. Age is an ordinal variable recorded as the number of completed years at the number of survey, while education is a five-point ordinal scale ranging from primary (coded 1) to post-university degree (coded 5). The following section provides an overview of the referendums to illustrate the topics and the driving forces behind campaigns.

Background information about the referendums

The referendum experience of the three analysed countries differs. Bulgaria organised its first referendum in 2013 (bottom-up) and since then it has been very active in this field, Poland organised five referendums in its post-communist history with quite some distance between them, while Slovakia had eight referendums with only the most recent (included in our analysis) being a bottom-up procedure.

Bulgaria

The Bulgarian referendum was held on the 6th of November 2016 simultaneously with the presidential elections. The citizens were asked three major questions: the replacement of the proportional vote by a majority vote, the introduction of compulsory voting, and the reduction of the state subsidies given to the political parties – from 11 leva (5.60 €) to 1 lev (0.50 €) for each vote won. The second question was quite redundant since compulsory voting had been already introduced a few months earlier (Stoychev, 2017).

Prior to the fall of the communist regime three popular votes were held in the country – in 1922, 1946 and 1971. In modern Bulgaria, the use of the direct democratic instruments is mainly regulated by the Law on Direct Participation of Citizens in the State and Local Government. In compliance with Article 3, a national referendum can be initiated over the issues which are in the competence of the National Assembly, with the exception of constitutional arrangements, taxation and budgetary topics. The result of a referendum is mandatory if the turnout reaches the level of the turnout in the last parliamentary elections and if more than a half of votes are in favour of the proposed question. If the turnout criterion is not met but was higher than 20% and if the number of 'yes' votes exceeds 50% the National Assembly is required to discuss the issue (Milanov, 2016).

The referendum in 2016 was initiated not by a political force, but by a very well-known Bulgarian showman, Stanislav Trifonov, who has been a TV star from the beginning of the '90s (Martino, 2016). It was the first successful bottom-up initiative leading to a nationwide referendum in Bulgaria since 1989. He managed to mobilise the disenfranchised citizens. A special Facebook page was launched for subscription campaign. Not only a large number of volunteers was engaged, but also many celebrities publicly supported the

campaign. In the end, over 570,000 valid signatures instead of 400,000 required were collected for six proposed questions. However, president Rosen Plevneliev referred to the Constitutional Court questioning the legality of three questions (to halve the number of MPs from 240 to 120, to introduce electronic voting and direct election of police chiefs). The Court accepted the president's arguments and blocked these questions (Stoychev, 2017).

The campaign itself was criticised for lacking the substantial debate. The main political parties were occupied by the simultaneously running presidential election campaign and paid little attention to the referendum: 'none of the major parties registered to campaign for the referendum at the Central Electoral Commission. Only 14 minor parties and coalitions with less than 1% of electoral support registered, mainly because of the money for media coverage provided by the state [about 20,000 EUR]' (Stoychev, 2017, p. 191). In this situation, the TV show of Trifonov became the primary source of information, though one-sided, massively agitating for the 'yes' vote. This resulted in a high degree of confusion among people over the asked questions (Cheresheva, 2016).

Those who took part in the poll overwhelmingly said 'yes' to all three questions. However, the result was not binding, since the referendum turnout of 50.8% fell short of the 2014 parliamentary elections turnout of 51% by a small margin of roughly 13,000 votes. Despite this fact, 'the 2016 referendum was the most successful popular initiative in the contemporary history of Bulgaria. Although it did not produce a legally binding result, it produced a politically legitimate demand for electoral reform' (Stoychev, 2017, p. 192).

Poland

The Polish referendum held on 6th of September 2015 was a fifth national referendum in the history of modern Poland. The reason behind conducting the popular vote was the outcome of presidential elections held in May 2015. The former president Bronislaw Komorowski, backed by the ruling centrist Civic Platform (PO) initiated the referendum 'as a panic move following his shock defeat in the first round of May's presidential election' (Szczerbiak, 2015). Despite the prediction of all polls Komorowski came behind his main opponent Andrzej Duda, the candidate of the right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) party. The most surprising fact was, however, that a rock musician Pawel Kukiz won around 20% of votes with his promise to implement single-member constituencies in the Sejm elections. A day after the elections, Komorowski declared to hold a referendum justifying it as a reaction to the voters' wish for change – indeed he intended to win the votes of Kukiz's supporters by this political move. In the end, Komorowski lost. The referendum, however, will be remembered as a part of presidential campaign (Hartliński, 2015).

The legal base was the Article 125 allowing the President to call a referendum if the Senate agrees on it. The results are binding if the turnout is more than 50%. The referendum was comprised of three questions: on introducing single-member constituencies in elections to the Sejm, Poland's more powerful lower chamber of parliament; on maintaining the current method of financing of political parties from the national budget and introducing a presumption in favour of the taxpayer in disputes over taxation law. The first question was the actual reason behind the initiation of the referendum and it caused also the most of legal doubts, since its implementation contradicted the Article 96 of

the Constitution stating that the elections to the Sejm shall be *inter alia* proportional (Hartliński, 2015).

The whole referendum campaign was barely visible. The main axis of the campaign was the issue of single-member constituencies. The PO and Kukiz were clearly in favour of the issue, the PiS politicians claimed that they would take part in the referendum but their party did not invest much effort in mobilizing their supporters. Other parties' position was against the issue and their representatives declared not to be going to vote. This inevitably was to influence the participation rates. The second question reflected more or less the same division and the third one was not a matter of debate since every party articulated in favour of strengthening the position of citizens. The campaign itself was delegated from established parties to mainly unknown/minor societies and foundations that enjoyed the benefit of being present in the media and receiving remuneration. The parties, having in mind the approaching parliamentary elections, were not actively engaged in the debate. No true campaigning took place in comparison to the presidential or parliamentary elections (e.g. no TV commercials, no posters) (Hartliński, 2015). 'Walking around the streets of Krakow, talking to its inhabitants, watching the news and reading the national press, discussion of the issue is notable by its absence. Indeed, many Poles seem to be confused about the referendum and about the electoral system in general' (Tilles & Bill, 2015).

The lack of real campaign found its reflection in a very low level of knowledge and interest among the population and as a consequence in a miniscule turnout of only 7.8%, though all questions were approved by the voters (Hartliński, 2015). It was the first time in the Polish modern history that the result of the referendum was not binding due to the low participation. Undoubtedly the topic wasn't as important as previous ones – e.g. on the Constitution in 1997 or joining the EU in 2003 (Hartliński, 2015). One member of the Polish Electoral Commission described it as 'one of the most expensive public opinion polls in Europe' (Szczerbiak, 2015). However, the way of calling this referendum as a part of presidential rivalry and the very low-profile campaign did not contribute to winning support for more direct democracy in Poland. This popular vote was a big fiasco for the political parties (Hartliński, 2015).

Slovakia

The Slovak same-sex marriage referendum held on 7th of February 2015 was unique in many terms. The so-called Referendum on Family was the first referendum in the history of the country that was initiated not by the established political parties, but by the civil society. In record times over 400,000 signatures were collected (roughly 10% of the country's electorate) demonstrating unprecedented civil engagement with over 10,000 volunteers and more than 100 pro-life associations. Furthermore, it was also the first time in the Slovak history that the issues of sexual education, forms of modern family and adoption was subjected to public debate. The referendum campaign was highly polarizing and extremely salient (Rybar & Sovcikova, 2016).

The Alliance for Family, a civic organization established in 2013, was the main organizer of the popular initiative. Roughly one year before the referendum, in February 2014, the Slovak Parliament and the governing social-democratic Smer party passed a constitutional amendment (Art. 41) that clearly defined the marriage as a union between a man and a woman. This was not ambitious enough for the Alliance demanding not only explicit prohibition of child adoptions by same-sex couples but also the denial of legal basis for same-sex

unions – the latter was proved as unconstitutional by the Court (Kuźelewska, 2015; Rybar & Sovcikova, 2016). The referendum was meant to take a back-step and reiterate that in Slovakia a family consists of a husband (male) and wife (female) ...’ (Zordova, 2015). This would make the future attempts to change the legislation even more difficult. The argument was that the values of the traditional family are under threat since more and more countries liberalise the rules – e.g. the neighbouring Austria and the Czech Republic allow various forms of same-sex unions and child adoption by gay couples (*The Guardian*, 2015).

According to the Article 95 of the Slovak Constitution, the president of the state calls a referendum either on the basis of the National Council’s resolution or if a petition receives more than 350,000 signatures. The vote is valid only if turnout exceeds 50% of all eligible voters. All referendums until this date were initiated in accordance with the first paragraph and all of them – with the exception of EU membership referendum in 2003 – failed due to insufficient turnout (Rybar & Sovcikova, 2016).

The referendum campaign was heated, debated and controversial. However, not the political parties, but the Catholic Church was one of the main players in the campaign, supporting the Alliance both morally and financially: for instance, petition sheets were available in the local churches and priests openly encouraged their parishioners to support the petition, providing theological backing (Rybar & Sovcikova, 2016; Smrek, 2015). Shortly before the referendum date, Pope Francis addressed the Slovak people: ‘I greet the pilgrims from Slovakia and, through them, I wish to express my appreciation to the entire Slovak church, encouraging everyone to continue their efforts in defence of the family, the vital cell of society’ (Harris, 2015). In contrast, the leading figures from the political elite refused to give a position on a referendum topic, thus, ‘the overriding silence of high officials and political parties on the issue’ was one of the main peculiarities of this popular vote (Kral, 2015).

The advocates framed the campaign in a quite positive manner, stressing the desire to preserve the status quo in regard to ‘marriage’ definition and to give parents more rights to decide about the content of their children’s education. The slogan of the Alliance was ‘Three Yeses For Children’ which defined the confrontational tone of the campaign, depicting the homosexuals ‘as perpetrators who seek to challenge the status quo’ (Smrek, 2015). Thus, the public debate, concentrated along two lines, namely the attitudes towards homosexuals and the role of the Catholic Church in public life (Rybar & Sovcikova, 2016). The opponents – mainly the LGBT minority represented by the non-governmental organisation *Iniciatíva Inakosť* campaigned for not taking part in the referendum (Valkovičová, 2017).

In the end, the vote was invalid due to the low turnout of 21.4%, below the average compared to other referendums. However, over 90% of voters said ‘yes’ to all the three questions: whether marriage can only be a union of a man and a woman, whether same-sex couples should be banned from adoptions, and whether children can skip classes involving education on sex and euthanasia.

Analysis and results

This section starts with a bivariate correlation between the variables to observe the statistical relationships on a one to one basis. It continues with ordinal regression models ran for several variables. Figure 1 explores the ways in which people voted at aggregate level and in each of the three countries, to illustrate the degree of variation on the

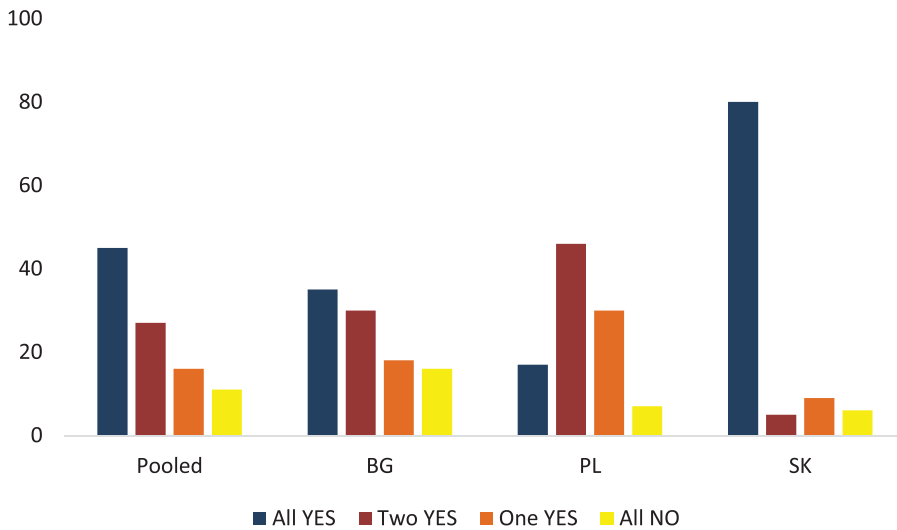


Figure 1. Voter distribution according to the support for referendum topics ($N = 511$). (Source: Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic).

Notes: The wording of referendum questions differed across the examined cases. Bulgaria: (a) Do you support the national representatives to be elected by majoritarian electoral system with absolute majority in two rounds? (b) Do you support the introduction of compulsory voting in elections and referendums? (c) Do you support the annual subsidy for financing the political parties and coalitions to be 1 BGN for every valid vote at the last parliamentary elections? (Source: Central Electoral Commission). Poland: (a) Are you in favor of the introduction of single-mandate electoral districts in the elections to the Sejm of the Republic of Poland? (b) Are you in favor of maintaining the current method of financing political parties from the state budget? (c) Are you in favor of introducing the general rule of doubts about the interpretation of tax law in favor of the taxpayer? (Source: National Electoral Commission). Slovakia: (a) Do you agree that the concept of marriage denotes solely the legal bond between one man and one woman, but it must not denote any other cohabitation between persons? (b) Do you agree that it should not be allowed to couples or groups of persons of the same sex to adopt and subsequently raise children? (c) Do you agree that schools should not require participation of children in the field of sexual education or euthanasia if their parents or the children themselves do not agree with the content of such education?

dependent variable. The graph illustrates that the highest percentage among the total number of respondents (45% in all three countries) supported all three referendum questions. This trend is observable in Bulgaria and Slovakia, the exception to the rule being Poland where the highest percentage of respondents (46%) voted yes to two questions as opposed to 17% who supported all three questions. One explanation for the massive vote in this direction is that two out of three questions were for change, while the third was to maintain the status quo. The latter referred to public party funding and the referendum results indicated that almost 83% of those who turned out to vote answered negatively to this question. In Slovakia the large percentage of votes in favour of all three proposals is due to the quite radical measures proposed in this referendum against same sex marriage, adoption and non-compulsory sexual and euthanasia education in schools. Since the three topics are related, the likelihood to support all of them is high. This is an issue reflected also in the official results when more than 90% of those who went to the polls casted a positive vote for each of them.

Table 1 includes the bivariate correlation coefficients between the support for referendum proposals and all other variables. The consistent observation across the pooled and country level data is that informative campaign is the variable that correlates the highest with support for the referendum proposals. The relationship goes in the

Table 1. Bivariate correlation with support for the referendum proposals.

Variable	Pooled	Bulgaria	Poland	Slovakia
Informative campaign	0.42***	0.51***	0.24**	0.16*
Follow campaign	0.14***	-0.01	0.01	0.16*
Pre-campaign opinion	0.10**	-0.03	-0.05	0.11
Satisfaction with government	-0.03	-0.06	0.21**	-0.04
Party cues	0.01	0.21***	0.12	-0.10
Access to information	-0.07	0.11	-0.04	-0.19**
Gender	-0.02	0.01	0.16	-0.15
Age	0.01	0.01	0.11	-0.10
Education	-0.09	-0.02	0.07	-0.11

Notes: Correlation coefficients are Spearman's rank.

N varies between 396 (party cues) and 473 (informative campaign).

*** $p < .01$; ** $p < .05$; * $p < .1$.

hypothesized relationship (H1) with respondents who find the campaign informative supporting all the proposals. The weakest relationship is in Slovakia, mostly due to the low variation on the dependent variable. In that particular case, irrespective of how respondent found the campaign, many of them cast a positive vote to all three questions. This result is not surprising if we keep in mind that some voters in Bulgaria and Poland were confused about the topics of the referendums (see the previous section). Those are the cases in which the referendum campaign can have an important effect by clarifying issues, educating the public and helping voters decide whether they support the proposal.

The bivariate correlations provide empirical support for H2 only in the pooled and Slovak model with respondents who closely follow the campaign being more inclined to favour the referendum proposals. In the other two cases, there is statistical independence with no relationship between these two variables. In the pooled model the variables corresponding to the main effects correlate the strongest (at the highest level of statistical significance) with the dependent variable. The variable informative campaign correlates in all but the Slovak model the highest with the support for referendums and that indicates robust empirical support for the first hypothesis.

Among the controls, only the pre-campaign opinion, access to information and education correlate with support for referendum proposals. People who cast a vote according to their attitude before the campaign have a slight tendency to support the proposals as opposed to those who do not have one. This relationship goes in the same direction only in Slovakia at country level, in Bulgaria and Poland it is reversed with people who do not hold pre-campaign opinions being more likely to support all referendum proposals. People with less access to information are slightly re likely to support the referendum proposals (-0.07 in the pooled model), a relationship that is quite strong in Slovakia (it is the highest correlation coefficient, statistically significant at the 0.05 level). Less educated people are more likely to support referendum proposals, a relationship that holds also in Slovakia but it is reversed in Poland – where more educated people support the proposals – and displays statistical independence in Bulgaria.

Other controls with relevant correlation at country level are satisfaction with government, party cues and gender. In Poland, citizens who are satisfied with the activity of the government are more likely to support the referendum proposals (0.21, statistically significant at the 0.01 level). This observation is quite intuitive since it is the only referendum

among the three investigated that had been initiated top-down, by political elites. In Bulgaria, those respondents who followed the opinion of the party for which they voted in the most recent legislative elections prior to the referendum are more likely to support the three proposals (coefficient 0.21, statistically significant at the 0.01 level). In Poland, the direction of relationship is similar, while in Slovakia it goes in the opposite direction with people who ignore their parties being slightly more likely to support the referendum. The latter can be explained through the ambiguity of party positioning on the referendum topics. The messages of political parties were not obvious, cues were unclear and thus we cannot observe a relationship between these and the voting decision. Finally, in Poland male are more likely to support the referendum proposals, while in Slovakia more female are among the supporters.

These bivariate correlations are an initial estimation of the relationship between variables. We will now turn to a regression analysis that seeks to assess causality. We run two types of ordinal regression models (due to the nature of the dependent variable): without control variables and with control variables. In the models with controls we exclude the socio-demographics for the following reasons: (1) the bivariate analysis showed the existence of poor relationships with the support for referendum proposals, (2) we ran regression analysis with them and the results confirm the existence of a very weak effect and (3) the interpretation of results is more parsimonious with fewer controls. In brief, by not reporting them there is not much substantive information lost.

Table 2 includes the odd-ratios for the two main effects. The reference category for all the variables are the absence of those features, e.g. for informative campaign, it is the category of people who voted against all three proposals. At pooled level, the citizens who consider the referendum campaign as very informative are more than three times more likely to support the referendum proposals (OR = 3.02, statistically significant at the 0.01 level) as opposed to those who do not find the campaign informative at all. Voters who followed very much the campaign are 1.24 times (statistically significant at the 0.1 level) more likely to support the proposals as opposed to those who did not follow at all. At country level, the effect hypothesized in H1 finds empirical evidence in all countries, with strength varying from 1.94 time more likely in Slovakia to 3.66 (statistically significant at the 0.01 level) in Bulgaria. The empirical support for H2 is mixed at country level where only Slovakia goes in the hypothesized direction: voters who follow campaign very much are two times (OR = 2.01) more likely to vote for referendum proposals as opposed to those who did not follow at all. In Bulgaria and Poland, people who follow the campaign are less likely (OR = 0.83 and OR = 0.90) to support the referendum proposals compared to those respondents who did not follow at all the campaign.

Table 2. Ordinal regression with support for the referendum proposals as DV (no controls).

Variable	Pooled	Bulgaria	Poland	Slovakia
Informative campaign	3.02*** (0.38)	3.66*** (0.62)	2.23*** (0.66)	1.94 (0.87)
Follow campaign	1.24* (0.16)	0.83 (0.15)	0.90 (0.26)	2.01 (0.90)
Pseudo R^2	0.08	0.11	0.03	0.06
Log likelihood	-543.03	-287.17	-128.49	-44.58
N	472	242	109	121

Notes: Reported coefficients are odds-ratios, standard errors in brackets.

*** $p < .01$; ** $p < .05$; * $p < 0.1$.

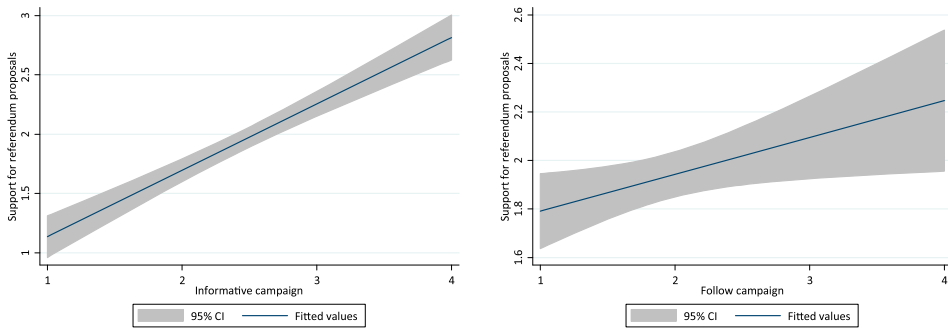


Figure 2. The marginal effect of informative campaigns and follow campaigns (pooled model).

The differences in the size of effect between H1 and H2 can be better visualized when comparing the two marginal effects in Figure 2, modelled at the pooled level. The left side of the graph depicts the marginal effect of Informative campaigns on the support for referendum questions. It shows a strong effect where the perception of high or very high informative campaign makes a substantive difference in the way in which voters support the referendum proposals. The right side of the graph depicts the marginal effect of following the campaign and it is much weaker. The interval on which it has an effect on the dependent variable (vertical axis) is considerably smaller compared to the effect of informative campaigns.

Table 3 includes the ordinal regression models with control variables. Informative campaign remains a very strong predictor in the pooled model where people who perceive the campaigns as very informative are almost three times more likely (OR = 2.94, statistically significant at the 0.01 level) to support all three proposals. The effect of following campaigns (H2) is also positive but considerably weaker than H1. Pre-campaign opinion has a positive effect on support for proposals, while satisfaction with the government and party cues have a negative effect. Access to information has no effect on the voting behaviour. This observation is relevant because it indicates that campaign means much more than simply information. The empirical evidence in our cases illustrates that there is no effect of pure information, while the campaign overall – as long as people consider it informative and follow it – has a consistent positive effect on people’s behaviour.

Table 3. Ordinal regression with support for the referendum proposals as DV (with controls).

Variable	Pooled	Bulgaria	Poland	Slovakia
Informative campaign	2.94*** (0.43)	3.28*** (0.65)	1.80* (0.63)	2.31* (1.11)
Follow campaign	1.13 (0.17)	0.68* (0.15)	1.29 (0.50)	1.38 (0.72)
Pre-campaign opinion	1.15 (0.11)	0.88 (0.13)	0.94 (0.28)	1.36 (0.41)
Satisfaction with government	0.89 (0.12)	0.82 (0.17)	1.57* (0.38)	1.11 (0.66)
Party cues	0.87 (0.10)	1.57** (0.52)	1.11 (0.23)	0.54 (0.22)
Access to information	0.97 (0.10)	1.17 (0.17)	1.14 (0.29)	0.72 (0.27)
Pseudo R ²	0.08	0.11	0.04	0.12
Log likelihood	-433.12	-212.79	-107.65	-40.93
N	379	180	93	112

Notes: Reported coefficients are odds-ratios, standard errors in brackets.

*** $p < .01$; ** $p < .05$; * $p < .1$.

The country level models indicate a strong and consistent empirical support for the first main effect (H1). The second main effect (H2) is also quite consistent and with the exception of Bulgaria in the other countries goes in the hypothesized direction. The rest of variables have only isolated effect in some countries, e.g. satisfaction with government in Poland or party cues in Bulgaria. The major conclusion of the statistical analysis is that the two main variables (H1 and H2) are the only ones with a consistent effect across the three investigated referendums; this observation is revealed both by the bivariate and multivariate statistical analysis.

Conclusions

This paper argued and tested the importance of referendum campaign as a predictor for voting decision by looking at its perceived informative character and the degree to which people follow it. It analysed this effect in the least likely setting of supporting referendum proposals on different topics in Bulgaria, Poland and Slovakia. The study relied on individual-level analysis coming from a web survey conducted in the spring of 2017. The results indicate that the two variables explain the decision of citizens to support referendums across different settings. Their effects are consistent and significantly stronger than alternative explanations employed in the literature such as the limited effect of campaigns, second-order elections, partisan cues or amount of information received.

The implications of these findings go beyond the comparative study of the three East European countries and they could have an impact on the broader study of voting behaviour during referendums. At theoretical level, our study reveals the importance as campaign as a valuable explanatory variable for the decisions taken by citizens in referendums. So far, research focused mainly on components of campaigns (information or media priming/framing) or campaign actors (parties or initiators) but has paid little attention to the campaign per se. Our results show that campaign is much more than information and it may yield much stronger relevance than the actor involved. Consequently, it is a determinant that could be included in further frameworks for analysis. At empirical level, the perception of campaign and degree to which people follow it appears to have consistent effect across different types of referendums. These are the only variables (especially the perceived informative feature of campaign) with such features among the ones considered. They are not context sensitive and are useful explanations for the way in which people vote.

One limitation of this study is the convenience sample on a fairly limited number of voters used to observe these behavioural patterns. Further research could address this issue by conducting a study on a large sample that could also pursue representativeness as long as data regarding the profile of voters will become accessible. Another avenue for further research is a more qualitative approach that involves interviews to explain the underlying mechanism. For example, we showed that the perception of informative campaign matters but we cannot know what is behind that perception. Focus groups or extended semi-structured interviews with voters could clarify the meaning and substantiate our findings.

Notes

1. The generic term of Eastern Europe is used to define the broader region to which the three countries belong. There are several definitions of the region and various ways to label these

countries, e.g. two of these countries can be considered Central Europe, while the third lies in South-Eastern Europe. Since identification issues lie beyond the goal of this article, we follow the definition used by the United Nations (<https://unstats.un.org/unsd/methodology/m49/#geo-regions>) that sees all these three countries as belonging to Eastern Europe.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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