Non-Voting in the 2018 Romanian Referendum:
The Importance of Initiators, Campaigning and Issue Saliency

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Abstract
The requirement of a participation quorum for validity makes non-voting in referendums an important type of voting behaviour. This article seeks to explain non-voting in a referendum where the expectation was to have high turnout but where in reality only few voted, i.e. the 2018 referendum on the topic of same-sex marriage in Romania. Our explanations are inspired by the literature on turnout on elections to which we add several specific features of referendums. We propose three major sets of factors derived from the literature: access to resources, strategic decisions and campaign issues. The analysis relies on 36 semi-structured interviews with individuals aged 18 and above conducted in several urban and rural localities throughout Romania between December 2018 and March 2019.

Keywords: referendum, non-voting, initiators, campaign, issue saliency

Introduction

A referendum is a choice about a policy. This choice is usually dichotomous, it presupposes a clear division of preferences, and thus the citizens' vote becomes crucial. Voting behaviour in referendums has been investigated primarily in the literature from the perspective of preferences. Many referendums require a quorum of approval, i.e. a minimum threshold to be valid, which assigns several meanings to non-voting. First, it can reflect strategic behaviour from those who strongly oppose the topic of the referendum since staying home can be as valuable as or more valuable than voting against. Second, it can be an indicator for policy priorities of societies – people rarely vote on or seek information about issues that are

marginal in their lives. Third, it sheds light on the legitimacy of the process. The margin by which a referendum proposal is adopted matters: the lower the turnout, the weaker the position in which the state authorities are placed to carry out the decision (Arnesen, Broderstad, Johannesson, & Linde, 2019).

For all these reasons, it is important to understand why citizens cast a vote in referendums. So far, little attention has been paid to the determinants of voter turnout in referendums. This article seeks to address this gap in the literature and aims to explain why citizens did not vote in the 2018 referendum in Romania on same-sex marriage. The case selected for analysis was one of the least likely setting to expect low levels of turnout. There are at least three reasons for this expectation. First, the pre-referendum polls indicated strong opinions on the topic and a general willingness to cast a vote. The topic appeared to have high saliency among the electorate. Second, Romania is a religious country and the referendum was actively supported by the Orthodox Church. Third, the referendum was promoted by the main government party and met very limited opposition among the political elites. And yet only one fifth of the electorate turned out to vote in the referendum. This is very low compared to roughly 50% in the European elections organized half a year after the referendum or to an average of around 60% for the presidential elections. Explaining low referendum turnout in this least likely case can be of great value for cross-case generalization. The evidence that we find for the Romanian referendum can be then used with greater confidence in similar referendums in countries with less favorable circumstances.

Our explanations are influenced by the literature on turnout in elections to which we add several specific features of referendums. We propose three major sets of factors derived from the literature: access to resources, strategic decisions and campaign issues. The importance of the latter is because the campaign effects in referendums fluctuate substantially depending on the context (LeDuc, 2002). Referendum campaigns differ from election campaigns in several ways: they run over a greater length of time, display higher likelihood of unforeseen events, political parties may be internally divided over the issue being voted on, and they are influenced by both domestic and international factors (de Vreese & Semetko, 2004; LeDuc, 2002; Silagadze & Gherghina, 2018; Siune, Svensson, & Tonsgaard, 1994). The analysis relies on 36 semi-structured interviews with individuals aged 18 and above conducted in several urban and rural localities in December 2018 - March 2019

(Appendix 1). The interviewees vary on a broad range of socio-demographic characteristics and represent all regions of the country.

The first section reviews the literature on turnout and provides a synthesis of what may determine individuals not to cast a vote in a referendum. From here we present the research design with emphasis on the selected case and data collection process. The third section includes the qualitative analysis that outlines the reasons for which the Romanian citizens did not vote in the referendum. The final section summarizes the key findings and discusses their implications for the broader study of turnout in referendums.

Non-voting in referendums

The literature on voter turnout is vast and has been mainly studied in the electoral context. In this paper, we first provide an overview of factors that have been identified as influential for political participation, in general. In the next step, we furnish a framework for voter turnout in referendums, specifically. It is noteworthy, that especially in the context of elections, voting and abstention have been studied as two sides of the same phenomenon – reasons that increase voter participation are the same that decrease it when absent: for instance, compulsory voting affects voter turnout positively, whereas turnout is systematically lower in countries that do not have compulsory voting (Stockemer, 2017). Referendums are a unique setting where abstention becomes another way of voting (against the proposal), often even more effective than casting an actual vote. Thus, abstention is one of the strategies applied solely in referendums and not in elections.

Since the earliest studies, the duty to vote has been viewed as a powerful predictor of turnout (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). It works in a two-fold way: one receives intrinsic satisfaction from behaving in accordance with a norm and, simultaneously, having extrinsic incentives to comply – social pressure (Gerber, Green, & Larimer, 2008). Moreover, some people may develop a self-image as voters which, in its turn, finds expressions over a series of elections. In addition, voting can be seen as a habitual act: habitual voters show up consistently in every election whereas others are motivated by a particular candidate or issue. Prior voting shapes significantly the propensity of participating in future elections (Campbell et al., 1960; Gerber, Green, & Shachar, 2003; Verba & Nie, 1972). Since referendums do not occur regularly but are occasional and difficult to predict, civic duty or habituality might play a minor role.

Other studies highlighted the importance of further predictors of voter turnout: compulsory voting, the type of electoral system, the number of parties competing, closeness of the outcome (Fowler, 2013; Stockemer, 2017). However, factors influencing turnout or abstention in referendums might vary to some extent due to referendum's intrinsic peculiarities – no candidates or political parties being up for the vote but rather a specific topic. The literature points in the direction of three sets of factors that can influence the decision to not vote in referendums. The first set is related to the access to resources with particular emphasis on the socioeconomic status and costs associated to voting. The second set refers to the strategies used by voters and is oriented towards the maintenance of the status quo. The final set covers the campaign related factors.[1] Each of the following sub-sections discusses the theoretical reasons behind each set of factors.

The Access to Resources

In theory, democracies offer equal political influence to all its citizens through the right to vote. In practice, wealthier and better educated voters are more likely to vote than the disadvantaged, resulting in "unequal turnout" patterns in the society (Lijphart, 1997). The role of socioeconomic status (income, education, and social class) in political participation is prominent: more disadvantaged citizens are less likely to vote due to the lack of motivation and interest as well as the cognitive resources needed to navigate through the electoral process (Verba et al., 1995). In the light of recent proliferation of popular votes, the question whether referendums can successfully reintegrate socioeconomically weak citizen has gained importance. Indeed, some scholars posit that the influence of socioeconomic status is even stronger in popular votes since they oftentimes demand higher knowledge, time and resources (Magleby, 1984; Merkel, 2010). Developing party or candidate preferences is more simple compared to deciding in referendums over a range of topics from complicated fiscal to moral politics or European integration (Fatke, 2014). The evidence from Switzerland indicates that in regards to direct democratic choices citizens with lower socioeconomic status are more likely to feel overstrained by the complexity that their co-citizens with a higher status (Blais, 2014). Simultaneously, perceived complexity of the topic serves as an incentive for non-voting in referendums: the more people find an issue difficult, the more

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[1] The reasons are interconnected in real life. For example, there is interaction between components of a campaign: saliency can be influenced by the efforts and engagement of political parties in the campaign.

likely it is that the vote is skewed by low turnout (Lutz, 2007). Consistent with the aforementioned concerns, one of the latest studies shows that turnout in referendums is lower in provinces with higher unemployment rates (Del Monte, Moccia, & Pennacchio, 2019).

The cost of voting is another aspect related to the resource theory that is influential in the referendum process. According to the traditional model of electoral participation, voter turnout decreases with voting costs (Downs, 1957). Various factors might influence the voting costs: information costs, time costs, travel costs, inconveniences such as voter registration procedures, queuing on ballot day, inconvenient opening hours, the weather, etc. Even procedural changes might tip the decision towards not voting (Blais, 2000). In this manner, the introduction of postal voting in Switzerland increased turnout by around four percentage points (Luechinger, Rosinger, & Stutzer, 2007). Similarly, a very small change in voting costs – prepaid postage of the return envelope – resulted in increased participation in the Swiss ballots by 4% (Schelker & Schneiter, 2017). Along the same lines, the more often people are asked to cast their vote, the less likely they are to do so each time, and the less likely they are to be informed about each issue (Lutz, 2007). Excessive demand on citizens leads to voter fatigue and increases the probability of non-voting on all kinds of issues, major and minor (Linder, 2005). In sum, high costs of voting combined with individuals' limited resources increases the likelihood of their abstention in referendums.

Strategic reasons

In general, referendums represent a binary choice: voters are asked to approve or reject a certain policy. However, most of referendums are accompanied with various turnout and approval quorums that differ across and within countries depending on the topic at stake. Although originally, quorum rules were adopted to avoid distortions in outcomes resulting from low turnout and as a safeguard against minority exploitation of voter apathy (LeDuc, 2003; Qvortrup, 2005). The common rationale is that a low turnout in referendums undermines their legitimacy; a low participation rate means greater deviation from the 'will of the people' (Qvortrup, 2005). However, in practice, participation quorums decrease electoral participation. Data on the national referendums held in the EU countries since 1970 shows that the mere existence of a participation quorum has negative effects on turnout. It

decreases the turnout by more than 10 percentage points (Aguiar-Conraria & Magalhães, 2010).

Quorums create incentives for supporters of the status quo to abstain, contributing to low turnout. The possibility of manipulating voting outcomes through not voting at all is defined as a 'no-show' paradox (Fishburn & Brams, 1983). Under such conditions, an individual who is in favour of the status quo and votes for its preservation may, in fact, be contributing to a victory of the pro-change side by helping turnout reach the necessary quorum level. This creates a dilemma for supporters of the status quo. If the threshold is sufficiently high, not voting is more likely to keep the status quo than actually going to the polls and casting the vote for it (Aguiar-Conraria & Magalhães, 2010; Côrte-Real & Pereira, 2004). Uleri (2002, pp. 881-2) sharpens this view by concluding that in the Italian case "all electors are equal, but in referendums non-voters are more equal than the voters" since the quorum penalises the supporters of the referendum proposal and favours the opponents. In fact, only in the studied period, 17 of the 18 referendums that received the electorate's approval were declared void due to unmet turnout level (Uleri, 2002).

In addition, turnout thresholds have also effect on the institutional level since they drastically distort incentives for political parties to mobilize voters by introducing a crucial asymmetry in the campaign strategy: those in favour of the status quo are encouraged to apply "quorum-busting" strategy. Thus, instead of devoting resources to increase the turnout of voters opposing the reform, the status quo party has the possibility to merely exploit the apathy among citizens (Herrera & Mattozi, 2010). Various salient policy issues failed for not fulfilling the quorum – e.g. referendum on abortion legalization in Portugal in 1998 or 2015 Slovak Family referendum where the LGBT minority campaigned against taking part in the referendum (Valkovičová, 2017). As a consequence, participation requirement suppresses turnout, generating a voting paradox: "the quorum is not reached precisely because of its existence or, in other words, turnout exceeds the quorum only if this requirement does not exist" (Aguiar-Conraria & Magalhães, 2010, p. 65).

Apart from deliberate quorum-busting strategies applied both by citizens and political parties, attitudes towards national government is another factor that can trigger strategic abstention. In fact, issue voting versus second-order voting has been one of the dominant debates in the field of referendums with empirical evidence supporting alternatively both theories. The issue-voting perspective suggests that the voting decision of

citizens is influenced by their attitudes toward the issue being voted on. For instance, people who are generally in favour of European integration are likely to support a new EU treaty. People who are generally sceptical about the EU project are likely to vote against (Siune & Svensson, 1993; Siune et al., 1994). The second-order voting implies that the attitudes towards the national political parties, in general, and to the incumbent government, in particular, are decisive for the vote. Referendums therefore become second-order national elections where considerations about (first-order) national politics determine citizens' political behaviour (M. Franklin, Marsh, & Wlezien, 1994; M. N. Franklin, 2002; Hobolt, 2007).

Voters who are not satisfied with the performance of the incumbent government may use the opportunity to punish the government by not following its recommendation. Hence, discontent with the government and its unpopularity among the public might motivate citizens' vote or abstention from voting rather than their attitudes towards the issue itself. This is closely linked to the concept of legitimacy that often serves as one of the motives of initiating a referendum in the first place – to gain additional legitimacy by demonstrating wide support in favour of a certain policy and the regime itself (Qvortrup, 2017). Consequently, in the context of public dissatisfaction over government performance, the topic at stake may get rejected on the basis of the cabinet's poor assessment. In instances with turnout quorum, a simple way of showing discontent and sabotaging government's proposal would be by not showing up on the voting day.

Reasons related to campaigns

Turnout in referendums is, in general, below the level of general elections (Blais, 2000). The participation rate in popular votes varies much more widely than in national elections, exhibiting greater potential for volatility. Similarly, referendum campaigns are considered influential for both outcome of the vote and turnout. The primary objective of a political campaign is to influence the outcome of a referendum by shaping public opinion and mobilising voters (Schmitt-Beck & Farrell, 2002).

The saliency of the topic voted upon depends heavily on the campaign and its features: the intensity of the debate, polarization around it, level of visibility in the media and actors involved. Saliency, in general, is linked to levels of information on the issues. On occasions where a topic has low saliency and parties do not compete over it, party

endorsements as cues are less available for the voters, thus, citizens tend to feel less informed and competent to vote on it (Hobolt, 2007). One of the goals of the campaign is to make the issue more salient and visible, increase knowledge on the topic among the citizens and encourage them to vote (de Vreese & Semetko, 2004). The more familiar voters become with the topic, the higher the probability of their turnout at the polls (Kriesi, 2005; Sager & Buehlmann, 2009). Consequently, campaign itself and its perceived informative character can serve as a predictor for the voting decision (Gherghina & Silagadze, 2019). As a result, participation rate can rise if the issue evokes voters' interest or if it is followed by an intensive campaign (LeDuc, 2003).

Interest is an antecedent of knowledge: in order to be informed or knowledgeable about a topic one needs to have an interest in it in the first place (Johnston, Blais, Gidengil, & Nevitte, 1996). Both the perceived level of importance and interest in the topic can be affected by the campaign. More intense and polarized a campaign is, higher are the chances for engaging larger segments of the population by explicitly communicating the implications of a decision and conveying what is at stakes. On the contrary, low saliency campaign lead to low turnout as the perceived importance of the topic is inevitably low in such a setting. The level of perceived importance in its turn affects the level of information one is willing to acquire about the matter: more importance citizens give to a referendum issue, more likely are they to inform themselves and subsequently more likely to participate in the voting (Lutz, 2007). Related to the latter point, closeness of outcome is another element that can boost turnout through two interconnected mechanisms: psychologically voters feel the importance of casting their preference when their vote is more valuable and even decisive which is reinforced by the heightened campaign and media presence that accompany close ballots (Blais, 2000).

Political parties play a decisive role in the referendum campaign and the extent to which citizens care about a topic also depends on their involvement and mobilization efforts (Gherghina, 2019; Herrera & Mattozi, 2010; Morel, 1993). Mobilisation of voters is more essential in popular votes due to the fact that participation rate in referendums is more fluctuating as compared to elections (LeDuc, 2002). For instance, one of the lowest turnouts in the history of referendums occurred during 2015 Polish referendum, which had a participation rate lower than 8%. One of the main features of this referendum was the lack of real campaign: established parties were not actively engaged in the debate, the

campaigning was delegated to mainly unknown foundations, no TV commercials or posters with the referendum topic were visible (Hartliński, 2015).

In addition, campaign and party cues have the potential to demobilize voters when they are unclear or exhibit low ideological congruence. Mixed or unclear messages from parties to electorate result in poor mobilization of own voters and in significantly lower chances to mobilize voters without a clear party identification (de Vreese & Semetko, 2004). Although, citizens themselves are often being criticized for inconsistent and incoherent belief systems, political parties, in the same manner, can take positions that are in conflict with their ideology. For instance, in the course of recent referendums on same-sex marriage, several left-wing parties took a position against it although in theory this clashes with their discourse in favor of inclusiveness and equality (Silagadze & Gherghina, 2020). Consequently, it might occur that the party a voter usually supports takes an unexpected position during a referendum campaign. This situation is rather confusing for voters and might lead to alienation and feeling of being misrepresented. Misrepresented citizens are more likely to turn away from politics and not participate at all (Feher-Gavra, 2017). Moreover, a conflicting situation might be challenging and demotivating for citizens, increasing their voting costs significantly and, thus, the probability that they abstain from voting.

Figure 1 summarizes the theoretical reasons for non-voting in a referendum. These are clustered in the three major factors as illustrated in the literature: resources, strategy and campaign. The following section explains the methodology used to collect the data that can help identifying which of these was crucial in determining non-voting in the 2018 referendum in Romania.

Figure 1 about here

Research design

The 2018 referendum in Romania is an appropriate setting to study the reasons for which citizens did not vote as it is the least likely case to have no voting on the topic of same-sex marriage for three reasons. First, the country has a very high number of self-declared religious individuals, with 55% in the population claiming to be highly religious and more than 95% claiming to be religious in general (Evans & Baronavski, 2018; Jerolimov, Zrinščak, & Borowik, 2004). Overall, the religious attitudes are quite stable in the post-communist

Romanian society. Second, many Romanians welcomed the referendum and showed interest for the topic. A probability representative survey conducted at national level in the spring of 2018 illustrate an overwhelming majority in favour of a referendum and against same-sex marriage. Three out of four respondents claimed that they would participate to a referendum and a similar percentage agrees that the family should be defined as the union between a man and a woman (Nicolae, 2018).

Third, there was strong popular support for the initiative against same-sex marriage. According to the legislation, a citizens' initiative aiming at constitutional amendments requires 500,000 signatures. The NGO collecting signatures (Coalition for Family) for the formal definition in the constitution of family as the union between a man and a woman submitted more than three million signatures. Equally important, the main government party – the Social Democrats (PSD) – supported the referendum. In the 2016 parliamentary elections, the party received the support of 46% of the electorate and continued to be at the top of voters' preferences in opinion polls until the referendum.

To identify the reasons for not voting in the referendum we use 36 semi-structured interviews. These were conducted in Romanian between December 2018 and March 2019 with individuals aged 18 and above. The interviewees were selected to ensure variation on several characteristics (see Appendix 1) across Romania's five historical regions Dobrudja, Moldavia, Oltenia, Transylvania and Wallachia. The interviews were conducted in 15 localities: three large cities (Brașov, Bucharest and Craiova), four small and medium-sized cities (Brăila, Bârlad, Pitești and Tulcea), three small cities (Balș, Dăbuleni and Sinaia), and five villages (Amărăștii de Jos, Dumbrăvița, Oboga, Ostroveni and Șinca). This selection intended to control both for the economic development, which varies greatly among the historical regions and localities, and turnout in the 2018 referendum. The latter ranges in our sample of localities between 14.56% (Craiova) and 51.99% (Oboga). Some of these localities have ethnic minorities, i.e. Roma, Hungarians.

Each interview lasted between 20 and 40 minutes (see the interview guide in Appendix 2), verbal consent was taken and interviews recorded. We contacted the the interviewees in two ways. First, once we established the localities where we want to conduct interviews, we identified with the help of colleagues and friends local contact persons who could facilitate the dialogue with several inhabitants. Our intention was to have in each locality respondents with variation in terms of the socio-demographic variables included in

Appendix 1. Second, if that variation was not achieved, we used a snowball technique in which the respondents recommended potential interviewees.

The 2018 Referendum in Romania

The same-sex referendum in Romania was framed as being about the definition of the family in the constitution. It followed a citizens' initiative launched by the Coalition for Family, which collected six times the number of signatures needed to hold a constitutional amendment referendum. The organization argued that the constitution is too vague about the composition of a family and insisted on explicitly prohibiting the same-sex marriage. Supported by the Orthodox Church and by the PSD, who had been in government since December 2016, the referendum on defining family as the union between a man and a woman was approved by the lower Chamber of the Romanian Parliament in March 2017. The upper Chamber approved it in September 2018 and the referendum was held in October 2018. The party in government ruled for two days of voting to increase the likelihood of meeting the participation quorum; such a provision was used only once for referendums in Romania, in the 2003 constitutional revision.

The PSD-led government and other parties supported the referendum, whereas it was consistently and explicitly opposed only by a newly formed party (Save Romanian Union), which came third in the 2016 national legislative elections. One of the reasons behind the broad political support for the referendum was that the Romanian public was considered by the elites quite conservative about this topic and religious. However, most political parties supporting the idea of the referendum refrained from campaigning. The active campaigners were the Coalition for Family and the Church, which carried out the campaign through the media and in person. The latter meant that priests advised citizens during sermons to vote in favour of the policy banning same-sex marriages. During the campaign, the message was often distorted and citizens were invited to turn out to vote in the referendum and vote against adoption rights for same-sex couples. The referendum was concerned only with marriage but the supporters of the ban put an equivalence sign between marriage and adoption of children to persuade voters about the harmful consequences of the status quo, which required a change.

The camp opposing the referendum asked for a boycott since the threshold for validity was set at 30%. The result was invalid due to low turnout (21.1%) although 93.40% of

those who turned out voted in favour. The number of voters in the referendum was only marginally higher than the number of signatures collected for the amendment in the first place.

The prominence of strategic and campaign reasons

The interviews provide rich information regarding the reasons for which the Romanian citizens did not vote. These reasons can be clustered in several categories, each of them discussed in detail in the sub-sections below. Following the presentation of these categories, a broader discussion wraps-up the analysis and aims to integrate the key findings with the existing theories.

Opposing the policy

Out of those interviewed, the majority were against the idea of same-sex marriage. Only six were in favour of same-sex marriage – thus against the policy of the referendum – and another seven were in favour but explicitly ruling out the right of same-sex couples to adopt children. The latter was, as briefly outlined in the previous section, one of the core misleading messages of the camp supporting the referendum. Out of those who declared their support for same-sex marriage, nine were university graduates and three still studying. This section focuses on the answers provided by those 13 respondents. They reflect strategic non-voting characterized by a consistent and coherent approach towards the topic under conditions of high levels of information or personal experience. As an illustration of the latter, one respondent argues: ˈMy son is married with a female from Africa. How could I oppose some minorities, when my son has a black partner? I find the referendum to be futile' (I24). Another respondent said that homosexuality cannot be changed through 'a vote', telling us that 'I have a very good friend who is homosexual. I met him during high-school and I am influenced by his sensibility, by his way of seeing the world and the society in general' (I29).

One female among the supporters of LGBT couples refers to the uselessness of the referendum. At the same time, she feels irritated about the public exhibitionism manifested by same-sex couples:

> The referendum was pointless because it referred to a non-topic, to a non-societal topic, one that is irrelevant. Normal people with different sexual orientation do whatever they wish in their bedrooms and we should not mind their sexual life. On the other hand, I do

not agree with their parades. I do not agree that we bother their intimacy, but also they should not expose through parades what they do in their bedroom (I22).

While for the most part we can infer a strategic approach of the supporters of same-sex marriage, we could also notice a conflict of core beliefs. Some respondents nuanced their position to the same-sex marriage issue leaning towards the civil partnership or they showed conflicting thoughts when asked about the adoption. Also a few said that they do not like male homosexuals, but they are not bothered by lesbians:

I do not agree with the marriage but I favour the civil partnership… I would support adoption too because if a Christian wouldn't abandon a kid, then a homosexual (respondent's wording) wouldn't be able to adopt. Therefore, it would be better in a homosexual family than in an orphanage (I20).

Opposing the initiators

The distrust and dissatisfaction with the ruling party was intensely echoed by the opposition politicians. They attempted to blame exclusively the PSD and its leader (Liviu Dragnea) for the failure to meet the participation quorum. After the referendum, the leader of the main opposition party argued: 'A topic that had the support of 80 per cent of the Romanian population did not gather sufficient votes to reach the threshold. Dragnea's attempt to hijack this topic determined Romanians not to come' (Gogean, 2018). These claims reflect only partially the reality on the ground. Only six of the 23 respondents who oppose same-sex marriage did not vote because they are dissatisfied with the PSD. Among those respondents, the attitudes are quite nuanced since one interviewee made a reference to the PSD leader but on moral grounds. He did not wish to take morality lessons from Dragnea 'who divorced his wife to marry a much younger woman, so young that she could be his daughter' (I11).

Five interviewees considered that a vote in the referendum would translate into political capital for the PSD leader and the ruling coalition, which is why they chose to stay at home. They expressed strong positions against the PSD and Dragnea. All responsibility for this referendum fiasco, as they call it, belongs to the ruling party. The respondents considered that the purpose of the PSD and its leader was to divert attention from the government problems. For example, I1 explains 'I don't like Dragnea at all. In this referendum, Dragnea only tested the party power, and to us, those liberal ideas come anyway through the EU connection'.

Other views indicate a straightforward opposition against the social democrats: 'I am not a supporter of same-sex marriage, but I did not vote because I don't agree with the party in government' (I25). This adversity against the governing party went as far as accusing the interviewers as party campaigners: 'You come now to campaign after you noticed the disastrous presence at the referendum. Where do you have your car from? How do you get money to come here? Does the party pay you to manipulate people?' (I27).

Some of those interviewed opposed the clergy. The latter was seen as estranged from the spirit of the Gospel and more interested in money. When asked why he thought that the clergy from his village did not campaign from door to door, one interviewee explained: 'they lack the courage to do it because they know that, given their corrupt behaviour, they have no moral authority over the people and consequently would be met with indifference, or even with hostility' (I20). In a small southern town, one respondent showed her hostility against the referendum, but mostly against the Church: 'The referendum was built on hate, and people's non-participation was like a slap on Church's face, the Church involvement was abnormal' (I21).

Low saliency

Three other people out of the 23 who opposed same-sex marriage explained that they did not vote because the organization of the referendum was a waste of money, absurd or even outright scandalous in the circumstances in which the country had other, more concrete problems, such as poverty, poor infrastructure and insufficient funds for healthcare and education. Although they were opposed to same-sex marriage, for them this was not actually a serious issue: in some cases, you could sense that they did not really care about the issue. Illustrative for this stance is the statement of I10 who claims: 'I don't mind if they marry, yet I don't support them; I am indifferent to them' (I10). Similarly, I17 clearly indicates indifference: 'I have hardly heard about this referendum, but I wouldn't give a damn about it, I do not care. Our world is living without caring about such issues'.

In other cases, even though the citizens cared about the issue itself, they did not think it represented a real 'threat'. They thought that, for the foreseeable future, homosexuality would not become socially acceptable in Romania and, as a result, same-sex marriage could not be legalized in Romania any time soon. 'I am totally against the homosexual marriage; I am a faithful person, go regularly to Church, but I did not vote

because I consider that money was spent in vain. By abstaining, I wanted to protest against this irrelevant financial spending' (I15). Two other respondents (I35, I36) declared their non-participation by referring to the pointless spending of public money, others only contextualized their sorrow about how money was spent: 'I did not go because they spent money for nothing, for something which I do not care. Let them do whatever they want at their homes, but I don't want to see them at my table' (I10). Similarly, I23 argues 'In our case, the referendum is hollow. There are other pressing issues that could have been solved with this money – poor children protection, sick people issues and many other things'.

One of the interviewees explained why very few people from his rural settlement voted in the referendum: 'All my neighbours were totally against same-sex marriage, but they did not vote because, despite their opposition to same-sex marriage, they are nevertheless interested in more practical issues' (I19). He pointed at a paradox according to which people who opposed same-sex marriage were not interested in it as a political subject: 'I believe that my neighbours did not vote because, living here, never in their life had they seen homosexuals, so they did not view this issue as a danger. If they would have seen homosexuals, I am sure all of them would have voted against same-sex marriage' (I19). Further indicators of the topic's low saliency are the mundane answers provided by several respondents. Such answers include: 'I forgot there was a referendum' (I7), 'I felt sick that day' (I5), 'I had to take care of the kids' (I2), 'I did not vote because such a topic should not even be up for debate' (I8), 'I worked during the weekend' (I34), 'I felt lazy' (I17), 'I thought that I am too old to vote and should let the younger generation decide this issue' (I18).

Limited campaigning

The theoretical section of this article reflected on the importance of cues provided by political parties during campaigns. In the Romanian referendum, the involvement of parties was fairly limited. Many interviewees reported that political parties either campaigned much less or not at all for the referendum, a situation contrary to what usually happens during electoral campaigns. Thus, an electoral event, which for many of those interviewed already seemed suspiciously odd, given its unusual and seemingly non-political topic, seemed even more so given the lack of mobilization effort from political parties, which had been very active whenever people were called to vote at elections:

(They) come here during local or parliamentary elections! Representatives of all parties overflow the streets: some leave and others immediately replace them to make you vote. For this referendum we saw a very weak involvement; they came once or twice, one could see them in the street but they did not talk to us (I18).

Some interviewees noticed the sharp discrepancy between the behaviour of political actors in this referendum as opposed to elections. For example, I16 claims 'From the town-hall no one came; same with the Church. But during electoral campaigns they all come in great numbers to make you vote, they offer you gifts for that'. This has been visible both in villages and cities. For example, someone from a village argues that 'the politicians' mobilisation was very weak, weaker than in local elections or parliamentary elections' (I26). One respondent from a large city explains: 'The town-hall people were not involved; it was a total disregard. They did little campaign on the streets' (I7).

Some of the interviewees – especially in the rural areas – have neither heard of the Coalition for Family nor did they come into contact with campaign materials such as posters or flyers. Those who knew about the Coalition did not see any flyers or similar materials distributed in their localities. The Church involvement in the electoral campaign was generally limited to exhortations, calling on people to vote, addressed as part of the Sunday sermons. Two-thirds of our respondents said that the Church's involvement was hardly noticeable: 'We did not see any priest on the streets during the campaign. Instead, one Pentecostal younger from a nearby village came to our street' (I11).

Accordingly, they seem to have reached only the ears of those who attended mass on a regular basis. At the country level, the church attendance in Romania is around 20% according to a recent study (PRC, 2017). Most respondents said that they were approached neither by campaigning members of the clergy outside the Church, nor were they familiar with priests canvassing from door to door with the purpose of convincing people to vote. Moreover, some interviewees had negative views not only of politicians but of the clergy as well.

To better understand the limited involvement of the Church in the campaign, we conducted three additional interviews with three priests from different localities in Dăbuleni and Șinca. They all admitted that they did tell people during sermons to vote 'yes' at the referendum. Outside the Church they campaigned very little or not at all. One spared his efforts – he only told people during Sunday sermons to vote – because he was convinced

that such a popular topic would easily get the necessary number of votes. He was shocked when learning that the referendum was invalidated due to low voter turnout. A similar perspective was conveyed by another priest who reported that initially, the bishop did not advise the clergy to campaign outside the Church. According to him, the explanation for this passive attitude of the bishop was, once again, the belief that the quorum threshold would be reached easily. Only towards the end of the first day of voting, when the voter turnout was revealed, this priest – together with the rest of the clergy in his area – received a message from the bishop, urging him to go out and campaign; which he did.

Poor information and the fear of consequences

There is poor visibility of sexual minorities in the social environment in which respondents live. Many argued explicitly that they have never come into contact with homosexuals and that this is a 'Western thing'. Many reported, especially in the rural areas, that they were certain about the absence of same-sex couples in their localities. In most cases, the interviewees either stated explicitly, or it was deduced implicitly from the conversations, that they failed to perceive the legalization of same-sex marriage and other objectives of LGBT groups as a 'real threat'. This was not for many of them something worth worrying about or salient, and thus it did not justify the minimal effort that voting presupposes.

Other interviewees did not understand what the referendum was about and what they were supposed to do. Only later, some of them regretted not casting a vote 'It was a mistake not going to vote; I understood only later. Many of us were not informed about what to vote' (I10). Others have hardly found out what the issue was (I17) or they had no clue about it (I5 or I28). I5 spoke about a combination of factors leading to the poor information: being busy, low saliency of the topic and limited campaigning. I28 indicated no knowledge about this referendum although she considered herself to be 'a progressive person (influenced by Einstein and science documentaries) regarding civil partnership or same-sex marriage'. The poor access to information is also reflected by the statement of I3 who explains that 'I was out of town and thought that, as a consequence, I could not vote'. The electoral law allows voting in referendums in a different constituency than the one in which voters are registered.

In theory, several socio-demographic and geographic features such as the interviewees' education, medium of residence (urban vs rural) or region in which they live

can be associated with greater access to resources. Our findings indicate that in the case of most respondents these variables do not appear to be directly related to the access to information about the referendum.

One interviewee explicitly mentioned the fear of the consequences of voting. Employed in the mayor's office in a rural settlement, where everybody knows everybody, the respondent did not vote because of suspicions about the mayor's real intentions. Although the mayor officially told all local public servants to vote as their conscience told them to do, the respondent feared that a vote might have a negative impact on his job status. He was afraid that in a small community that he had turned out to vote would have been seen and soon known by all. "Out of the record, the mayor told us to go if we wished to do so, but I decided not to go thinking that some issues might appear from 'the upper tier' (I19). On a broader idea, I3 stated that 'I fear to share my political view because it is worse than before, during Ceaușescu; you bother someone with your political perspective and they make your life a living Hell'.

Discussion and conclusions

This article aimed to explain why citizens did not vote in the 2018 referendum in Romania on the topic of same-sex marriage. While there were many indicators prior to the referendum that the turnout would be high, in reality, only one in five voters went to the polls. The interviews conducted for this study reveal a combination of strategic and campaign related factors that led to this outcome. The access to resources determined non-voting to a much less extent. The schematic view of these factors is depicted in Figure 2, in the order of importance highlighted by the interviews. The strategic factors were the opposition against the topic subjected to the referendum and the opposition against the initiators. Some interviewees were in favour of same-sex marriage and they used non-voting to invalidate the referendum. Other interviewees, although against same-sex marriage, had an issue with the initiators. They considered that the government party tried to divert public opinion from the real problems of the country. Equally important, some contested the involvement of the Orthodox Church in the context of several corruption scandals in which the institution was involved.

Figure 2 about here

Although explicitly against same-sex marriage, many voters did not mobilize because of the low saliency of the topic and limited involvement of parties in the campaign. The interviews reveal how the unchallenged strength of the conservative culture in which many interviewees lived prevented their political mobilization on an issue that, given the circumstances, they could not perceive as 'serious' or 'dangerous'. The conservativism of Romanian society about the topic of same-sex marriage is widespread and firm, reflected by many opinion polls before calling the referendum. One indicator of the public's general embrace of conservatism is the fact that the social democrats, which are characterized by strong left wing conservatism, have won all but one of the popular votes in post-Communist Romania (Gherghina, 2014). In the 2016 parliamentary election, the last before the analyzed referendum, they received almost half of the share of votes. Another indicator is that Romania was one of the first countries in post-Communist Europe where nationalist conservative parties received important electoral support, i.e. throughout the 1990s and early 2000s.

However, this conservatism appears to be dormant, organic and cultural at the levels of individuals. Without an active campaign, political parties and clerical elites could not activate this conservativism, could not make it ideological and could not mobilize on political grounds. In theory, we could expect higher levels of mobilization among conservatives who live in a more diverse, progressive and, therefore, culturally challenging social environment. However, the interview data did not indicate a higher level of mobilization among younger and better educated conservatives. Apparently, they have the same perception with regard to the 'danger' represented by same-sex marriage and the seriousness of same-sex marriage as a topic as older and less educated conservatives; both types of Romanian conservatives seem to live in the same cultural horizon.

To a lower extent, the non-voting was determined by the access to resources: the poor information acted in two ways. On the one hand, limited information about the referendum or its topic meant that some voters could not be mobilized to vote. Their number is very small, which indicates that the decision of non-voting was to a great extent taken under conditions of information. As such, the competence of voters in deciding voluntarily about their behaviour cannot be attributed to incompetence. On the other hand,

the limited information determined several interviewees to fear for the consequences of their vote or opinions.

The implications of these findings reach beyond the single case study presented here and can be useful for further comparative work. At theoretical level, this article proposes a framework for analysis that can be used in other settings to understand voting behaviour in referendums. To our knowledge, this is the first analysis to conduct an in-depth investigation of the reasons behind turnout in referendums. The three broad categories of factors could be tested in other instances. The identified determinants are not context sensitive and can be easily replicated in other settings, with important value for comparative research across referendums and countries.

At empirical level, this article illustrates how non-voting in a referendum does not have a single cause but it is a complex set of factors. In the context of this referendum, a small minority of interviewees opposed the policy subjected for the referendum and this was the main driver for their non-voting. The others favoured the policy but decided against voting because they opposed the initiator, did not consider the topic to be important, or their conservatism was not activated during campaigns. The latter is relevant for the study of referendum (and electoral) campaigns because it reveals once more the importance of mobilizing even those who are persuaded. Admittedly, a degree of caution is warranted when interpreting the interview results. First, respondents might not be entirely truthful in their statements and second, as latest research in psychology shows, it is quite common for individuals to engage in post-hoc rationalizations in an attempt to justify their own behaviour using the arguments that did not play a role as they took a decision (Haidt, 2012).

Our study proposes a qualitative assessment of the reasons behind non-voting in referendums. There are three main avenues for the future research. The first direction would be to study the reasons behind abstention in other referendums on moral issues (e.g. abortion, euthanasia) to see the extent to which the explanatory framework proposed in this article holds. Alternatively, one could scrutinize voting behaviour in popular votes with participation or approval quorums on other topics rather than moral – for instance, domestic policies or environment. Since moral issues constitute a distinctive field, touching upon fundamental values, the study of voting behaviour in referendums on more 'neutral' topics

would have the potential of revealing further explanatory variables, thus, expanding the theoretical framework.

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Figure 1: A Summary of Theoretical Reasons for Non-Voting in Referendums

Resources	• socioeconomic status • voting costs
Strategy	• quorum-busting strategy • second-order voting
Campaign	• saliency • perceived importance • cues and incongruence
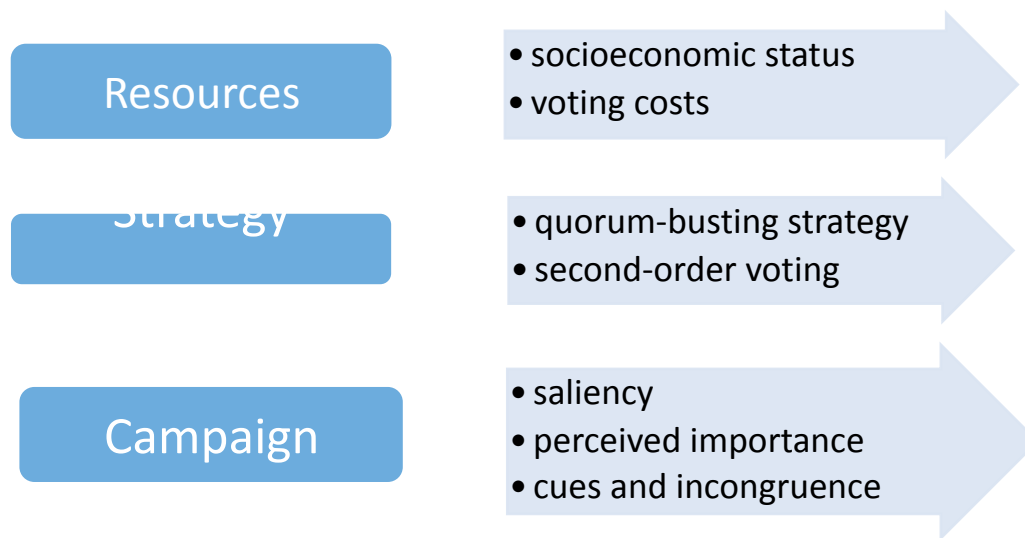
Figure 2: A Summary of the Reasons for Non-Voting in the 2018 Referendum in Romania

Strategy	• opposing the policy • opposing the initiators
Campaign	• low saliency • limited involvement of political parties in campaign
Resources	• poor information • fear of consequences
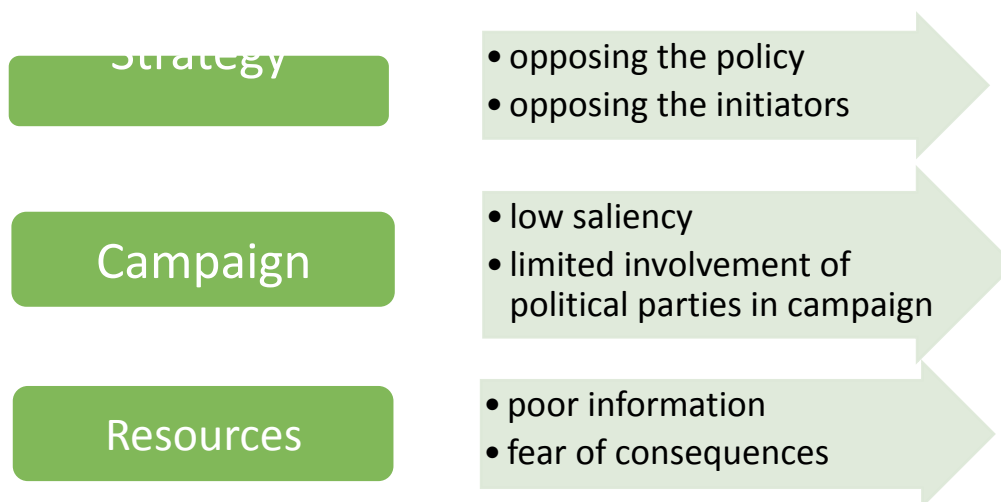
Appendix 1: An Overview of the Interviewees

	Age group	Gender	Employment	Income (net RON)	Education	Church attendance	County	Medium of residence
I1	36-50	Male	Full-time	n/a	High school	Special occasions	Olt	Rural
I2	36-50	Female	Full-time	2,001-3,000	Postgraduate	Few times in a year	Bucharest	Urban
I3	51-65	Female	Retired	2,001-3,000	University	Weekly	Olt	Urban
I4	36-50	Female	Full-time	1,001 – 1,500	University	Special occasions	Dolj	Urban
I5	26-35	Female	Full-time	1,001 – 1,500	High school	Special occasions	Dolj	Urban
I6	36-50	Male	Full-time	Over 3,000	University	Special occasions	Dolj	Urban
I7	26-35	Male	Full-time	n/a	High school	Special occasions	Dolj	Urban
I8	51-65	Male	Full-time	n/a	University	At least once a month	Dolj	Urban
I9	36-50	Female	Full-time	n/a	University	Few times in a year	Dolj	Urban
I10	26-35	Female	Full-time	n/a	University	Special occasions	Dolj	Urban
I11	Over 65	Male	Retired	Below 1,000	Secondary school	Special occasions	Dolj	Rural
I12	51-65	Male	Retired	Below 1,000	Secondary school	Special occasions	Dolj	Rural
I13	26-35	Male	Part-time	Below 1,000	High school	Special occasions	Dolj	Rural
I14	51-65	Male	Social assistance	Below 1,000	Secondary school	Special occasions	Dolj	Rural
I15	36-50	Male	Full-time	Below 1,000	High school	Weekly	Dolj	Urban
I16	51-65	Male	No answer	n/a	High school	Special occasions	Gorj	Urban
I17	36-50	Female	Full-time	1,001 – 1,500	High school	Special occasions	Dolj	Rural
I18	Over 65	Male	Retired	Below 1,000	Secondary school	Never	Dolj	Rural
I19	36-50	Male	Full-time	Over 3,000	University	Special occasions	Dolj	Urban
I20	36-50	Male	Full-time	Over 3,000	University	Special occasions	Dolj	Urban

I21	26-35	Female	Full-time	Over 3,000	Postgraduate	Special occasions	Dolj	Urban
I22	26-35	Female	Full-time	Over 3,000	Postgraduate	Special occasions	Dolj	Urban
I23	36-50	Female	Housewife	Over 3,000	Postgraduate	Few times in a year	Brașov	Urban
I24	51-65	Female	Full-time	n/a	University	At least once a month	Brașov	Urban
I25	Over 65	Male	Retired	Over 3,000	Secondary school	No answer	Brașov	Rural
I26	51-65	Male	Retired	Below 1,000	High school	Special occasions	Brașov	Rural
I27	51-65	Male	Employed	1,501 – 2,000	High school	Few times in a year	Brașov	Rural
I28	51-65	Female	Retired	1,501 – 2,000	University	At least once a month	Vaslui	Urban
I29	15-25	Female	Student	1,001 – 1,500	High school	Few times in a year	Vaslui	Urban
I30	18-25	Female	Student	Below 1,000	High school	Few times in a year	Vaslui	Urban
I31	18-25	Male	Student	1,001 – 1,500	High school	Special occasions	Vaslui	Urban
I32	36-50	Male	Full-time	Below 1,000	Secondary school	Special occasions	Argeș	Urban
I33	36-50	Female	Full-time	1,001 – 1,500	Postgraduate	Weekly	Tulcea	Urban
I34	18-25	Female	Full-time	2,001 – 3,000	University	Few times in a year	Tulcea	Urban
I35	36-50	Female	Full-time	Over 3,000 RON	University	Few times in a year	Tulcea	Urban
I36	51-65	Female	Full-time	Over 3,000 RON	University	Few times in a year	Tulcea	Urban

Appendix 2: The Questionnaire used for the Semi-structured Interviews

1. A recent citizens' initiative initiated a referendum to change the Constitution so that it explicitly states that the family in Romania is a result of a marriage between "a man and a woman" and not between "spouses". How aware were you about this?
    a. Did you sign the petition that triggered the referendum?

2. What is your opinion about the same-sex marriage?

3. Did you vote in the referendum?
    b. If not, why?

4. How often do you attend church / religious service?

5. To which of the following age groups do you belong?
    □ 18-25 years
    □ 26-35 years
    □ 36-50 years
    □ 50-65 years
    □ Over 65 years

6. Do you currently work? Are you a student? Retired person?

7. What is the level of your income (individual, not household)?
    □ < 999 lei
    □ 1.000 – 1.499 lei
    □ 1.500 – 1.999 lei
    □ 2.000 lei – 2.999 lei
    □ > 3.000 lei

8. What is the last level of completed education?

Notes: The follow-up questions are in italics. These depend on interviewees' previous answers
Variables such as gender, medium of residence, county and region were also recorded based on interviewers' observations.