

Master thesis

**Euphoria and hangovers in direct democracy: the effects of
winning, losing and abstaining in referendums on citizens'
referendum support**

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Abstract

The use of referendums has risen over the last decades and various surveys suggest that citizens are generally favourable towards referendums. However, as referendums create satisfying outcomes for citizens who vote for the majority option, they could generate ambivalent feelings among those who have lost or have not voted. Little is known about how this inequality affect winners', losers' and non-voters' support for the instrument of a referendum. Based upon multiple-wave survey data from four referendums in Bavaria (Germany), Finland and the Netherlands, this study provides some evidence that referendum support increases among winners and decreases among losers of a referendum in the aftermath of a referendum, but the empirical evidence for a decrease in losers' support is stronger. The perceived importance of a referendum and an unpredicted referendum outcome do barely amplify changes in support levels of winners and losers. The effects for non-voters' support for referendums differ across cases. The study further shows that most citizens are positive or fairly positive about referendums. Although referendums have an impact on citizens' attitudes towards the instrument, referendum support remains high or relatively high after a referendum, also among losers.

Keywords: direct democracy, referendums, referendum support, winner-loser gap, non-voting, public opinion

1. Introduction

Over the last decades, the use of referendums has increased worldwide (Altman, 2017; Qvortrup, 2017). In most U.S. states and cities, direct democracy has become a common practice and a growing number of European countries has gained experience with referendums on a national level. Most opinion surveys suggest vast majorities in Western democracies welcome the increased use of referendums. In the United States, more than 70 percent approve direct democracy at the state and local level, while a two-third majority would favour referendums at a federal level – also in European countries, there is majority support for the instrument (Donovan & Karp, 2006; Smith et al., 2010).

However, in recent years, referendums in e.g. Colombia, Hungary, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands have reignited the debate about referendums (Hendriks et al., 2017: 9). Some are concerned that referendums lead to a “tyranny of the majority”, in which the 51 percent decides and the voice and rights of minorities could become oppressed (Hendriks et al., 2017: 14-17). Referendums create winners and losers – especially in referendums on EU membership, secession or other crucial political decisions, the outcomes could provide important advantages for those who win, but the costs could be perceived as high for those who lose.

Nevertheless, little known is about whether and how this inequality affects the attitudes towards the referendum of citizens who were faced with a defeat or a victory in a direct vote. This winner-loser gap however has been elaboratively studied for elections. After elections, those who vote for a winning candidate or party (‘winners’) are generally most satisfied with the way democracy works, while ‘losers’ are most likely to be dissatisfied with democracy and to favour changes of the existing electoral rules (see e.g.: Anderson et al., 2005; Anderson & Tverdova, 2001; Blais & Gélinau, 2007; Esaiasson, 2011).

Studies about the effects of winning or losing a referendum are seldom: Marien and Kern (2017) found that the levels of general political support among winners of a referendum increase after the vote, while those of losers remain stable. It has not been studied whether a victory or a defeat in a referendum could affect support for the instrument of a referendum. For the long-run support for referendums, however, it is crucial that the instrument could rely upon the consent of those who are faced with a defeat in a referendum (cf. Anderson et al., 2005: 7).

In addition, non-voters are often an overlooked group in the political science literature about winners and losers. However, their relevance is increasing with the global decline in voter turnout, while several studies show that non-voting is associated with lower evaluations of

democracy (Rich, 2015; Rich & Treece, 2016). As turnout in referendums is often lower than in elections and therefore likely to be more unequally distributed among groups of citizens (Leininger, 2015: 18), this creates a further concern about the effects for referendum support among those who did abstain.

This study attempts to explore the effects of ‘losing’, ‘winning’ and ‘abstaining’ in referendums on citizens’ referendum support. The central research question of this study is phrased as: *To what extent does winning, losing or abstaining in referendums affect referendum support of citizens?*

To answer above question, the study combines theoretical insights from the literature about electoral winners, losers and non-voters with empirical multiple-wave public opinion data from two EU-related referendums in the Netherlands, the EU membership referendum in Finland and one referendum on a federal state level in Bavaria (Germany). The study’s methodological strength lies with its use of panel data, as it makes the statistical analyses very suitable for establishing causal inferences and for controlling for confounding factors (see e.g.: Daniller, 2016; Esaiasson, 2011; Singh et al., 2012).

By answering this question, this study adds a new dimension to the ongoing scientific debate how to explain which groups of citizens favour referendums. Two hypotheses have dominated this debate: the *cognitive mobilization (new politics)* hypothesis and the *political dissatisfaction* hypothesis (see e.g.: Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009; Coffé & Michels, 2014; Dalton et al., 2001; Donovan & Karp, 2006; Schuck & De Vreese, 2015).

The *cognitive mobilization (new politics)* hypothesis assumes that popular support for direct democracy has increased because of societal modernization: citizens are higher educated and post-materialist values become priorities in Western societies over materialist values. Because of their post-materialist values, citizens would become more sceptical about hierarchical authorities, such as political parties, and would favour a new participatory style of politics with an emphasis on direct action and participation. Because of their higher education, citizens will also feel more competent to directly participate in decision-making (Bengtsson & Matilla, 2009: 1032-1033; Dalton et al., 2001: 145-146). Therefore, this hypothesis claims that support for referendums is higher for those with a higher education, more cognitive skills, better access to political information and higher levels of political interest and efficacy (Bengtsson & Matilla, 2009: 1033; Coffé & Michels, 2014: 3; Schuck & De Vreese, 2015: 150).

On the contrary, the *political dissatisfaction* hypothesis assumes that referendum support is higher for citizens who are dissatisfied and frustrated by representative democracy (Bengtsson & Matilla, 2009, 1033). These citizens favour changes of the existing political system and the referendum provides them an alternative to support for (Schuck & De Vreese, 2015: 151). The “political dissatisfaction” hypothesis is in line with the larger support for referendums among voters of protest parties (Dalton et al., 2001: 148). As lower educated citizens are suggested to be most politically dissatisfied, they are expected to be more strongly in favour of direct democracy (Coffé & Michels, 2014: 3).

The empirical evidence for these hypotheses, however, is diffused. As Donovan and Karp (2006: 685) argue, based upon their study of support for direct democracy in six Western democracies: “neither the cognitive mobilization theory nor the political disaffection theory explains much of the variance in levels of support”.

Besides, another stream of literature suggest that citizens’ support for referendums is fluid, rather than stable and constant (e.g. Smith et al., 2010). In an experimental study among U.S. citizens, Bowler and Donovan (2007) have shown that support for a national referendum decreased when the reform proposal was framed in terms of risk by rephrasing the question wording of survey items. Building upon these insights, this study explores the stability of public opinion towards referendums in a real-life setting and it provides insights about how citizens’ views about referendums are (re)shaped after being confronted with its positive or negative outcomes.

The outline of this article will be as follows. Firstly, the study reviews the literature about winners, losers and non-voters and introduces the hypotheses. In the remaining, cases, data and methods will be discussed, followed by the empirical findings. The study ends with a conclusion and a discussion.

2. Theory: effects of winning, losing and abstaining

Besides the work of Marien and Kern (2017), little attempt has been made to study the effects of citizens’ status as a winner or loser in referendums. However, this study could draw upon the large body of political science literature that has examined differences between electoral ‘winners’ and ‘losers’. Several scholars have investigated the effects of people’s status as winner or loser in elections for attitudes towards government, democracy and political institutions (see e.g.: Anderson et al., 2005; Anderson & LoTempio, 2002; Nadeau & Blais, 1993; Esaiasson, 2011).

‘Winners’, those who vote for a winning party or a winning candidate, are expected to have the most positive attitudes and evaluations about the political system (Rich & Treece, 2016: 1-2) – for instance, it has been shown that an electoral victory positively affects feelings of government responsiveness and satisfaction with democracy. Winning further increases levels of political efficacy and political trust (Anderson & LoTempio, 2002: 336). In a similar logic, losers are most likely to be dissatisfied with the status quo and to favour changes in the existing institutional arrangements (Anderson & Tverdova, 2001: 321). Furthermore, losers have generally less faith in the fairness and efficacy of elections and show less support for democratic principles (Anderson et al., 2005: 47-49). Empirical findings are very consistent: differences between winners and losers have been established for a wide range of political attitudes among a wide variety of democracies, with the largest effects being reported in majoritarian systems, rather than consensual democracies (Anderson & Guillony, 1997: 77-79), and in newly established democracies, such as in Central and Eastern Europe (Anderson et al., 2005: 102-108; Esaiasson, 2011: 102).

From a policy perspective, the ‘winner-loser’ gap is explained by the fact that winners are more likely to expect the implementation of their preferred policies and are, therefore, happier, more trustful and more satisfied than losers (Anderson et al., 2005: 3). However, as Singh (2014: 309-310) and Singh et al. (2012: 202) argue, the effects of winning or losing elections can further be considered to be largely psychological. Being a winner creates positive emotions, while losing will boost a range of negative emotions, as anger and disillusionment – and these psychological effects do not only hold for e.g. sports games, but are also present on election days.

In line with findings on winner-loser dynamics in elections, this study will examine the impact of winning and losing in referendums on referendum support. It will be expected that winners of referendums – those who voted for the majority option in a referendum – will be more positive about the instrument, while losers – those who voted for the minority option – will become more negative. This leads to the following hypotheses:

H1: Those who vote for the majority option in a referendum will be more supportive of referendums after the referendum.

H2: Those who vote for the minority option in a referendum will be less supportive of referendums after the referendum.

The effects of winning or losing an election are not equal across individuals. Researchers have distinguished different types of winners and losers (Anderson et al., 2005: Ch. 5). For example, satisfaction with democracy will be the highest for those winners who vote most in line with their preferences – winners’ sentiments are mediated through the ideological proximity to the party they voted for (Campbell, 2015: 180). Singh (2014: 322-323) also noted that winners will be more satisfied if they vote for a party they have strong ideological similarities with – the strongest effects, however, are found for winners who highly ranked their party in terms of likeability and identification. In addition, negative feelings about the winning party and the policies associated with it tend to depress losers’ support for elections (Nadeau & Blais, 1993: 562). According to Daniller (2016: 158-159), voters who are more engaged with elections are likely to experience a more severe disappointment if their preferred candidate loses, which translated into decreased perceptions of electoral legitimacy. For those who support the winning candidate, a higher individual investment in the election predicts a greater increase in perceived electoral legitimacy (Daniller, 2016: 156). As citizens’ engagement with elections amplify the effects of winning or losing elections for attitudes towards democracy, it will be tested whether the effects of ‘winning’ or ‘losing’ a referendum will be larger for those winners and losers who are more concerned with the referendum and consider the referendum outcome as a more important decision, thus:

H3: The effects of a referendum victory or defeat for citizens’ referendum support will be larger for those winners and losers who consider the outcome of the particular referendum as more important.

Expectations about the referendum outcome may also affect how winners and losers evaluate the instrument of a referendum after a vote. Howell & Justwan (2013: 342) showed that satisfaction with democracy among winners is the highest in close elections and decreases as the margin of victory increases. On the other hand, losers’ satisfaction is not affected by the margin of defeat (Howell & Justwan, 2013: 335). Blais and Gélinau (2007: 427) however predicted that “only voters who wrongly assessed the chances of their party to win or lose will change their assessment of democracy after the election”. Those who correctly expected the chances of their party winning or losing the election should have no reason to change their perceptions about democracy after the election results are known. For the case of the 1997 Canadian elections, Blais and Gélinau (2007: 433) however did not find that outcome expectations affect losers’ or winners’ assessment of the functioning of democracy, but “further research is required to determine whether this is a general pattern or not” (Blais & Gélinau,

2007: 437). In the context of the U.S. presidential elections in 2008, a more recent study of Hollander (2014) found support for the claim that surprised losers were more likely than their fellow losers to perceive the government as a threat and to question electoral integrity. There were however no differences between surprised and unsurprised losers in terms of satisfaction with democracy, trust in government, or perceived electoral responsiveness (Hollander, 2014: 659).

However, this study still consider the outcome expectations of winners and losers with regard to a referendum to get a better understanding of the effects of winner-loser dynamics in referendums for levels of support and to see whether above findings hold for referendums as well.

H4: The effects of a referendum victory or defeat for citizens' referendum support will be larger for those winners and losers who were surprised by the outcome.

Next to winners and losers, non-voters are often an overlooked group, but their significance in elections is growing with decreasing turnout worldwide (Rich, 2015: 247; Rich & Treece, 2016: 5). Although the group of non-voters largely varies, it is suggested that non-voting mostly reflect an alienation from the democratic process, which may account for negative perceptions about democracy. For eight East Asian democracies, Rich (2015: 255-256) found that non-voting in elections was negatively correlated with satisfaction with democracy, although voting for the losing camp has a greater negative effect. Rich & Treece (2016: 6-7) distinguished three categories of non-voters: non-voters with a preference for a winning party, those with a preference for a losing party and those without a party preference. In the context of Germany, all groups of non-voters negatively correspond with democratic satisfaction. However, non-voters who support losers or who had no party preference were more dissatisfied than non-voters who support winners (Rich & Treece, 2016: 15-16). In line with these findings, the final hypotheses are phrased as:

H5: Non-voters will be less supportive of referendums after the referendum.

H6: The effect of a referendum will be more negative for non-voters with no preference or a preference for the minority option than those with a preference for the majority option.

3. Methods

Most research on the political attitudes among electoral winners and losers have drawn upon cross-sectional post-election surveys to aggregate differences in perceptions between winners and losers – the so-called “winner-loser gap” or “legitimacy gap” (Daniller, 2016: 152; Esaiasson, 2011: 104). However, cross-sectional data is poorly suited to explain changes in perceptions among winners and losers. To trace the dynamics of winners’ and losers’ attitudes during an electoral or referendum process, panel data is needed with a before-after design which has identical measures of system support or other attitudes in both waves of the survey (Daniller, 2016: 158; Esaiasson, 2011: 104). Some studies in this field did make use of such a longitudinal survey design (e.g. Blais & Gélinau, 2007; Daniller, 2016; Singh et al., 2012). As such an approach is very suitable to make causal inferences, this study uses a before-after design with multiple-wave survey data as well.

3.1. Case selection

Hypotheses are tested by using public opinion data collected around four referendums: the Dutch referendum about the Ukraine-EU Association Agreement (2016), the Bavarian non-smokers protection referendum (2010), the Dutch European Constitution referendum (2005) and the Finnish EU membership referendum (1994). The Netherlands and Finland are interesting cases, because of the limited experience of its citizens with referendums on a national level. For the Netherlands, the two referendums were the first occasions in which Dutch citizens could participate in a national referendum within two centuries (Hendriks et al., 2017: 55). For Finland, the referendum of 1994 was the first national referendum in the country since 1931 (Suksi, 1996: 52). Because referendums happened occasionally in these countries, it is possible to study the effects of winning, losing and abstaining in referendums on referendum support without the effects of citizens’ earlier experiences with a national referendum. Furthermore, as EU issues are a popular topic for referendums in various countries (see: Hendriks et al., 2017: 133-134), these three EU-related referendums are clear examples for these bunch of referendums.

Table 1 | Cases: referendums

Case	Referendum	Outcomes
The Netherlands (2016)	Referendum on the Ukraine-EU Association Agreement	Turnout: 32%: 61% No, 38% Yes
Bavaria (2010)	Non-smokers protection referendum	Turnout: 38%: 61% Yes, 39% No
The Netherlands (2005)	Referendum on the European Constitution	Turnout: 63%: 62% No, 38% Yes
Finland (1994)	Referendum on joining the European Union	Turnout: 71%: 57% Yes, 43% No

(sources: *Bayerisches Landesamt für Statistik und Datenverarbeitung; Datenbank und Suchmaschine für direkte Demokratie, sudd.ch; European Election Database; Kiesraad*)¹

In addition, the Bavarian non-smokers protection referendum provides information about the winner-loser dynamics in a referendum in a federal state, which has already had quite some experience with direct democracy before (Hendriks et al., 2017: 130). Although the selection of these referendums exists out of four cases, these referendums reflect a large part of the variety in referendums: it includes two referendums that have been initiated by parliament, one that has been initiated by citizens to reverse a parliamentary decision and one that has been initiated by citizens to propose new legislation. As Table 1 shows, although the margins of defeat are quite similar for these four referendums, they do differ in terms of turnout rates. Furthermore, half of the referendums resulted in a majority for the “Yes” vote, while the other half had a “No” victory as its outcome. Crucially, for all referendums, panel data was available which includes the relevant information on the dependent variable in both a pre- and post-referendum wave.

3.2. Data collection

The following datasets have been used for the purposes of this study. For the Dutch Ukraine referendum, data was obtained from the Election Survey Ukraine referendum, which was conducted among members of the Dutch LISS Panel (CentERdata, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c; Jacobs et al., 2016). The survey was fielded twice during the campaign period in the run up to the referendum, followed by a post-referendum questionnaire directly after the vote (Jacobs et al., 2016: 67-68). In these waves, the N varies between 2.300 and 2.600 – a number of 1.856 respondents participated in at least one of the pre-wave surveys and the post-wave survey. With regard to the Bavarian non-smokers protection referendum, public opinion data was collected

¹For the Dutch Ukraine referendum, blank votes are officially valid and are considered as part of the referendum outcome. As 0.8% of the voters cast a blank vote during the Ukraine referendum, combining the percentages of both “Yes” and “No” votes does not precisely equal 100 per cent.

by Infratest dimap at the behest of Otto-Friedrich-Universität Bamberg (Hilmer & Hofrichter, 2010). A pre-referendum survey was conducted by 4.000 respondents and 2.003 of these respondents participated in the post-referendum survey (Hilmer & Hofrichter, 2010: 2). The Dutch Referendum Study 2005 (Aarts & Van der Kolk, 2005/2007) has been used for the Dutch European Constitution referendum. Here, a sample of the electorate was surveyed by GfK Benelux and the survey consists out of a pre-referendum and a post-referendum measurement – 1.224 respondents participated in both waves (Aarts & Van der Kolk, 2005/2007: 4-6). For the Finnish EU membership referendum, data was used from the referendum study of the Finnish Social Science Data Archive (Pesonen & Sänkiaho, 2002). In the pre-referendum wave of the survey, 1.559 respondents participated and 1.316 of them conducted the post-referendum survey (Pesonen & Sänkiaho, 2002: 3). To deal with missing observations, a listwise deletion of respondents with missing data on the key variables of interest has been employed for all cases (see: Allison, 2001).

3.3. Data analysis

In this study, citizens' support for referendums serves as dependent variable. Table 2 shows that such attitudes have been measured differently across the various surveys. In the 2016 Dutch referendum study and the 2010 Bavarian referendum study, items are related to citizens' general approval of referendums. In the Finnish referendum survey, however, items were included that were more specifically formulated or related to the EU membership referendum. The 2005 Dutch referendum study includes survey items that measure general referendum approval and a specific attitude about the referendum about the European Constitution. There are further differences in terms of level of measurement: some items are measured on a dichotomous scale, while others on a five-point Likert scale. However, all items have in common that they were asked before and after the referendum among largely the same respondents.²

²As the 2016 Dutch referendum study consisted out of two pre-referendum waves, respondents' prior-level support for referendums is reflected by the mean score of these two observations. For respondents with only a score for one of the pre-wave measures, the particular score is used. As such, the sample size will be enhanced and the number of missing observations will be reduced.

Table 2 | Approval of referendums: measurement of dependent variable across datasets

<i>Referendum</i>	<i>Item</i>	<i>Measurement</i>
Netherlands (2016)	Some of the decisions that are important for our country need to be voted on directly by the electorate, by means of a referendum	1= Disagree completely 2= Disagree 3= Neither agree, nor disagree 4= Agree 5= Agree completely
Bavaria (2010)	Referendums are a good way to decide upon important political issues.	1= Fully agree 2= Tend to agree 3= Neither agree or disagree 4= Tend to disagree 5= Fully disagree
	At the federal level, referendums and plebiscites should not be introduced.	1= Fully agree 2= Tend to agree 3= Neither agree or disagree 4= Tend to disagree 5= Fully disagree
Netherlands (2005)	Some people approve in general of the people being able to influence the Second Chamber via referenda, others don't, and again some others think something in between. What's your opinion on a scale from 1 (general approval) to 5 (general disapproval)?	1= In general I disapprove of national referenda 5= In general I approve of national referenda
	Some people approve of a referendum on the European Constitution, others don't. What is your opinion?	1= I disapprove of this referendum 2= I approve of this referendum
Finland (1994)	Would it have been better if the Government and Parliament had made the decision about Finland's EU-membership, or was it the right thing to hold a referendum?	1= Government and Parliament should have decided 2= Referendum was the right thing
	In your opinion, should politicians abide by the outcome of the referendum or would you be willing to let Parliament decide against the outcome?	1= Abide by the outcome 2= Parliament can decide

The independent variable in this study is citizens' turnout and voting behaviour in referendums. To measure people's voting behaviour and not their vote intention, these information will be obtained from the post-referendum surveys. Respondents have been classified as "winner" if

they indicate they have voted for the majority option and as “loser” if they indicate a vote for the minority option. The study further considers the views of non-voters. In the case of the two Dutch referendums, non-voters have been further distinguished between those with a majority preference and those with none or a minority preference.³ Respondents who indicated they voted invalid or blank, were excluded from the analyses.

On a crucial note, respondents’ recall of their vote choice in a post-referendum survey is still self-reported behaviour and does not reflect actual vote choice per se. Some, as Daniller (2016), use pre-election preferences instead post-election reported vote choice to differentiate between winners and losers to ensure that “respondents’ choices were not potentially tainted by knowledge of the election outcome” (Daniller, 2016: 154). This issue has been elaboratively discussed by Anderson et al. (2005: 33-36). Based upon pre-election and post-election Eurobarometer surveys, they however show that large majorities of respondents report the same voting choice before and after the election. Anderson et al. (2005: 35) argue that “assuming that there is some degree of measurement error inherent in *any* measure of vote choice, there seems to be little difference between classifying winners and losers on the basis of vote recall (past vote) or vote intention (future vote).”

Next to turnout and voting behaviour in referendums, this study considers two additional effects that are suggested to amplify the effects of winning or losing a referendum for citizens’ referendum support. The first one is the importance that citizens give to the referendum. In the pre-wave survey prior to the Bavarian non-smokers protection referendum, respondents could indicate on a five-point Likert scale how important the result of the referendum would be for them personally. In the run up to the Finnish EU membership referendum, respondents were asked how important a decision it is to Finland to decide whether to join the European Union or not. The survey item provides three answer categories: it was the most important decision, one of the important decisions or it was not very important. A slightly different item has been used in the surveys before the Dutch Ukraine referendum. Here, respondents could indicate on a five-point Likert scale how much interested they were in the Ukraine-EU Association Agreement. In the 2005 Dutch Referendum Study, no questions were related to respondents’

³For the case of the European Constitution referendum, the preferences of non-voters have not been considered for the analysis of specific approval of a referendum about the European Constitution, as the number of non-voters was very small (N=74). In the Finnish referendum survey, the number of non-voters with a minority or none preference was rather small. In the Bavarian referendum survey, non-voters were not asked about their preferences with regard to the referendum outcome.

views about the importance of the referendum – therefore, these effects have not been studied for this case.⁴

To consider the effects of ‘surprised defeats’ and ‘surprised victories’, respondents’ outcome expectations are included. Outcome expectation is operationalized as a variable with three different scores: a value of 0 for those who correctly predicted which of the two sides would get majority support in the referendum (*unsurprised*), a value of 0.5 for those who indicate that they did not know which side would win or who predicted a 50/50-outcome and a value of 1 for those who incorrectly predicted which side would win the referendum (*surprised*).⁵ By including an interaction effect between outcome expectation and winner/loser status in the analysis, it will be tested whether the effects of outcome expectations are different for winners than for losers.

The study further includes control variables for demographic background. As respondents’ scores of post-level referendum support can be compared with prior information about their support levels, it reduces to a large extent the need to control for background variables that may account for differences between respondents in referendum support. However, to ensure that post-referendum changes are explained by citizens’ status as winner, loser or non-voter and that these changes are not caused by differences in underlying demographic characteristics between these groups, there will be controlled for standard demographic variables as gender, age and level of education.⁶

Some methodological limitations of this study should be considered. Firstly, non-voters are often underrepresented in the various surveys. As a result, some analyses are based upon only a small number of non-voters (N<100). As Jacobs et al. (2016: 69) explained for the case of the Dutch Ukraine referendum, underrepresentation of non-voters has been a concern for most

⁴Variables have been transformed into an 0-1 format with a score of 0 representing the lowest score of perceived importance of the referendum/level of interest in the issue of the referendum and a value of 1 representing the highest score. For the Dutch Ukraine referendum, the survey item has been asked during both pre-waves – the mean score out of these two observations has been used as indicator. Missing values have been replaced by the middle category of 0.5. This applies to only a small number of cases.

⁵Observations were retrieved based upon the pre-wave surveys. In the case of the Dutch Ukraine referendum, observations from the second and last wave of the two pre-referendum waves have been used as an indicator for respondents’ outcome expectations. If these information was missing, first-wave scores were used.

⁶Gender is a dummy variable (0= female, 1= male). Age is operationalized as years divided by 100. Level of education is a variable with three scores: a value of 0 for people with a low level of education, a value of 0.5 for people with a middle level of education and a value of 1 for people with a high level of education.

public opinion surveys as non-response is higher among these citizens. As an effect of participating in the pre-wave survey, it could be that respondents were better informed about the referendum than most of their fellow citizens and, therefore, perhaps more likely to vote, which may further enlarge the overrepresentation of voters (Jacobs et al., 2016: 69). Secondly, a common problem with panel data is attrition. In panel designs, it is unavoidable that some respondents do not participate at some waves (Cheng & Trivedi, 2015). As a consequence of attrition, post-level referendum support and information about actual voting behaviour were missing for some amount of respondents in the several datasets.

4. Results

Tables 3-4 give an overview of pre-level and post-level referendum attitudes among different groups of voters for each referendum. As it has been expected, referendum experiences have different consequences for the views of those who have won ('winners') than of those who have lost the referendum ('losers'). The tables provide some evidence that referendum approval increases among the winners of a referendum and decreases among losers, but the empirical support for a decrease of losers' referendum approval is stronger than for an increase in referendum support among winners.

Generally, losers are less supportive of referendums after they are faced with their defeat. The decline is both significant for losers' views towards the referendum they just have lost as for their attitudes towards referendums in general. There is only one exception to the rule: while losers of the Dutch European Constitution referendum became less supportive of the referendum about the Constitution after the results of the vote were known, their approval of referendums in general did not significantly drop after their defeat.

The effects of a referendum victory are less clear. In line with the expectations, the Finnish EU membership referendum shows that winners were significantly more likely to argue that the referendum was the right thing to do and that politicians should abide by the referendum outcome after the referendum was held. In the aftermath of the Dutch European Constitution referendum, winners were significantly more positive about the referendum they just had won, but the increase in their general referendum approval was insignificant. Winners of the Bavarian non-smokers protection referendum did barely change their attitudes towards referendums. Among the winners of the Dutch Ukraine referendum, the effects were in the opposite direction as expected: their referendum support significantly dropped, even at a 0.001 level.

Table 3 | General referendum approval before and after referendums

	Netherlands (2016)			Bavaria (2010)		
	Referendums about important decisions			Referendums about important decisions		
	<i>Before</i>	<i>After</i>	<i>Diff.</i>	<i>Before</i>	<i>After</i>	<i>Diff.</i>
All	3.59 (1.05)	3.40 (1.08)	-0.19***	4.16 (1.08)	4.00 (1.10)	-0.16***
Winners	4.16 (0.82)	3.95 (0.82)	-0.21***	4.27 (0.97)	4.24 (0.98)	-0.03
Losers	3.16 (1.02)	2.89 (1.07)	-0.27***	4.08 (1.17)	3.82 (1.17)	-0.26***
Non-voters	3.40 (1.03)	3.27 (1.07)	-0.13**	4.05 (1.13)	3.78 (1.16)	-0.27***
Range of N	433-1542			474-1781		
	Bavaria (2010)			Netherlands (2005)		
	Introducing referendums at federal level			General approval of referendums		
	<i>Before</i>	<i>After</i>	<i>Diff.</i>	<i>Before</i>	<i>After</i>	<i>Diff.</i>
All	3.67 (1.36)	3.54 (1.35)	-0.13**	3.94 (1.17)	4.03 (1.14)	+0.09**
Winners	3.61 (1.36)	3.63 (1.30)	+0.02	4.13 (1.08)	4.31 (0.99)	+0.18
Losers	3.73 (1.40)	3.51 (1.39)	-0.22**	3.77 (1.21)	3.68 (1.22)	-0.09
Non-voters	3.70 (1.30)	3.39 (1.38)	-0.31***	3.53 (1.29)	3.91 (1.17)	+0.38**
Range of N	465-1755			106-1148		

Scores reflect mean scores (with standard deviations). All indicators were measured at a five-point Likert scale with 1= lowest level of referendum support and 5= highest level of referendum support. * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$ (Repeated Measures-ANOVA).

The effects of a referendum for the views of those who did not show up at the polling stations, is neither uniform across the four cases. The findings from the Dutch Ukraine referendum and the Bavarian non-smokers protection referendum suggest that non-voters will be more negative about referendums after the experience with a referendum, as is in line with the expectations from the literature. After the Finnish EU membership referendum, non-voters' referendum support decreased as well, but the effects were insignificant. On the contrary, the Dutch European Constitution referendum even shows a significant increase in non-voters' general approval of referendums.

Importantly, these findings further illustrate that most citizens were positive or fairly positive towards the instrument of a referendum in the run-up to these referendums. In nearly all cases, citizens' support for the instrument remains relatively high after the referendum. Although there is clear evidence that a referendum defeat could have negative consequences for losers' support for referendums, large groups of losers were still positive or fairly positive about the instrument after a defeat. Only in the case of the Dutch Ukraine referendum, the mean score of losers' referendum support dropped below the midpoint of the scale.

Table 4 | Specific referendum support before and after referendums

	Netherlands (2005)			Finland (1994)			Finland (1994)		
	Approval of referendum about the European Constitution			Referendum was the right thing			Politicians should abide by the outcome		
	<i>Before</i>	<i>After</i>	<i>Diff.</i>	<i>Before</i>	<i>After</i>	<i>Diff.</i>	<i>Before</i>	<i>After</i>	<i>Diff.</i>
All	81.3%	83.4%	+2.1	85.9%	84.4%	-1.5	80.2%	78.8%	-1.4
Winners	87.2%	93.7%	+6.5***	79.7%	83.1%	+3.4*	72.1%	87.1%	+15***
Losers	74.5%	68.8%	-5.7*	94.1%	86.1%	-8***	91.7%	65.8%	-25.9***
Non-voters	74.3%	85.1%	+10.8	90.8%	85.3%	-5.5	86.1%	76.9%	-9.2
Range of N	73-1001			109-1209			108-1186		

*Scores reflect the percentages of respondents who indicate to agree with the statement. * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$ (McNemar's test of symmetry).*

In a next step, regression techniques have been used for a more rigorous understanding of post-referendum changes in citizens' opinions towards the instrument (see Tables 5, 6 and 7). In a basic regression model (Table 5) – with support for referendums after the vote as a dependent variable – respondents' prior-level support for referendums was included, while dummy variables were created for people's status as winner/loser with the group of non-voters as the baseline category. There has further been controlled for the background variables gender, age and level of education.

These models (Table 5) make clear that prior-level support is an important and significant predictor of citizens' referendum support after the experience of referendum for all cases. They further illustrate that the experience of winning or losing a referendum has a significant impact on post-level referendum support in most of the cases, also after controlling for differences in

demographic characteristics between winners, losers and non-voters. The results confirm to a large extent a general pattern that holding a referendum has the most positive consequences for winners' support for referendums, but is least beneficial for losers' levels of referendum support.

Table 5 | The impact of a referendum victory or defeat on post-referendum changes in levels of support

	Netherlands (2016) <i>Referendums about important issues</i>	Bavaria (2010) <i>Referendums about important issues</i>	Bavaria (2010) <i>Introducing referendums at federal level</i>	Netherlands (2005) <i>General approval of referendums</i>
	Coeff. (SE)	Coeff. (SE)	Coeff. (SE)	Coeff. (SE)
Prior-level support	0.576*** (0.03)	0.483*** (0.02)	0.349*** (0.02)	0.444*** (0.03)
Winner	0.235*** (0.06)	0.316*** (0.06)	0.291*** (0.07)	0.141 (0.10)
Loser	-0.236*** (0.06)	-0.010 (0.06)	0.124 (0.08)	-0.303** (0.11)
Male	0.056 (0.05)	0.065 (0.05)	0.207** (0.06)	0.026 (0.06)
Age	-0.221 (0.13)	0.086 (0.14)	-0.496** (0.18)	-0.045 (0.19)
Level of education	-0.127* (0.06)	-0.045 (0.06)	-0.062 (0.08)	-0.218** (0.08)
Constant	1.473*** (0.12)	1.804*** (0.13)	2.276*** (0.15)	2.447*** (0.17)
R ²	0.42	0.25	0.14	0.28
N of cases	1272	1833	1811	1149
	Netherlands (2005) <i>Approval of referendum about the European Constitution</i>	Finland (1994) <i>Referendum was the right thing</i>	Finland (1994) <i>Politicians should abide by the outcome</i>	
	Coeff. (SE)	Coeff. (SE)	Coeff. (SE)	
Prior-level support	2.126*** (0.21)	2.547*** (0.21)	1.532*** (0.19)	
Winner	0.671 (0.40)	0.486 (0.34)	0.990*** (0.28)	
Loser	-1.010*** (0.38)	0.048 (0.34)	-0.680** (0.27)	
Male	-0.034 (0.20)	-0.327 (0.19)	0.157 (0.15)	
Age	-0.252 (0.65)	-1.889** (0.57)	0.442 (0.49)	
Level of education	-0.892** (0.29)	-0.159 (0.21)	0.263 (0.19)	
Constant	-1.092 (0.63)	-1.959*** (0.56)	-0.434 (0.37)	
Nagelkerke R ²	0.34	0.25	0.17	
N of cases	1001	1192	1171	

*The first row reports unstandardized coefficients from linear regression models, the second row reports unstandardized coefficients from logistic regression models. *p < 0.05. **p < 0.01. ***p < 0.001.*

This is perfectly illustrated by the Dutch Ukraine referendum. Here, winners were more likely than non-voters to report a boost in referendum support, while losers were most likely to report a decrease. For the Bavarian non-smokers protection referendum, such an effect was found for a referendum victory, but losers react similarly to the referendum result as non-voters. In the case of the Dutch European Constitution referendum, a referendum victory did not boost referendum support, as compared to abstention. Losers of the referendum, however, were more

likely than non-voters to respond negatively to the referendum outcome. For the case of the Finnish EU membership referendum, evidence was mixed. A victory or a defeat in the referendum does not seem to account for changes in citizens' judgement about whether holding the referendum was the right thing. Both winning and losing did have a significant impact in the expected direction on citizens' post-referendum attitudes about whether politicians should be abide by the referendum.

Post-referendum changes in referendum support further seem to differ across demographic groups, also after controlling for people's status as winner/loser/non-voter. These effects are however not uniform across cases. In the aftermath of both Dutch referendums, people's level of education has a negative effect for post-referendum changes in support. The cases of the Bavarian and Finnish referendums suggest that the experience with a referendum has the most positive consequences for referendum support of younger people, but the effects were not significant for all items. Overall, people's status as winner/loser/non-voter is a stronger predictor for post-referendum changes in levels of referendum support.

To test additional hypotheses, the effects of respondents' perceived importance of the referendum and their expectations of the referendum outcome, as well as the interaction effects between these variables and people's winner/loser status, have been included in an elaborative model (see Table 6). This provides no reason to assume that the perceived importance of a referendum among winners and losers has consequences for post-referendum changes in their support levels. In not a single case, winners with higher levels of perceived importance of the referendum/interest in the issue would reported a higher increase in referendum support than their fellow winners. The results are similar for losers who were most concerned with the referendum. Surprisingly, for losers of the Dutch Ukraine referendum, interest in the issue even cushions the effect of a defeat (see: Table 6).

Only weak evidence was found that the consequences of winning or losing a referendum are larger for surprised winners or losers. Referendum support did not more strongly increase among surprised winners than among unsurprised winners. A significant interaction effect between loser status and outcome expectation was only found in the case of losers' specific approval of the European Constitution referendum: in other cases, a decrease in referendum support was not more likely for surprised losers than for unsurprised losers.

Table 6 | The impact of perceived importance and outcome expectations on post-referendum changes in levels of support

	Netherlands (2016)	Bavaria (2010)	Bavaria (2010)	Netherlands (2005)
	<i>Referendums about important issues</i>	<i>Referendums about important issues</i>	<i>Introducing referendums at federal level</i>	<i>General approval of referendums</i>
	Coeff. (SE)	Coeff. (SE)	Coeff. (SE)	Coeff. (SE)
Prior-level support	0.574***(0.02)	0.478*** (0.02)	0.345*** (0.02)	0.444*** (0.03)
Winner	0.161 (0.13)	0.118 (0.14)	0.050 (0.19)	0.142 (0.14)
Loser	-0.622*** (0.17)	-0.029 (0.14)	-0.126 (0.18)	-0.272 (0.14)
Male	0.055 (0.05)	0.073 (0.05)	0.215*** (0.06)	0.027 (0.06)
Age	-0.226 (0.13)	0.068 (0.14)	-0.509** (0.18)	-0.040 (0.19)
Level of education	-0.122* (0.06)	-0.054 (0.06)	-0.061 (0.08)	-0.218** (0.08)
Importance	-0.160 (0.15)	0.102 (0.14)	0.131 (0.19)	---
Expectation	0.049 (0.10)	-0.156 (0.09)	0.011 (0.12)	0.020 (0.24)
Winner * Importance	0.263 (0.22)	0.142 (0.20)	0.300 (0.26)	---
Loser * Importance	0.658* (0.26)	-0.174 (0.20)	0.285 (0.27)	---
Winner * Expectation	-0.148 (0.16)	0.141 (0.12)	-0.080 (0.16)	0.002 (0.26)
Loser * Expectation	0.016 (0.05)	0.233 (0.13)	0.123 (0.17)	-0.080 (0.26)
Constant	1.526*** (0.15)	1.856*** (0.15)	2.232*** (0.18)	2.436*** (0.19)
R ²	0.42	0.26	0.14	0.27
N of cases	1272	1833	1811	1149
	Netherlands (2005)	Finland (1994)	Finland (1994)	
	<i>Approval of referendum about the European Constitution</i>	<i>Referendum was the right thing</i>	<i>Politicians should abide by the outcome</i>	
	Coeff. (SE)	Coeff. (SE)	Coeff. (SE)	
Prior-level support	2.183*** (0.21)	2.652*** (0.21)	1.608*** (0.20)	
Winner	1.242 (0.48)	0.250 (0.83)	1.146 (0.70)	
Loser	-0.270 (0.47)	0.485 (0.83)	-0.258 (0.65)	
Male	-0.007 (0.20)	-0.371* (0.19)	0.119 (0.15)	
Age	-0.229 (0.66)	-1.944** (0.58)	0.539 (0.50)	
Level of education	-0.877** (0.29)	-0.197 (0.22)	0.269 (0.19)	
Importance	---	-0.054 (0.96)	-0.132 (0.76)	
Expectation	1.709 (0.94)	-0.011 (0.64)	0.002(0.50)	
Winner * Importance	---	0.526 (1.05)	0.093 (0.88)	
Loser * Importance	---	-0.475 (1.04)	-0.273 (0.81)	
Winner * Expectation	-1.651 (1.06)	-0.606 (0.71)	-0.790 (0.57)	
Loser * Expectation	-2.098* (0.98)	-0.198 (0.72)	-0.411 (0.55)	
Constant	-1.797** (0.70)	-2.047*** (0.89)	-0.430 (0.66)	
Nagelkerke R ²	0.35	0.26	0.18	
N of cases	1001	1192	1171	

*The first row reports unstandardized coefficients from linear regression models, the second row reports unstandardized coefficients from logistic regression models. *p < 0.05. **p<0.01. ***p<0.001.*

For both Dutch referendums, it has been tested whether general approval of referendums did change differently for non-voters with a preference for the winning option in the referendum

than for other non-voters (see Table 7). The results vary: non-voters with a majority preference became relatively more positive towards referendums than other non-voters after the Dutch Ukraine referendum. For the European Constitution referendum, there were however no differences between ‘winning’ non-voters and other non-voters.

Table 7 | The impact of a majority preference on non-voters’ post-referendum changes in levels of support

	Netherlands (2016)	Netherlands (2005)
	<i>Referendums about important issues</i>	<i>General approval of referendums</i>
	Coeff. (SE)	Coeff. (SE)
Prior-level support	0.563***(0.03)	0.443*** (0.03)
Winner	0.316*** (0.07)	0.204 (0.15)
Loser	-0.107*(0.07)	-0.240 (0.15)
Male	0.050 (0.05)	0.026 (0.06)
Age	-0.217 (0.13)	-0.045 (0.19)
Level of education	-0.123* (0.06)	-0.216** (0.08)
Non-voter with majority preference	0.169* (0.08)	0.115 (0.19)
Constant	1.443*** (0.12)	2.385*** (0.20)
R ²	0.42	0.28
N of cases	1272	1149

*The table reports unstandardized coefficients from linear regression models.. *p < 0.05. **p<0.01. ***p<0.001.*

All in all, the findings suggest that a referendum victory could have positive consequences for the support levels for referendums among winners, but that a referendum defeat could lead to a decrease of losers’ referendum support. Nevertheless, the empirical evidence is mixed: an increase in winners’ referendum support has only partly been found in some cases, while support did even decrease among winners of the Dutch Ukraine referendum. Hypothesis 1 is therefore partly supported. The evidence for a decline of losers’ support levels is stronger and Hypothesis 2 is largely confirmed, although the case of the Dutch European Constitution referendum shows that a referendum defeat does not necessarily have to lead to lower levels of referendum approval. The perceived importance of a referendum and an unpredicted referendum outcome barely affect post-referendum changes in support levels among winners and losers. Evidence for both Hypotheses 3 and 4 is therefore very weak. The effects for non-voters’ referendum approval are diffused: in half of the cases, empirical support was found for the claim that non-voters will become more negative about the instrument of a referendum after being confronted with it. The results partly show that a referendum will have more negative consequences for the views of non-voters with a minority preference or none preference than for non-voters who prefer the majority option. Hypotheses 5 and 6 are limitedly supported.

5. Conclusion and discussion

Various studies have underlined that vast majorities of citizens in Western democracies approve the use of referendums. Negative or positive experiences with institutions could however reshape people's perceptions and political attitudes. Some suggest that referendum support is rather fluid than stable (Bowler & Donovan, 2007; Smith et al., 2010). Although the number of referendums has increased since the 1970s (Qvortup, 2017), still little was known about the effects of the experience with a referendum and, more specifically, about the effects of winning, losing and abstaining in referendums for citizens' support for the instrument.

Based upon multiple-wave survey data from referendums in Bavaria, Finland and The Netherlands, this study provides some evidence that a referendum victory could lead to an increase of referendum support among winners and a referendum defeat could to a decrease in losers' support for the instrument. The empirical evidence for a decrease in losers' support is however stronger. A decrease in non-voters' referendum support was observed in half of the cases.

As such, this study shows to some extent that insights from the political science literature about electoral winners and losers and non-voters also hold for referendums (e.g. Anderson et al., 2005). It largely confirms that support for an institution decreased as people are confronted with negative consequences of the institution (Bowler & Donovan, 2007; Smith et al., 2010). Nevertheless, the effects are not uniform across cases. Although people's status as winner, loser or non-voter seems to matter for post-referendum changes in support for the instrument, this suggests that the case-specific elements and context of a referendum are further of crucial importance.

The question remains how differences across these four cases could be explained. As the Dutch Ukraine referendum shows, a referendum experience could lead to a decline of support levels for referendums among all groups of voters, including winners. Although various explanations are possible, this overall decline of referendum support could be considered in the light of the negative media publicity for the referendum in the days before the vote. These negative sentiments were mainly an effect of an interview with the initiators of the Ukraine referendum, in which they stated that their motivation to initiate the referendum has barely to do with Ukraine or the treaty, but with fostering the destruction of the EU (see: Hendriks et al., 2017: 42). On the other hand, the Dutch experience with the European Constitution referendum illustrates that a referendum could also boost referendum approval of winners and even non-voters, while losers' support levels remain stable.

It is remarkable that both the perceived importance of a referendum and outcome expectations do not account for changes in winners' and losers' perceptions after the vote. Winners and losers who considered the referendum as important were not more likely than their fellow winners or losers to show post-referendum changes in their referendum support. These findings are striking as levels of investment, alignment and attachment have been suggested to amplify the effects of winning and losing in elections (e.g. Daniller, 2016; Nadeau & Blais, 1993; Singh et al., 2012). Beside a single exception, there were no differences found in post-referendum changes between surprised and unsurprised winners and neither between surprised and unsurprised losers. However, these findings are in line with Blais and Gélinau (2007) and Hollander (2014). It seems that surprised victories and defeats do barely affect winners' and losers' perceptions, neither after elections or referendums.

Importantly, above findings should be considered in the light of high referendum support in society. All cases show that majorities of citizens were at least fairly positive about the instrument of a referendum in the days before they could participate in a referendum. These high levels of pre-level support could partly explain why only limited evidence was found for an increase of winners' support for the instrument, as it was for some of them even impossible to obtain higher values of referendum support than their scores reported in the pre-wave survey. Furthermore, although the post-referendum levels of losers' support are most often lower than before the referendum, most losers are still supportive or fairly supportive of referendums after their defeat. Losers of the Dutch Ukraine referendum form an exception here, as their average referendum support dropped below midpoint.

The findings provide several directions for further research. As the study makes use of data of referendums that all have been held in European consensual democracies, further research could examine whether these findings hold in different countries and different settings, for example within majoritarian political systems or non-European countries. Furthermore, as Howell and Justwan (2013) argue that the margin of victory matters for post-election changes in perceptions about democracy, further studies should also include referendums that resulted in a close call. Another direction would be to study the long-term consequences of winning, losing and abstaining in referendums on citizens' referendum support. This study only considers citizens' referendum support shortly before and after the direct vote was held. By using panel data that has been collected over a long period, other studies could figure out whether and to what extent the experience with a referendum victory, defeat or abstention has consequences in a longer term. In addition, as referendum support has been used as dependent variable in this study, other

studies could get an insight into the consequences of winning, losing or abstaining in referendums for other relevant attitudes, as trust in the fairness of the referendum or political efficacy. Finally, with data from a larger set of referendums, further research could investigate patterns that explain when and why the effects of winning, losing and abstaining in referendums for citizens' referendum support are most likely to occur.

To end with, referendums are promoted but also contested – considered as a purely democratic ideal or as a dangerous instrument that leads to demagoguery or a 'tyranny of the majority' (Hendriks et al., 2017: 14-17). Although referendums are supported by large parts of Western societies, it is of concern for the legitimacy of the instrument that it could still rely upon the support of those who lose or abstain in a referendum. This study provides some first insights that a referendum victory could have positive effects for citizens' referendum support, but that a defeat or abstention could negatively affect support for referendums. Decreases in losers' and non-voters' support can potentially harm the legitimacy of referendums. Based upon this study's findings, such effects should however not be exaggerated as referendum support remains relatively high and stable in the aftermath of referendums, also among most losers.

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