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## **Why People Vote in Local Level Referendums: Comparing Germany and the United States**

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### **Abstract**

Although local level referendums have been quite common in the last three decades, there is little research on who participates. This article seeks to address this gap in the literature and analyzes the determinants of turnout in local level referendums in Germany and the US. Our analysis tests for explanatory power of civicness, political knowledge, interest in local politics, saliency of the referendum topic, party cues and citizens as decision-makers. It controls for satisfaction with democracy, voting in local elections and education. We use individual level data collected through an original survey in February-April 2018, which included respondents who had referendums organized in their community, since they became eligible to vote. In both countries voting in local level referendums is driven by engagement with elections and political knowledge, while civicness and interest in politics have mixed effects.

**Keywords:** local level, referendums, political knowledge, Germany, US

### **Introduction**

Local level referendums have gradually become important components of contemporary democracies; they often drive policy change that has a direct effect on the daily lives of citizens. Such referendums are often called to address specific problems of communities on a large variety of topics. The use of referendums at the local level are beneficial in two ways. On the community level, decisions are more easily accepted by people if they receive a voice in the decision-making process and the legitimacy of state institutions implementing the policy is higher. On the individual level, they have an educational function through which they increase citizens' desire to get involved in community life. It opens up a broader array of opportunities to participate, which comes along with access to information, motivation to participate and the competence of citizens (Schiller 2011, 10). All these reasons explain why a large share of the established and new democracies in Europe use local level referendums (Gherghina 2017).

Although local level referendums have been quite common in the last three decades, there is little research on who participates. While previous studies looked at how people vote in local referendums (Vatter and Heidelberger 2013), scarce attention has been paid to drivers for turnout. It is important to know what determines how people vote in referendums, because this shows if citizens have similar incentives for engagement as in other forms of political participation. Research on the topic is isolated and focuses on single case-studies (Feld and Matsusaka 2003). This article attempts to address this gap in the literature and analyzes the determinants of turnout in local level referendums in a comparative perspective. The research question guiding our analysis is: What drives voter turnout in German and United States (US) local referendums? The benefit of this comparison is the empirical evidence collected and analyzed for two distinct populations, residing in countries with a different approach towards local level referendums. In spite of institutional similarities at macro-level, i.e. the federal structure, substantial autonomy of local and regional authorities, and no referendums allowed at national level, there is variation in the timing of referendums, as well as the frequency and topics subjected to referendums at the local level. Due to this institutional variation, the causes for turnout in local level referendums in the two countries are likely to be differentiated.

The study builds on theories on political participation and earlier research on referendums at national level. It derives several potential explanations that we test empirically: civicness, political knowledge, interest in local politics, saliency of the referendum topic, party cues and citizens as decision-makers. In addition, we control for several determinants that were identified as potential drivers for turnout in referendums: satisfaction with democracy, voting in local elections and education. The analysis uses individual level data collected through an original web survey from February-April 2018, which included respondents who had referendums organized in their community since they became eligible to vote. Through this filter we focused on those citizens who had the possibility to vote in local level referendums, since the availability of these direct democratic procedures varies greatly across the states of the two countries.

This exploratory analysis has two important findings. First, the German and American voters who are knowledgeable about politics and who regularly vote in elections are more likely to participate in local level referendums. As such, engagement with direct democracy can be seen as a complementary form to elections rather than as a substitute for them.

Second, civicness and political interest have mixed effects for the two populations. In Germany, higher engagement in community life and lower levels of political interest drive people to vote in referendums. The German voters appear to see the referendum as a decision-making process oriented more towards (solving problems in) the community rather than having a political flavor, i.e. they may be perceived as independent from politics. In the US, where the pool of voters in local elections and local referendums overlaps to a very large extent, high political interest is conducive to participation in referendums. The latter appears to be associated quite a lot with politics and it is not tied to civic engagement, i.e. civicness has no effect on turnout.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows: The following section includes the theoretical framework with particular attention devoted to potential explanations for turnout in local level referendums. It includes the six main hypotheses and brings also several arguments for including several controls in the empirical testing. The third section covers the research design with emphasis on the case selection, data collection and variable operationalization. The third section presents and interprets the results of the empirical analysis. The conclusions summarize the key findings, discuss the broader implications of this study and develop directions for further research.

### **Local level referendums**

Direct democracy allows citizens to play a direct role in the decision-making processes. It is defined as a “publicly recognized institution wherein citizens decide or emit their opinion on issues – other than through legislative and executive elections – directly at the ballot box through universal and secret suffrage” (Altman 2011, 7). There are several forms of direct democracy and the broadly acknowledged categories are the referendums, citizens’ initiatives and recalls (Beramendi et al. 2008; Altman 2011; Gherghina 2017). This article focuses on referendums since they are the more common form of direct democracy, with increasing use throughout the world in the last half a century (Qvortrup 2014) both at national and local level. Referendums allow citizens to do more than merely decide which representative or political party will make decisions for them and, instead, provide an open political arena that allows for policy changes supporting the fundamentals of transparency for which democracy stands. They “provide more chances to enforce accountability and political control of representative decision-making by elites” (Schiller 2011, 10).

At local level, there are three distinct types of referendums: mandatory, which is uncommon and usually refers to the reorganization of territory; government-initiated, which is called by the state authorities at local level, i.e. mayor, local council etc.; and popular referendums that are called by citizens (Schiller 2011, 16–17). Local referendums, although the addressed topics may hold less weight than those at a national level, are usually more important to citizens as they address daily problems. In spite of this diversity and importance, it remains quite unclear what drives voters to turn out to the polls and vote in local level referendums. The following section formulates several testable hypotheses derived from arguments available in the literature on political participation in general and of vote in national level referendums.

### *Why People Vote in Referendums*

Earlier research outlines several potential determinants for turnout in referendums (Qvortrup 2005). The following lines build on an extensive scholarly tradition and argue that civic engagement, knowledge about community events, interest in politics, saliency of topics, party cues and orientation towards citizens as decision-makers can positively influence turnout. To begin with civic engagement, this has been long considered a valid explanation for political participation (Verba and Nie 1972; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Putnam 2000). There are reasons to believe that it can also be a strong predictor for turnout in local level referendums. So far, research has emphasized the reverse causality in which direct democracy has an effect on civic engagement (Smith and Tolbert 2004). The latter can favor higher turnout in local level referendums because these often address problems in the community. An involvement of citizens in the life of the community is likely to bring them in touch with these problems. Citizens who are active in social and communal activities learn about “skills and norms that spur democratic political involvement” (Dalton 2013, 50) and the impact on members “habits of cooperation, solidarity, and public spiritedness” (Putnam 1993, 89–90). The willingness to participate in various groups, organizations, and overall community life (civic mindedness), and the feelings connected with making a difference in one’s community, are linked with a desire to participate politically (Gherghina 2016, 270).

The persons who are more religious have a tendency to be more politically engaged. In a survey, those who expressed “very strong” feelings of religiosity showed the highest

levels of civic engagement, with those being not at all religious ranking second highest (Dalton 2008, 44–45). This connection is related to a religious participation in a socially based group setting like a church, mosque, synagogue, religious youth organizations, etc. Many religious groups also participate together in community service activities, stretching the horizon of these organizations well beyond merely religious causes. Common interests and backgrounds that are associated with membership in various organizations and groups lead to similar political participation habits. More than half of the voters in local referendums received information from religious or social groups that swayed the way in which they chose to vote. Even though most of the mentioned organizations do not directly take part in political campaign activities, the standpoints of the organizations swayed the way in which their members voted (Kriesi and Trechsel 2008, 64).

Knowledge of and interest in their community are two other factors likely to influence citizens' desire to vote in referendums. The reasoning behind their effects is linked to the above explanation about involvement in community life. Studies have shown that citizens who actively participate in their local communities are more likely to seek information about the community than those who are not (Schuck and Vreese 2011; Kriesi and Trechsel 2008). Knowledge can impact the decision to vote in two ways; firstly, people who are aware about what happens in the local community are also more likely to understand the necessity of a policy change and the avenues through which it can be done. Secondly, knowledge allows individuals to reach informed decisions, have more grounded political attitudes, and less "attitude uncertainty" (Sara Binzer Hobolt 2005, 87). For example, in the 1997 UK devolution referendums, both Scottish and Welsh regional media outlets covered the referendums comprehensively. In a regional survey, almost half of voting citizens reported to know a great deal about the referendums, even higher numbers than were reported during the UK general election in that same year (Denver 2002, 831).

Political interest goes hand in hand with the level of knowledge and usually feeds participatory behavior (Donovan and Karp 2006). Studies have shown that an increasing share of the population welcomes the possibility to express non-mediated preferences, especially when they are informed about issues of interest to them (Nicholson 2005). Interested citizens want to be involved and to influence politics directly. An extensive body of literature indicates that political interest is one of the most powerful predictors of political participation (Verba et al. 1995; Norris 2000; Christensen 2017). The argument is

straightforward; individuals who are already interested in politics are more likely to participate than the rest of the public. Previous research indicates how political interest is also a good predictor of the willingness to get involved in deliberative practices (Jacobs, Cook, and Carpini 2009); such as direct democracy; this is an alternative to representative democracy and the findings are illustrative for the participatory appetite of individuals with high interest in politics.

A further factor related to knowledge and interest is the saliency of a referendum topic, for example how important voters perceive the topic of a referendum. The simple logic behind this is that people vote in referendums with topics that are relevant to them. This is similar to what happens in elections where explanations for the low turnout, such as in the elections for the European Parliament, focus upon their second-order character. For citizens, the national elections are more salient and thus they are more likely to participate in them. People see the European Parliament as having less of an impact on them than their national governments, explaining lower turn-outs.

Regarding referendums, previous studies showed that when citizens considered the referendum to be important, they voted more (Garry, Marsh, and Sinnott 2005). Another way in which saliency may have an effect on turnout is through the stake or the divisive character of that referendum. Previous studies showed that the closer the outcome of a vote is projected to be, the higher the voter turnout (Lutz 2006, 58).

Citizens also gain knowledge and create opinions by paying attention to party cues which give voters a condensed overview of legislation through which they can infer their own positions on an issue. Partisan cues are an important shortcut when it comes to direct democratic votes, with party endorsements getting more attention than endorsements from other social/interest organizations (Kriesi 2005, 139). When an issue is of greater importance to a political party, they will put extra emphasis on voicing the party's opinion. Through this heightened endorsement, it is more likely that even voters who do not pay attention to politics will still be exposed to the party's endorsement (Steenbergen, Edwards, and de Vries 2007). On the other hand, with many citizens showing preference towards a political party, endorsements help those who pay attention to politics to ground their political choices, in that they help them better understand what choice best matches their political views. Assuming that the party endorsements are factual, a voter will better understand what decisions to make (Sara B. Hobolt 2007). A recent comparative study on

referendums in Europe shows the importance of party cues for how citizens vote (Silagadze and Gherghina 2018). If that is the case, prior to instructing their voters about “how” to position themselves on the referendum question, political parties are expected to take the vote out convince their voters to participate in the referendum.

Although referendums provide citizens a voice in the decision-making process, academic views on them are divided, with virtues and vices argued for by existing research. On the one hand, the direct involvement of citizenry could compensate for the flaws of representative democracy and could address the dissatisfaction of citizens with the current system of government (Dalton 2004; Norris 2011; Geissel and Newton 2012; Gherghina 2017). Over time, politicians and political institutions have been criticized for being slow in making decisions, engaging in never-ending debates, making political compromises and pursuing their personal interests as opposed to those of society. The referendums could reduce some of these costs and increase the speed of policy change by bypassing the intermediaries (i.e. representatives). On the other hand, the referendums could place too much responsibility on the shoulders of average citizens who are not competent, lack time and information, or have a low interest in many issues (Kriesi 2012). Citizens may be unable to make wise decisions (Budge 2012) and they could be manipulated and easily influenced by those who pursue narrow interests. With this division in mind, we argue that the final driving force behind citizens’ decision to vote in a local level referendum is their attitude towards the role of citizenry. Simply put, when people consider that citizens should have a direct say in policy making decisions, they will be more likely to actively participate in a referendum (i.e. vote). Earlier research showed the existence of a positive association between a preference for citizens as decision-makers and voting in referendums (Gherghina and Geissel 2017).

All these arguments indicate the existence of some drivers for participation. We hypothesize that the likelihood to vote in local level referendums is higher for:

H1: Citizens who are actively engaged in the life of their local communities

H2: Citizens who are knowledgeable about what happens in their community

H3: Citizens who are interested in the politics of their community

H4: Citizens who perceive referendum topics to be salient

H5: Citizens who receive information from the party they voted for in the previous election



## H6: Citizens who favor citizens as decision-makers

### *Controls*

There are theoretical reasons to expect the effect of three other variables on the turnout in local level referendums. The first control variable is the degree of satisfaction with representative democracy, which could have an ambivalent relationship with turnout. On the one hand, studies dealing with elections found a positive correlation between the two variables. People who are satisfied with the way that democracy works vote more (Ezrow and Xezonakis 2016). On the other hand, citizens who are satisfied with representative democracy may be less likely to vote in referendums since they trust politicians to make the best decisions (Gherghina and Geissel 2017). The second control variable is voting in local elections. Earlier research found that usually people engage in more than one form of political participation. We wanted to see whether those who vote in referendums are the same as those who vote in elections. One empirical argument in favor of our choice is that in the United States referendums are sometimes included on the same ballots with other voting choices. The third control variable is education since socioeconomic status (SES) has often been associated with political participation. Studies have shown that education is often a proxy for knowledge and interest in politics, and thus likely to influence voting (Verba and Nie 1972; Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995). More educated citizens also allocate more time to inform themselves about the topic, which is of particular relevance in referendums.<sup>1</sup>

### **Research Design**

To test the hypotheses, we use individual level data from an original web survey conducted in February-April 2018. We could not find any suitable data asking citizens about their participation in local level referendums in Germany and the US. The survey was piloted in January 2018 on several respondents in the two countries and, based on good results at the cognitive pretesting, fielded the following three months. We could not use a probability representative sample since we were interested in respondents who had referendums

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<sup>1</sup> To avoid the problem of “too many variables, too few cases”, we have included in the analysis only the control variables with the highest effect on the dependent variable of this study. [We also tested for many other controls including age, gender, medium of residence, and frequency of referendums.](#)

organized in their community since they acquired the right to vote. This sampling relative to the availability of referendums was further complicated by the existence of many referendums organized at the local level in both countries (i.e. the community level). As such, we use a maximum variation sample that has the disadvantage of no generalization to the broader population, but which can be very informative regarding the reasons for which people engage with referendums. Two further sources of bias in the survey are misreporting and community selection bias. Misreporting can be due to the fact that respondents may not remember correctly some of the retrospective items, e.g. the number of referendums that were organized. The community selection bias means that only the local governments with a sufficient level of responsiveness towards citizens are likely to hold referendums.

The questionnaire was the same in both countries, translated in German and English, and distributed through social media, email, and online discussion forums. The respondents were neither pre-selected nor part of a pool of available individuals. They could stop anytime and skip any question. The use of social media to collect data had the main advantage of allowing people to fill in the survey when they are in a setting that is part of their everyday life and thus likely to express genuine attitudes. The main disadvantage was the potential bias towards those individuals with access to and knowledge to use devices and Internet. This bias is lowered by very high rates on Internet penetration in both countries: Equally important, the distribution of respondents on variables included in this analysis (Appendix 1) and on other socio-demographic variables such as age do not indicate a skewed distribution. The German survey had 403 complete answers (out of a total of 460 who started the survey), while the US survey received 378 complete answers (out of a total of 449 who started the survey). The respondents in both surveys came from many states without any significant over-representation of any state in which many referendums are organized, e.g. California in the US. The number in the tables report the number of persons who answered to all items included in the analysis (for details, see Appendix 1). The results of the t-test used for the two populations indicate we can reject the null hypothesis according to which there is no difference between their means.

This article focuses on Germany and the US, because the two countries have great variation about the timing, frequency and topics subjected to referendum at local level. In the US, referendums are often organized concurrently with local elections, while in Germany this is not usually the case. In Germany, local level referendums are less frequent

and cannot include budget issues, while in the US the same type of referendums are more often and include a variety of fiscal decisions (tax rates, expenditures or public debt). Consequently, citizens in the two countries can make decisions about different topics – economy is a salient issue for the population in most countries – and likely to be driven by different motivations in voting at referendums.

#### Variable Operationalization

The dependent variable of this study is operationalized through the answers provided to the questions “Did you vote in the referendums organized in your area of residence?”. The available answers were coded on a five-point ordinal scale ranging from “in none of them” (1) to “in all of them” (5). Most of the independent variables were coded on ordinal scales, with the exception of civicness (H1). This is an index compiled on the basis of the answer to the following question if respondents were members of any of the state’s groups, organizations, or associations, which ranged from political parties, to religious groups, to economic/interest groups, etc. Each of these was coded 0 for absence and 1 for presence (whenever the respondents indicated that they were part of a type of organization); as such, the index took values from 0 (member in no civic organization) to a maximum of 9 (member in all of these types of civic organizations).

Political knowledge (H2) is measured through the question “How would you rate your general knowledge about the local politics where you live?”, which could be rated between “very poor” (coded 1) and “very good” (coded 5). Interest in local politics (H3) was operationalized through the question “How interested are you in the politics of the local community in which you live?” This could be answered on a scale ranging from “not at all interested” (coded 1) to “very interested” (coded 5). Saliency of the referendum topic (H4) was operationalized through a question asking respondents what factors played a role in their decision to either vote or not vote in local referendums. One of the options under the question was rating the importance of the topic either for themselves or for their community. Answers could range from “not at all” (coded 1) to “very much” (coded 5).

The party cues variable (H5), the role that the suggestions from their political party play on their decision making when it comes to voting in referendums, was measured on a five-point ordinal scale question that asked the participants to rate between “not at all”

(coded 1) and “very much” (coded 5) preference for citizens as decision-makers. (H6) was measured using the same questions and method as Gherghina and Geissel (2017). Respondents were asked to “In your opinion, who should make important policy decisions? Please indicate the number on the scale from 1 to 6 that is closest to your opinion”. The first scale placed citizens as preferred policy makers at 1 and elected politicians at 6. The following questions compared elected politicians (1) and experts (6), with the final scale comparing experts (1) and citizens (6). Respondents who clearly indicated citizens as preferred decision makers both against politicians and against experts were coded 1, the rest of respondents were coded 0.

The first control variable, satisfaction with democracy, was operationalized as the answer to the question “Thinking about how democracy works in your local community, are you satisfied with its functioning?”. The available answer options were coded on a five-point scale between “not at all satisfied” (1) and “very satisfied” (5). Voting in local elections was measured by asking “Thinking now about local elections, how often do you vote?”, which was then answered through a five-point scale ranging from “never” (1) and “always” (5). Education was operationalized through the question “What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed?”. Available answers ranged between grade school (1) and post-university degree (5).

### **Civiness, Knowledge and Participatory Behavior**

One of the key arguments in the literature is that people stop voting because of fatigue. They get exhausted and are likely to get worn out by constant votes as these take a great deal of personal effort and resources. We have already mentioned that we controlled for the frequency of referendums, but we would like to make clear that it is not an issue in our analysis. In addition, we would like to show the variation in experience with referendums in the two samples. Figure 1 depicts the amount of referendums organized since the respondents acquired the right to vote. The respondents had to answer the following question: “Can you estimate how many such referendums were organized since you got the right to vote?”. The distribution of respondents is different in the two countries and very likely has its origins in the institutional variation explained above. In the US, referendums

are more frequent than in Germany.<sup>2</sup> This distribution reflects the initial expectation that the samples of respondents from the two countries differ in terms of exposure to referendums.

### **Figure 1 about here**

The distribution between the two groups varies considerably. The largest number of German respondents (84%) reported between 1-3 referendums taking place in their voting area since having the right to vote. Far less German participants reported more than 3 referendums, with 12% reporting 4-6, 3% reporting 7-10, and only 1% reporting more than 10 referendums in their voting history. The American sample, in return, looks very different, with the numbers being much more widespread than the German responses. In this group, only 39% of American voters reported between 1-3 referendums, far less than the German group. Moving on, 34% of the American group reported 4-6 referendums, only 8% reported 7-10 referendums, and 19% reported more than 10 referendums, all numbers higher than in the German group. It is noticeable on the graph that in the German group, the higher number of referendums that the survey asked about, the less that were reported. This is not the case for the American group, as the numbers decrease until 7-10 referendums, but increase again at over 10 referendums.

In spite of these differences in terms of organized referendums, the aggregate voting behavior followed similar patterns. Figure 2 displays the percentages of the respondents in the two samples along the dependent variable of this study. In the reported groups, 11% of Germans and only 4% of Americans did not vote in any of the organized referendums that took place in their voting area. The reports of both groups were somewhat similar. In the German group, 8% reported that they had voted in a few of the organized referendums, 8% voted in half, 19% voted in most and 54% voted in all organized referendums. The American group responded similarly to the Germans in that 5% reported having voted in a few of the organized referendums, 7% voted in half, 33% voted in most (much higher than the German group), and 51% voted in all referendums. In comparison, the German group reported higher numbers in all categories than the American group, except in the category “in most”.

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<sup>2</sup> One possible explanation could have been age since the right to vote is relative to it, but there is no statistical correlation between frequency of referendums and age.

Overall, both of the reporting groups are comprised of engaged voters, considering that 73% of German and 84% of American respondents voted in most or all of the referendums that were organized in their voting area.

## **Figure 2 about here**

### *Correlations*

Table 1 includes the coefficients for the bivariate correlation between the dependent variable (voting in referendums) and each of the independent variables – for which hypotheses were formulated – plus control variables. Since the variables are ordinal, we used non-parametric correlation. There is consistent empirical support for the first four hypotheses, these being also the relationships with the highest value of the coefficients in both countries. These coefficients are also statistically significant at different levels. For civicism (H1), results show that people who are actively engaged in life in their local communities are more likely to vote in local level referendums. This happens to a greater extent in Germany than in the US. The correlation for political knowledge (H2) indicates that people with greater political knowledge are more likely to vote in referendums. The correlation is considerably stronger in the US than in Germany. For interest in politics (H3), the correlation coefficient indicates that people with greater interest in politics are more likely to vote in referendums in Germany (0.15) and much more likely to do the same thing in the US (0.35). The correlation with saliency of the referendum topic (H4) shows that people who perceive a referendum topic as salient are more likely to vote in referendums. Both correlations are weak and positive in both countries.

## **Table 1 about here**

The remaining hypotheses - information from a political party (H5) and seeing citizens as decision makers – provide mixed evidence. H5 goes in the hypothesized direction in Germany where people who receive information from their preferred political party are more likely to vote in local level referendums. However, in the US this correlation is negative and goes against the hypothesized relationship, with people being less likely to vote in local level referendums. Also for H6 the coefficients have different signs in the two countries: in

Germany, people who favor citizens as decision-makers voted less in the local referendums organized in their areas compared to the rest of the population, while in the US the correlation goes in the hypothesized direction.

Among the control variables, respondents who vote on a regular basis in previous elections are more likely to vote in referendums. This value of the correlation coefficient is the highest in both countries. The correlation between education and voting in referendums is positive, showing that more educated people vote more. This happens more in Germany than in the US, but both coefficients are quite small. There is very weak – close to statistical independence – and mixed evidence for the correlation with satisfaction with democracy: in Germany dissatisfied democrats are likely to vote more, while in the US those who are satisfied engage more with referendums.

### *Regressions*

We conduct an ordered logit regression – since the dependent variable is measured on an ordinal scale – to test for the effect of these variables in a common model with other potential determinants.<sup>3</sup> There are two models for each country, one with and the other without controls. Overall, the results of the regression analysis nuance the observations from the correlation table. The empirical evidence provides support for some of the hypothesized relationships but also reveals mixed or very small effects for others. To begin with the expectations that are supported by evidence, knowledge about politics, voting in elections and saliency of the topic have a positive effect on turnout in referendums in both countries. More knowledgeable respondents (H2) are roughly two times more likely to vote in local level referendums in both countries (2.10 times in Germany and 1.83 times in the US). This confirms the theoretical idea that when citizens are informed about community issues, they are more likely to vote. Knowledgeable citizens are likely to recognize the important role that votes like referendums play in the development of their communities and are therefore more willing to turn out.

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<sup>3</sup> Following the suggestion of one reviewer to this journal, we ran several alternative statistical models, to ensure the robustness of results. The independent variables are ordinal and their interpretation can be sometimes problematic. We constructed models with multiple dummies for each variable and also models in which we aggregated some categories. The results were very similar to what we observe in the original ordered logit models presented in this article, which are simpler to interpret.

Voting in local elections has a strong positive effect in Germany where respondents who do so on a regular basis are 2.66 times more likely to vote in local referendums. The odds-ratios for the same variable in the US show an almost deterministic relationship where the likelihood to vote is eight times higher. This very strong effect could be due to the way that the polling procedure is organized where representative votes and referendum votes are often done on a single ballot on election days. This means that an individual will already be voting in a local election when they vote in a local referendum. In this way, there is a mechanical effect of the vote in elections on the vote in referendums in addition to any socialization and experience effects that were explained in the theoretical section.

An additional explanation for the different effect size between the two countries lies in the profile of the pools of voters which resulted from the institutional differences in holding referendums. In Germany, these referendums are relatively rare and address less salient issues, i.e. especially compared to the economy, which may encourage protest or expressive voters. The latter are not always the same as the “regular” voters in local elections. In contrast, in the US, local referendums and local elections are of equal importance because they can address potentially the same issues and thus participation in one of these two types (election) drives participation in the other (referendum).

The saliency of the topic (H4) has a positive effect on voting in referendums, with a stronger impact in Germany compared to the US. German citizens who consider the topic of the referendum to be salient are 1.63 times more likely to turn out to vote. In comparison, the American citizens who have a similar perception are 1.23 times more likely to vote in referendums. In the US the strength of the effect and its statistical significance disappear when introducing voting in elections in the model (see Model 2 vs. Model 1 in Table 2). One possible explanation could be that the saliency of the topic subjected to referendum overlaps with campaign topics from local elections. The participation of citizens in local elections is also due to the interest they have in the topics approached during campaigns.

## **Table 2 about here**

There are two hypotheses for which the effect is mixed. Civicness (H1) has a strong effect in Germany where citizens who are more active in their communities are 2.37 times more likely to vote in local referendums. The US, however, displays a different picture in which



there is no effect of civicism on voting in local level referendums. In the case of political interest (H3), the evidence shows that people who have lower political interest turn out to vote in German referendums. In the US, the citizens with higher political interest vote in more referendums than those people with lower interest. One possible explanation for these results is the institutional context in which referendums are organized. In the US the local level referendums are closely linked to elections and thus more likely to be associated with (the interest in) politics. In Germany, the two procedures are separate and those who decide to take part in referendums are more likely to be driven by the community problems that direct democracy is intended to address.

The effect of party cues (H5) is in the hypothesized direction in Germany: persons who received information from the party for which they voted in the previous election are 1.18 times more likely to vote in local level referendums. In the US the effect is reversed (0.86 times less likely to vote in referendum) and this difference could lie in the party-system structure. The multi-party system in Germany is oriented towards representing preferences, while the US two-party system encourages strategic voting and polarizes society. With the two-party system, it may be hard for an American voter to make decisions based on political party information. Another possible explanation could be that there may be a higher level of skepticism towards politicians and political parties in the US. Under these circumstances, citizens would disregard information presented by political parties.

Finally, there are several variables with little or no significant effect on the likelihood to vote in referendums. For example, respondents who are satisfied with democracy in their local community are less likely to vote in local level referendums in Germany and more likely to turn out in the US. One possible explanation for the German case is what has been identified in the literature as “dissatisfaction bias” (Geissel and Joas 2013, 107–8). According to this perspective, citizens may be driven to vote in referendums by their dissatisfaction with how democracy works. The US provides empirical evidence for the classic argument according to which satisfaction with democracy increases political participation. Respondents who consider the democratic institutions to be working in a way that they see fit, find their vote useful and continue to cast it. The effect size of education in voting in referendums is very small for the respondents in both countries.

## **Conclusions**

This article sought to identify the determinants of turnout in local level referendums in Germany and the US. The two countries differ in terms of frequency and timing of local level referendums. Compared to the US, Germany organizes fewer referendums and they are rarely organized at the same time as elections. These institutional features shape different pools of voters in the two countries. The key findings of this analysis indicate that Germans and Americans mobilize as the result of two sets of factors. On the one hand, there are common drivers for turnout in the two countries: knowledge about politics and voting in elections. Knowledgeable citizens participate more in referendums because they understand better than the others how referendums function, how they could influence their community and have more information about topics. The knowledge they possess allows them to assess and understand the stake of the referendum. This happens across the two countries, independent of their institutional settings. At the same time, the type of vote does not appear to matter and respondents see the vote as a way of driving change in their community and this can happen either through electing representatives or deciding directly on the policy to be adopted. This finding confirms earlier accounts in the literature according to which people who engage in politics do so across various types of participation (Teorell, Torcal, and Montero 2007; Norris 2011; Dalton 2013).

On the other hand, there are specific drivers for voting in each country that have little or opposing effect in the other. As explained in the analysis, these may be associated with the institutional context in which local level referendums take place. Civicness in Germany has a large impact, while in the US there is no effect on voting in referendums. The importance of civicness in the mobilization for referendums positions this analysis in the broader debate about the egocentric vs. community-based incentives. Two separate strands of literature – on the individual cost-benefit analysis of voting and on clientelism – have the same argument; people go to the polls to receive a form of personal gain, an exchange between their vote and goods or services. The results of our analysis show that citizens who vote regularly in referendums share a concern for public issues, which may be due to a higher “sense of civic duty” (Putnam 1993, 93). Political interest inhibits participation in referendums in Germany, while in the US it is an important predictor. The latter probably happens because citizens can hardly separate referendums from elections and then they attach a political dimension to them. If people with little interest in politics vote in local

referendums may have consequences for the quality of the public policy outcomes decided in those referendums.

While this is the first comparative study to assess turnout in local level referendums in Germany and the US, we are aware about its limitations. One of the most obvious, covered in the research design section, is the convenience sample. A probability representative sample would have been ideal to generalize the findings at country level, but our focus on referendums relative to their availability in different states made that difficult. It was important to have an exploratory study that reveals some patterns on which further research can build. Future studies could use probability representative sampling to field a questionnaire similar to the one we used, to be able to get a broader view on what happens within these countries or other similar settings. One potential route to follow is a comparison between participation in local referendums and in local elections. Studies using probability representative samples could draw important conclusions regarding the drivers for turnout in these two forms of political participation. They would contribute to the debates regarding the citizens' involvement in direct and representative democracy.

Another potential avenue for research is to build on the patterns revealed by this study and conduct in-depth analyses about how these determinants can indeed foster turnout in referendums. For example, we found a statistical relationship between political knowledge and voting in referendums and we tested several theoretical assumptions, based on previous research. Future studies could look closer into the matter and interview people with different degrees of knowledge to assess the ways in which this variable contributes to the decision to participate in local level referendums. Such an effort will make clear whether knowledge has something to do with developing a sense for what is important, understanding better the idea behind a referendum or being able to envisage the effects of policies on their lives.

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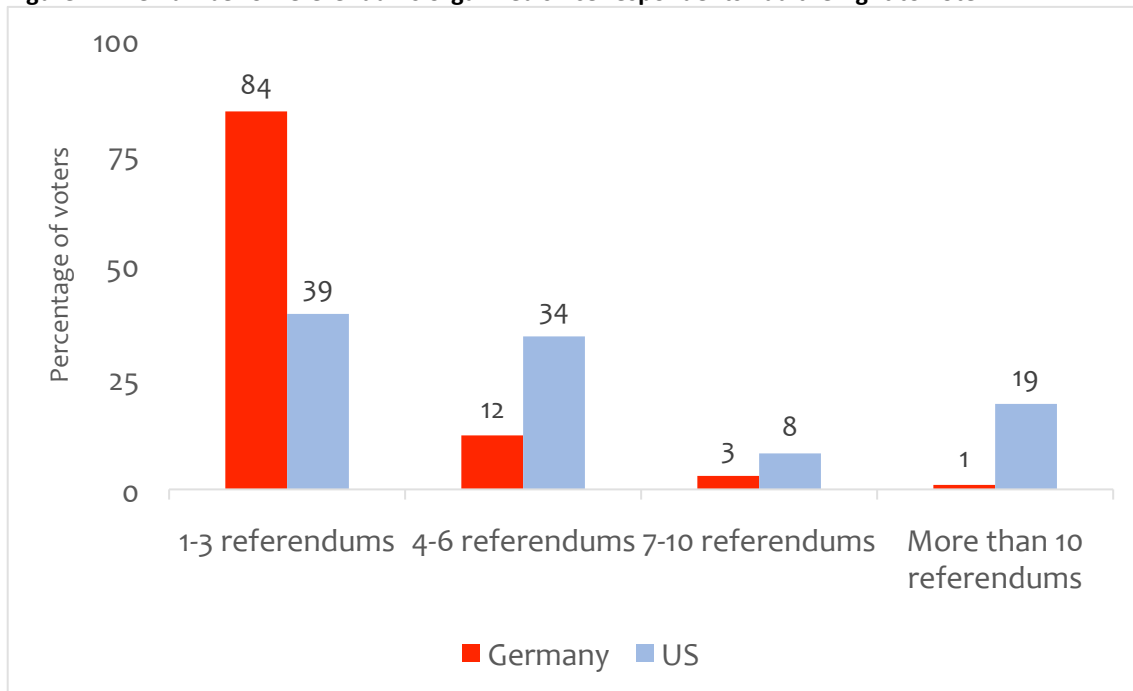
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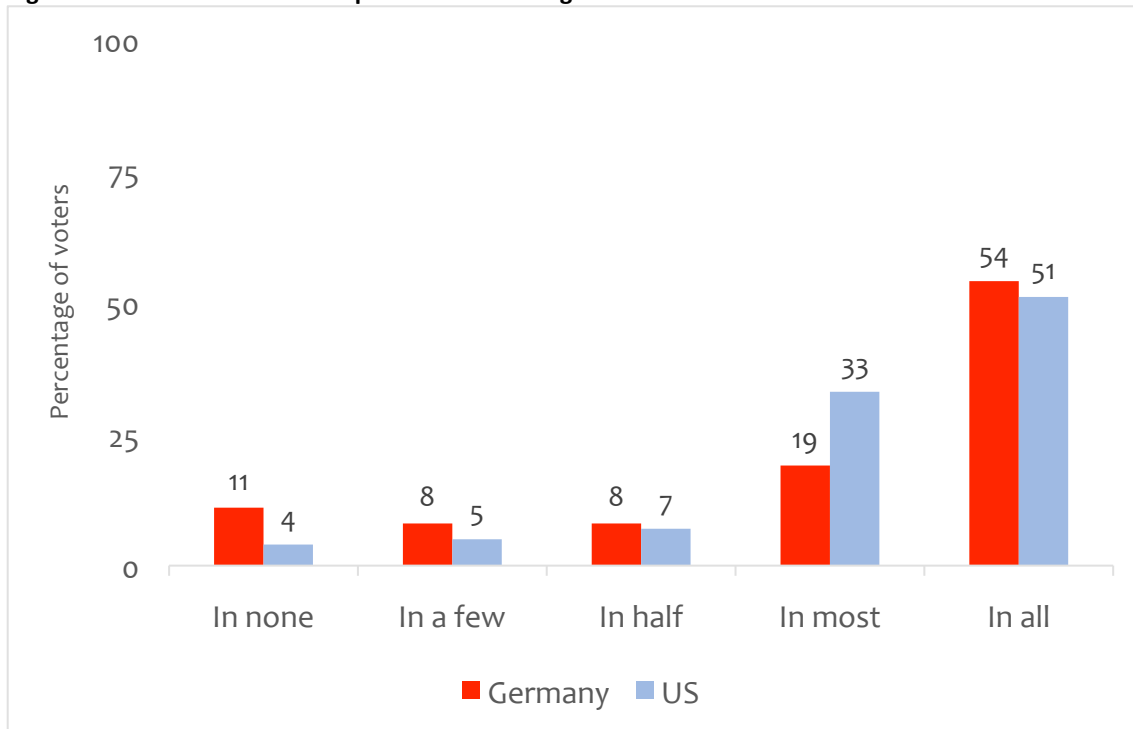
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**Figure 1: The number of referendums organized since respondents had the right to vote**



**Figure 2: The distribution of respondents according to their vote in local referendums**





**Table 1: Correlation coefficients for voting in referendums at local level**

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Germany</b>	<b>United States</b>
Civicness	0.25***	0.14**
Political knowledge	0.24***	0.36***
Political interest	0.15*	0.35***
Saliency	0.14*	0.10*
Party cues	0.12	-0.08
Citizens as decision-makers	-0.09	0.07
Satisfaction with democracy	-0.06	0.05
Voting in local election	0.40***	0.67***
Education	0.15*	0.06
N	154	290

Notes: Correlation coefficients are non-parametric (Spearman)

\*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*  $p < 0.1$

**Table 2: Ordinal logistic regression for voting in referendums at local level**

Variables	Germany		United States	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Civiness	2.37*** (0.70)	2.39*** (0.75)	0.99 (0.11)	0.95 (0.12)
Political knowledge	2.10** (0.62)	2.21** (0.70)	1.83*** (0.31)	1.24 (0.23)
Political interest	0.64* (0.17)	0.50** (0.15)	1.49** (0.24)	1.32 (0.23)
Saliency	1.63*** (0.28)	1.67*** (0.30)	1.23* (0.16)	1.03 (0.15)
Party cues	1.18 (0.16)	1.23 (0.18)	0.86 (0.09)	0.82* (0.09)
Citizens as decision-makers	0.54 (0.22)	0.51 (0.22)	1.25 (0.32)	1.32 (0.36)
Democratic satisfaction		0.56** (0.13)		1.10 (0.16)
Voting in local election		2.66*** (0.76)		8.00*** (1.70)
Education		1.10 (0.11)		1.05 (0.13)
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.08	0.13	0.09	0.29
LR Chi <sup>2</sup>	31.86	47.78	57.21	187.48
N	149	146	277	277

Notes: Reported coefficients are odds-ratios (standard errors in brackets)

\*\*\* p < 0.01; \*\* p < 0.05; \* p < 0.1

**Appendix 1: Descriptive statistics of the variables included in the analysis**

Variables	Germany					United States				
	Mean	Std. dev.	Min.	Max	N	Mean	Std. dev.	Min.	Max	N
Voting in referendums	3.97	1.40	1	5	156	4.22	1.05	1	5	290
Civicness	1.39	0.79	0	4	403	1.98	1.15	0	4	378
Political knowledge	3.30	0.96	1	5	403	3.55	0.99	1	5	378
Political interest	3.71	1.02	1	5	402	3.78	0.99	1	5	378
Saliency	4.06	1.01	1	5	152	4.34	0.95	1	5	289
Party cues	2.38	1.27	1	5	151	2.43	1.23	1	5	286
Citizens as decision-makers	0.20	0.40	0	1	388	0.34	0.47	0	1	366
Satisfaction with democracy	3.51	0.92	1	5	401	3.11	0.91	1	5	377
Voting in local election	4.78	0.69	1	5	400	4.41	0.92	1	5	378
Education	5.73	1.91	0	8	402	3.87	1.15	0	8	378