



# Party Cues and Pre-Campaign Attitudes: Voting Choice in Referendums in Eastern Europe

Sergiu Gherghina <sup>a</sup> and Nanuli Silagadze <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK; <sup>b</sup>Department of Political Science, Abo Akademi Finland, Turku, Finland

## ABSTRACT

Political parties provide cues that influence how people vote in referendums. We know little about how this works against the attitudes held by voters before campaigns. This article analyzes under what circumstances voters in referendums consider their choice to be the result of party cues or of their opinions prior to a campaign. It focuses on seven referendums organized in Eastern Europe between 2015 and 2019. The results show that party cues may shape voting behavior when political parties are trusted, cues are clear, and citizens are media users. Political activity, information and interest in politics make pre-campaign attitudes important.

## Introduction

Over the last three decades, an increasing number of policies have been subjected to referendums globally. Previous explanations about voting behavior in referendums focus extensively on the political cues provided by parties during campaigns. The cues have three functions: to compensate for poor information, to provide an indication of effects, and to complement low-intensity campaigns. They are useful for voters with little prior information because they become substitutes for knowledge and help voters to make choices (LeDuc 2009; Lupia and Matsusaka 2004; Zaller 1992). When voters do not fully understand the content of an issue, they may use cues to determine how the proposal might affect their own interests (Bowler and Donovan 2002). When campaign intensity is low and information is limited, voters have few incentives to make judgments about the ballot proposal and rely more heavily on shortcuts (Hobolt 2005).

So far, scholarship has focused on when and how party cues influence voters. However, little attention has been paid to why citizens follow cues instead of other stimuli. Such a question is relevant because the effect of party cues is not straightforward. For example, studies show that individuals follow their party even if they are exposed to controversial policy information (Cohen 2003) and that citizens abstract from their preferred party's position when exposed to substantive policy information (Bullock 2011). However, there are instances of important preference gaps between citizens' issue preferences in referendum voting and the cues provided by parties (Sager and Buehlmann 2009). This suggests that voters process policy-related information independently from the recommendations of their preferred party. It remains unclear what drives voters to follow cues or to process information on their own. To address this gap in the literature, our article aims to explain why citizens follow party cues or the opinions they held prior to campaigns in deciding how to vote in referendums. It uses individual-level data from an original survey conducted in seven East European referendums on different topics between 2015 and

2019. The survey questions ask respondents about how they think they themselves were influenced by party cues and prior opinions when voting in the referendum. The dataset includes 1,825 respondents from Bulgaria, Hungary, Republic of Moldova, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia.

The central argument of this article is that there are two distinct groups of voters in a referendum: those who follow party cues and those who pursue the opinion they held prior to the referendum campaign. The voters who trust parties, perceive cues as being clear, and use the media channels on which parties convey messages during campaigns, are likely to perceive a high influence of party cues on their voting decision. The voters who are actively involved in contentious politics (protests, petitions, or boycotts), who consider themselves well informed about the referendum topic, and who have a high interest in politics, are likely to follow their opinions in casting a vote in a referendum. We also control for the potential effect of political discussions (both online and offline) and education on the likelihood to influence their perception about the importance of party cues or prior opinions in their vote choice. Our quantitative analysis uses bivariate correlations and ordinal logistic regression.

The next section reviews the literature about cue taking and opinion formation. It formulates two general arguments and several testable hypotheses about the conditions under which voters resort to cues or to their own opinions in deciding how to vote. The second section presents the case selection and variable measurement, and provides details about the surveys used for data collection. The third section includes the interpretation of results and shows how the survey respondents arrived at their voting decision in referendums. The final section summarizes the key findings and discusses the implications of the results for the study of voting in referendums.

## Opinion Formation in Referendum Campaigns

Referendums fulfill various functions for political parties. They may serve as a crisis-solving mechanism: parties are able to decouple a controversial topic from the upcoming election by putting it to a popular vote. Moreover, a parliament's highly divisive decisions might not be regarded as fully legitimate until they are contested in a referendum (Björklund 1982; Morel 1993, 2007). Referendums are often instrumentalized by political parties and used mainly as an electoral strategy to promote the political agenda of the initiator, increase their popularity, or weaken the position of political opponents (Gherghina 2019; Hollander 2019).

Referendum campaigns are designed to impact vote choices; they create a context in which a particular issue is framed by political actors and media. Although referendums are often about policy proposals, partisan orientations frequently serve as a “perceptual screen” that helps voters navigate through information-rich campaigns and sometimes conflicting preferences that occur because partisan and issue-specific orientations are not always aligned (Bartels 2002). When voters experience cross-pressures between their issue-specific attitudes and their partisan predispositions, they might opt for abstaining from voting as a way to minimize the dissonance (Endres and Panagopoulos 2019). Some scholars argue that those citizens who vote often resolve these conflicts in favor of their partisan loyalty (Selb et al. 2009). Others conclude that campaign effects clearly outweigh partisan effects because the information delivered during the referendum campaign plays a more dominant role in the process of opinion formation than party preferences (Sciarini and Tresch 2011).

The interaction between partisan predispositions and information processing is an important debate in voting behavior. Motivated reasoning theory has played a major role in the discourse, according to which political reasoning is not necessarily guided by the goal of being accurate but rather by directional goals—a personal motivation to protect existing beliefs or to follow a certain party line (Kunda 1990; Taber and Lodge 2006). Earlier findings identify an interaction between partisan predispositions and information processing, concluding that more often than not individuals' information processing is biased by their party preference: voters engage in the selective recruitment of new information so as to confirm existing attitudes or opinions (Bartels 2002; Druckman, Fein, and Leeper 2012; Slothuus and de Vreese 2010). Recent research confirms partisan-biased processing of policy arguments according to which voters tend to align their arguments with their preferred party's position (Colombo and Kriesi 2017).

This article takes a step further in this debate and argues that a particular type of voter follows party cues—as opposed to opinions formed prior to campaigns—when deciding how to vote in referendums. We expect cues to play a role in the voting decision when people trust parties, perceive cues as being clear, and use the media channels where parties advertise. We hypothesize that their own opinions prior to a campaign matter more for those individuals who are politically active, consider themselves to be informed, and have an interest in politics.

## Party Cues

According to the dual-process theories in social psychology, there are two qualitatively different paths of individual opinion formation—a heuristic path and a systematic path (Chaiken and Trope 1999; Eagly and Chaiken 1993). This distinction refers to the role played by arguments: systematic opinion formation is argument-based (involving high cognitive effort), while the heuristic is based on shortcuts that use heuristic cues (low cognitive effort). In the present study, following a party cue corresponds to a heuristic strategy, while processing policy arguments reflects a systematic path of opinion formation. In this article, we aim at identifying which mechanisms are at play when and under what conditions.

Many societies have experienced downward trends in political trust and party membership in the last decades (Ceka 2013; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2001; van Biezen, Mair, and Poguntke 2012). Political trust toward institutions corresponds to David Easton's (1965) conception of specific support. It can also be seen as citizens' faith that actors within the political system, including the government, act according to citizens' normative expectations (Hooghe 2011; Miller 1974). Low levels of trust in political institutions (including political parties) make it difficult for political parties to effectively convey their message to the constituency, since trust plays a pivotal role in the likelihood of that message to come through and be acted upon. In Eastern Europe, the level of trust in political parties has remained very low over time, well below the trust in government or parliament (Závecz 2017).

Hanspeter Kriesi (2005b) identifies trust as one of the main heuristic strategies applied by voters to come to a decision: people follow the advice of speakers whom they find trustworthy. Earlier studies show that individuals follow a policy endorsement if it is suggested by someone they perceive as knowledgeable and trustworthy; in the opposite situation they are likely to just “listen to the speaker's advice and do the opposite” (Lupia and McCubbins 1998). There is evidence that the level of familiarity and trust in a cue giver conditions the acceptance or rejection of that party's cue (Coan et al. 2008). The latest research from Denmark examined how citizens react when their party changes its position on a major policy, and concluded that parties highly trusted by citizens were successful in reversing opinions among their supporters, even when the new position went against citizens' previously held views (Slothuus and Bisgaard 2020). Hence, trust can exhibit a powerful influence in the voting decision.

Another important element within the heuristics highlighted by previous scholarship is the clarity of cues: the less clear external clues are (the signals received from political parties), the more the individual is forced to act on internal clues (Svensson 1984). Competing messages issued by various representatives of a party muddle the cues for its supporters (Zaller 1992). De Vreese and Semetko (2004) confirmed that when parties send their electorate mixed or unclear messages about their stand on a referendum issue, they performed poorly even in mobilizing their own voters, not to mention the mobilization of voters lacking a clear party identification. A recent study shows that referendums that are accompanied

by clear political cues are more than four times more likely to be adopted compared to those with mixed cues (Silagadze and Gherghina 2018). Thus, the ability of political parties to effectively influence voters is conditioned by the level of intra-party dissent (Steenbergen, Edwards, and de Vries 2007).

Polarization on a ballot proposition is not only an indicator of the saliency of the campaign, but also a setting that helps political parties to clarify where they stand on the issue by increasing the ideological distance between the parties and enhancing the ideological homogeneity within each party, enabling ordinary voters to adopt more consistent attitudes (Levendusky 2010). Moreover, greater issue salience enhances the influence of parties on voters, because, if an issue is salient to a party, it is expected to articulate its position clearly and frequently (Steenbergen, Edwards, and de Vries 2007). Previous studies suggest that party cues are most influential on polarized issues (Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013).

Campaigns generate a large variety of information about different aspects of the policy under consideration—costs, benefits, implications, reasons in favor and against. The longer and more intense the public debates, the easier it is for voters to make up their minds, since a lot of information on the issue is already available (Font and Rodriguez 2009). In the situation where citizens are bombarded by various facts, the source of information matters. With regard to television, empirical studies suggest that TV advertisements are far from having a corrosive effect on politics, but rather contribute to a well-informed electorate (Brians and Wattenberg 1996). Television campaigns raise awareness of the topic at hand and encourage people to seek further information elsewhere (Bowler and Donovan 2002). Moreover, in the case of the 2011 UK referendum on the alternative vote (on the method of electing MPs), television came out as the best source for balanced and accurate information, covering both sides almost equally (Vowles 2013).

Social media as a source of information are experiencing an unprecedented popularity, although this comes with certain pitfalls: as a result of search and selection algorithm filters, bubbles and echo chambers emerge, with the result that users receive a tailored universe of information that fits their pre-existing attitudes (Geschke, Lorenz, and Holtz 2019). Moreover, “post-truth politics” is massively reproduced in the social media context (Roberts 2010). However, what television and social media have in common is the fact that political parties have a presence there and advertise their positions. As classic newspaper usage is declining, television, with its growing online streaming format, and social media are important platforms for ad targeting, for both companies and political parties. Following these lines of reasoning, we expect that voters consider themselves to be influenced in their voting choice by the cues provided by political parties when:

H1: They trust political parties

H2: They perceive cues as being clear

H3: They use extensively the media channels where parties advertise

## Own Opinions

Citizens' dissatisfaction with political institutions and actors coincides with a robust increase in non-electoral forms of participation (Caren, Ghoshal, and Ribas 2011). The rise of post-material social movements can be seen as a new form of engaged citizenship (Dalton 2008; Inglehart and Catterberg 2002). Recent research illustrates the effectiveness of unconventional political participation in reaching various objectives (Perkoski and Chenoweth 2018). However, all forms of unconventional political participation (protest, petitions, boycotts) have one feature in common: they serve as a manifestation of discontent with the current situation or policy resulting from a political action or absence of such action by their representatives. More precisely, citizens who are active in protest “are dissatisfied with the responsiveness of political representatives and raise their voice to influence the political decision on a specific issue” (Gherghina and Geissel 2017). Furthermore, political efficacy is positively correlated with all forms of non-voting political activities (Lussier 2016). This means that when citizens believe in their ability to influence the political process, they are also likely to engage in protests, demonstrations, and boycotts if need be. Political parties also organize and lead protests: people who are strongly in favor or against a certain policy will protest if they view demonstration as the best possible tool to make their voices heard. Moreover, citizens who engage in contentious politics often have higher interest in a particular topic and develop strong opinions about it. Individuals with strong attitudes toward a topic feel well informed and certain about the consequences of the vote even before the start of the campaign (Beach and Finke 2020). In addition, citizens with firm attitudes are more likely to engage in motivated reasoning—that is, biased processing of campaign arguments to support their underlying beliefs (Druckman, Fein, and Leeper 2012). Consequently, voters with strong opinions are less susceptible to messages from political parties that contradict their standpoint, and less impacted by the campaign, as they feel confident about their arguments and know how they will vote even before the campaign begins.

A prominent critique against direct democracy is based on the argument that citizens are not sufficiently qualified to participate directly in political decision-making processes due to their lack of political knowledge (Budge 1996; Matsusaka 2004). Indeed, research has largely confirmed the lack of political knowledge on the part of ordinary citizens (Converse 1964; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Zaller 1992). However, political knowledge also plays an important mediating role in the use of heuristics (Clarke et al. 2013). If citizens are uninformed about referendum-specific factors, they tend to conform to the policy views of elites, following their cues on judgments, opinions, and preferences, and thus being more susceptible to partisan cues (Bullock 2011; Jacobs 2018). When deciding on more complex topics (e.g. a class action issue), citizens rely more on party cues because they do not feel well-informed enough (Coan et al. 2008). The most recent research shows that there are different decision-making patterns among different types of voters, with heuristic voting being predominant among less-well-informed individuals. In the 2016 Italian constitutional referendum, less politically sophisticated voters relied more heavily on government assessment as a heuristic, whereas sophisticated and independent



voters chose systematic processing and based their decisions on their assessment of the reform itself. Specifically, less-well-informed voters substituted the complex question of reforming the country's constitution with the simpler question of how much they liked or disliked the Renzi government (De Angelis, Colombo, and Morisi 2020). This goes in line with insights from cognitive psychology: individuals tend to substitute a complex question that requires high cognitive effort, with an easier and more familiar one that they can answer more readily (Kahneman and Shane 2002).

Moreover, people who find a referendum campaign very informative are roughly three times more likely to support the referendum proposals (Gherghina and Silagadze 2019). These findings can be linked to the concept of internal efficacy, or "subjective competence"—individuals' belief in their capacity to understand and participate effectively in politics (Almond and Verba 1963). For instance, when a person describes a campaign as informative, it means that they paid attention to various lines of argument and see themselves as knowledgeable or well-informed enough about the issue at stake to cast a vote.<sup>1</sup> Biased processing effect is stronger among highly knowledgeable citizens, as well-informed citizens seem to be more skilled at protecting their prior beliefs and aligning the arguments with their preferred party's position (Cohen 2003; Zaller 1992).

Traditionally, two factors are considered to be significant in determining how much effort individuals decide to put into opinion formation—their ability and their motivation (Chaiken 1980). Ability, in the political context, refers to someone's political knowledge; motivation, in contrast, can be defined as an individual's political interest, their general willingness to engage in political reasoning and action. Furthermore, interest is an antecedent of knowledge: in order to be knowledgeable about a topic one needs to have an interest in it in the first place (Johnston et al. 1996). Studies point out that politically interested citizens know more than the rest of society (Neijens, Minkman, and Slot 1998).

According to Kriesi (2005a) whether and to what extent individuals apply systematic (argument-based) or heuristic strategies also depends on their level of political interest and competence (political awareness, level of education). Political awareness is the extent to which an individual pays attention to and understands political information (Zaller 1992). Thus, interest is a precondition for both level of knowledge and political awareness—the factors that decide what mechanisms of opinion formation are at play. Interest, motivation, and knowledge can be affected by the salience of the topic. Highly salient issues receive considerable coverage by the media and there is more easily available information on the topic. Since motivation serves as an integral part of engaging in systematic information processing, people are more inclined to do so with high-salience issues compared to low-salience ones. Saliency fosters people's motivation to engage in issue-relevant elaboration as opposed to picking up on easy cues (Kahneman 2011; Petty and Cacioppo 1986). Recent research suggests that salience works as a moderator in opinion formation. Citizens are more likely to systematically process policy-relevant information and incorporate it into their attitudes with high-salience issues (Ciuk and Yost 2016).

On the contrary, when motivation is absent and a policy is relatively unimportant to them, citizens tend to rely on party cues to form their attitudes (Ciuk and Yost 2016). Voters who are more politically aware and interested in a political issue are more likely to follow their policy preferences than to rely on other cues (Arceneaux 2008). The less politically aware, in contrast, rely more on elite cues than on their own attitude when deciding (Hobolt 2005; Kam 2005). Recent evidence from Spain suggests that partisan bias disappears when such political awareness is high (Anduiza, Gallego, and Muñoz 2013).

These arguments about the sense of political efficacy, the perception of information, and the interest in politics may determine that voters believe they are influenced by their own opinion prior to a campaign when:

H4: They are active in unconventional forms of political participation

H5: They believe they are informed about the referendum topic

H6: They have high interest in politics

### **Control Variables**

In addition to these main effects, we also control for online and offline political discussions and education that might play a role in either influence by parties or influence by pre-campaign knowledge. Sociodemographic features have long been considered as explanatory variables for vote choice in elections and referendums.

In referendum studies, level of education has been viewed as one of the elements influencing the choice between systematic or heuristic voting strategies (Kriesi 2005a). The evidence from EU referendums in Nordic countries showed that the Yes vote increased with education almost in a linear fashion (Jensen 1998). The online era has brought new means of communication and socialization for parties and citizens, with the Internet being seen as a means to revive and reconnect parties with their grassroots (Margetts 2006). Political parties and individual politicians can use social media to bypass the traditional media and communicate directly with voters through, for example, Facebook and Twitter. Additionally, the internet revolution has brought about online groups and discussion forums that appear to resemble offline groups. Discussions, in general, are thought to be an integral component of a political efficacy feeling among citizens, leading to higher rates of political activity (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Fishkin 1991). There is a consistent positive relationship between online and offline network size and civic engagement (de Zúñiga and Valenzuela 2011).

### **East European Cases and Variables on Voter Motivations**

The empirical test of these hypotheses relies on individual data collected through an original survey conducted among the voters in seven referendums in Eastern Europe between 2015 and 2019. The seven referendums are ones organized in Bulgaria (2016), Hungary (2016), Republic of Moldova (2019), Poland (2015),

Romania (2018 and 2019), and Slovakia (2015). These referendums were on different topics (Appendix A) ranging from political issues such as compulsory voting (Bulgaria 2016), party financing (Poland 2015), or the number of parliamentarians (Moldova 2019) to issues related to migration (Hungary 2016) or moral concerns (Slovakia 2015, Romania 2018). These different topics make the seven referendums an appropriate setting to test the hypothesized effects: the existence of statistical relationships across referendums, independent of the policies being submitted to a popular vote.

We focus on Eastern Europe for two main reasons. First, the countries in the region share several common characteristics: low levels of trust in political institutions, low levels of citizens' involvement in politics, high electoral volatility, attitudes toward parties, and prominence of parties in politics (Ceka 2013; Gherghina 2014; Letki 2004). Second, the East European countries included direct democracy in their legislation very soon after the regime change, even before some West European countries (Scarrow 2001), but did not make extensive use of referendums until recently (Gherghina 2017). Given this limited experience and the active involvement of political parties in instrumentalizing referendums in the region (Gherghina 2019), these countries are the critical cases where we would expect party cues to play an important role in voting behavior.

The surveys were conducted online within three months after a referendum. This time frame was used to avoid the recall bias among respondents. They include only the voters in those referendums, because we were interested in what drove their behavior. As such, representative probability samples are not possible, because none of the countries provide official statistics about the profile of voters. Without this information, we cannot know the broader universe of cases and cannot use representative sampling. Instead, we used a purposive sampling technique (maximum variation samples) that increases the variation on many key variables for this analysis (see Appendix B). Despite the non-representative character of the samples, the distribution is rarely skewed; for example, even for age—which is not reported in the analysis but is often skewed in online surveys—the distribution within the samples resembles the general spread within the broader population.

The samples vary across countries, depending on the availability of respondents but also on the general turnout. For example, in Poland the turnout was lower than 8 percent and thus respondents were difficult to find. The total number of respondents is 1,825 with complete answers, with country samples varying between 114 in Hungary (2016) and 634 in Romania (2019). Due to these differences, the analysis uses weights according to sample size.<sup>2</sup> Since we use a non-representative sampling strategy, our results are confined to the sample and we do not generalize to the entire population.

### Variable Operationalization from Survey Data

The survey asked for respondents' self-reported perceptions about the extent to which they think party cues and prior opinions, respectively, influenced their vote choice in a referendum. Our study distinguishes between two categories of voters: those who were influenced by party cues and those who followed their own opinion from prior to the campaign when making a choice in the referendum. The two dependent variables are measured as the answer to a similar question: "When voting in this referendum, to what extent did the following factors play a role in your decision?" Two of the available items are "The position of the party for which I voted in the (year of the most recent national) elections" and "My opinion before the referendum campaign." For each of these, respondents can indicate the degree of influence, which ranges from "not at all" (coded 1) to "very much" (coded 4). The value of the correlation coefficient between the answers provided to these items is very small (0.07), which indicates that we have two different groups of respondents distributed along the two sources of influence (also reflected in Figure 1). One caveat to these questions is the extent to which we get meaningful answers to questions that require introspection. While we are aware of potential respondent bias, we follow the conclusions of earlier research according to which introspective questions can provide useful information about which considerations drive people's voting decisions in referendums (Blais, Martin, and Nadeau 1998).

The first independent variable is trust in political parties (H1), measured through the answers to the straightforward question encountered in many international surveys. The answers are

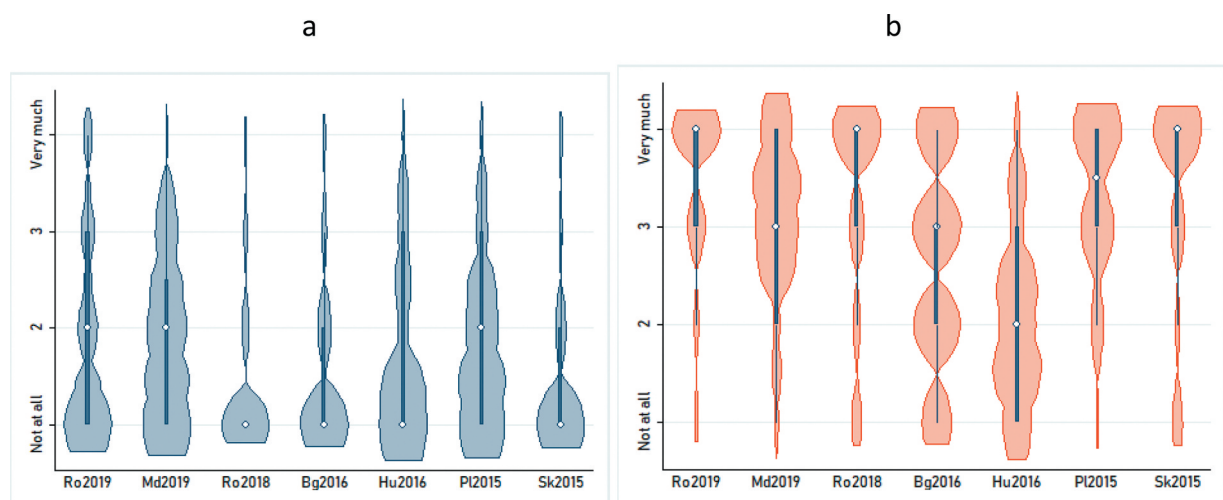


Figure 1. The perceived influence of party cues (a) and own opinion (b) on voting.

recorded on a four-point ordinal scale ranging between not at all (1) and very much (4). The perceived clarity of the cues (H2) is operationalized as the answer provided to the question “How clear was the position of the party for which you voted in the (year of the most recent national election) on the question(s) of this referendum?” The answers are on an ordinal scale between very ambiguous (1) and very clear (4). The media channels used by voters (H3) aim to capture the sources of information about the referendum. It is a cumulative index of information received via television, radio, or newspapers as traditional media and Facebook as social media. These are the channels where parties broadcast their messages during a campaign. The index has three values: no traditional or social media were used, one was used, or both were used.

The participation in contentious politics (H4) is also a cumulative index that seeks to reflect whether respondents were involved in protests, signing petitions, or boycotts in the most recent five years before the referendum. The index is measured on a four-point ordinal scale with the following extremes: 0 for those who did not participate in any of these activities and 3 for those who engaged in all three forms of contentious politics. The perception about information is measured as the answer to the question “How would you rate your knowledge about the referendum question(s)?” The answers were recorded on an ordinal scale ranging from very limited (1) to very good (4). The interest in politics (H6) is measured through the answer to the usual survey question, with answers on a four-point ordinal scale (1 = not at all, 4 = very much).

As noted earlier, salience of the issue is an important factor in predicting whether individuals choose to follow party cues or their own opinion. Since our survey captures a variety of topics with different levels of saliency in society, two separate questions serve as a proxy for the subjective salience: perceived knowledge of the topic voted upon (“How would you rate your knowledge about the referendum question(s)?”) and the interest in the topic (“How closely did you follow the campaign?”). On the individual level, whether or not a certain topic is important (salient) to a person “is defined in terms of the individual’s subjective sense of the concern, caring, and significance he or she attaches to the attitude” (Boninger, Krosnick, and Berent 1995). The combination of these questions provides the importance of a particular referendum for respondents.

Among the controls, political discussion is a cumulative index of information about the referendum acquired through discussions with friends or online forums. The index has three values: none, one such discussion, or both. Education refers to the highest completed level and is measured on a five-point ordinal scale from primary to postgraduate studies. All variables are coded ascendingly for an easier interpretation, and all “do not know/no answer” options were removed from the analysis. The methodology uses a combination of bivariate and multivariate (ordered logistic regression), to be described in detail in the following section.

### Explaining Effects of Party Cues and Opinions

Before delving into the analysis, let us take a quick look at the distribution of respondents across the two dependent variables of this study in each of the seven referendums: the perceived influence of party cues (a) and of own opinion (b) in voting (Figure 1).

There are two general observations. First, there is great variation regarding the reported importance of party cues or of own opinion on voting preference between the seven referendums. This variation is important for the robustness of results because the effects that we detect are not referendum- or topic-sensitive.<sup>3</sup> Instead, they apply to a variety of referendums in which the party cues and own opinions play different roles. Second, related to the latter point, the groups of respondents declaring that they followed party cues or own opinions in deciding how to vote are almost completely different. This confirms the small correlation coefficient between the two groups to which we referred in the previous section.

The correlation coefficients in Table 1 are non-parametric, that is, based on the ranked values for each variable rather than the raw data, due to the ordinal measurement of the variables. The bivariate relationships provide empirical support for H1–H3. Trust in parties and clear cues correlate positively with the perceived influence of political parties in the voting decision. The use of media channels is also positively associated with this perception, but somewhat weaker than the previous two variables. While these findings correspond to the theoretical expectations, it is surprising to observe a positive correlation between these three variables and the perceived influence of own opinion prior to a campaign. Trust in parties, clear cues, and the use of media channels on which parties broadcast their messages correlate with the perception regarding the importance of one’s own opinion in shaping the vote decision.

There is strong empirical evidence for the three hypotheses formulated for the importance of an individual’s own opinion prior to a referendum campaign (H4–H6). The results indicate that the survey respondents who engaged in contentious politics, those who consider themselves well informed about the referendum topic(s), and those with higher interest in politics are likely to vote in the referendum according to their own opinion before the campaign. All these correlations are statistically significant. In contrast, respondents who do not engage in contentious politics are slightly more likely to vote according to party cues (–0.05). There is no statistical relationship between the perceived level of information regarding the referendum topic and cues provided by parties. Interest in politics correlates positively, but weakly and without statistical significance, with the perceived influence of political parties in voting decision.

The control variables also tell an interesting story because the direction of correlation with the two dependent variables is different. People who have fewer discussions either online or offline are more inclined to vote according to the guidance received from parties (–0.13, statistically significant). This variable is not

**Table 1.** Correlation Coefficients for Party and Own Opinion Influence.

	Political parties	Own opinion	N
Trust in parties	0.25**	0.11**	1572
Clear cues	0.26**	0.24**	1420
Media channels	0.12**	0.09**	1592
Contentious politics	–0.05**	0.21**	1592
Perceived information	0.02	0.29**	1590
Interest in politics	0.05	0.13**	1588
Political discussions	–0.13**	0.03	1592
Education	–0.08**	0.11**	1547

Reported coefficients are non-parametric (Spearman); \*\*p < 0.01; \*p < 0.05.

statistically related to their own opinion (0.03). Respondents with lower levels of education are more likely to vote in line with what parties suggest, while those with higher levels of education tend to follow their own opinion.<sup>4</sup> Such an observation is consistent with several arguments presented in the literature on information processing. Less-educated citizens use party cues to understand the issue at stake. In their case, political parties simplify the information and provide them a simple alternative (De Angelis, Colombo, and Morisi 2020; Kriesi 2005b). Highly educated citizens develop abilities to interpret politics through their own lenses and form long-term attitudes (Cohen 2003; Zaller 1992), to which they stick when voting in referendums.

The ordered logistic regression presented in Figure 2 strengthens the preliminary observations from the bivariate analysis.<sup>5</sup> These models include the control variables, while those without controls are available in Appendix C. The reported coefficients are odds-ratios to make the interpretation more straightforward. There is empirical support for the first three hypothesized relationships. All effects are positive and statistically significant. Respondents who trust parties are two times more likely to consider that their voting decision in a referendum was influenced by party cues. Individuals who perceive the cues as being clear are 1.78 times more likely to consider themselves influenced by political parties compared to citizens who find cues to be ambiguous. Also, respondents who get their information from media where parties advertise are 1.25 times more likely to follow party cues when voting in a referendum.

Only one of these variables has a strong and statistically significant effect on the survey respondents who follow their opinion. When these voters perceive the cues from political parties to be clear, they are 1.44 times more likely to follow their opinion prior to the referendum. One possible explanation for this is that citizens can assess the clarity of the cues without being influenced by them. They are familiar with what

political parties suggest but that does not exclude a behavior guided by their opinion prior to the campaign. Two examples in this direction are the same-sex referendums organized in Slovakia (2015) and Romania (2018). The topic touches upon moral issues and other elements related to traditions. These are usually topics on which citizens can develop strong beliefs, especially if the issue is salient to them (Gherghina 2021). These beliefs are often developed over time, well before the referendum campaign. Under these circumstances, even if the cues of parties were very clear—especially those of the governing social democrats in both countries—the voting behavior of people was not influenced by these cues. Trust in parties and the use of media channels has a weak effect, without statistical significance.

There is also strong empirical support for H4 and H5. The results indicate that survey respondents who get involved on a regular basis in contentious political participation are 1.34 times more likely to follow their opinions prior to a referendum. In contrast, those individuals who do not protest, sign petitions, or boycott are more likely to use the cues provided by political parties when deciding how to vote (OR = 0.92). This is in line with the theoretical expectations according to which people who engage in other modes of participation beyond voting develop an independent way of thinking and can assess matters on their own. Those who are inactive are more exposed to the influence of political parties, the actors that are at the core of their only mode of participation: voting.

The respondents who consider themselves to be well informed about the referendum topic are 1.82 times more likely to use their opinion in voting compared to those who see themselves as poorly informed. This is in line with the theoretical expectations according to which such individuals are inclined toward building their own perspective and understanding of the topic rather than receiving input

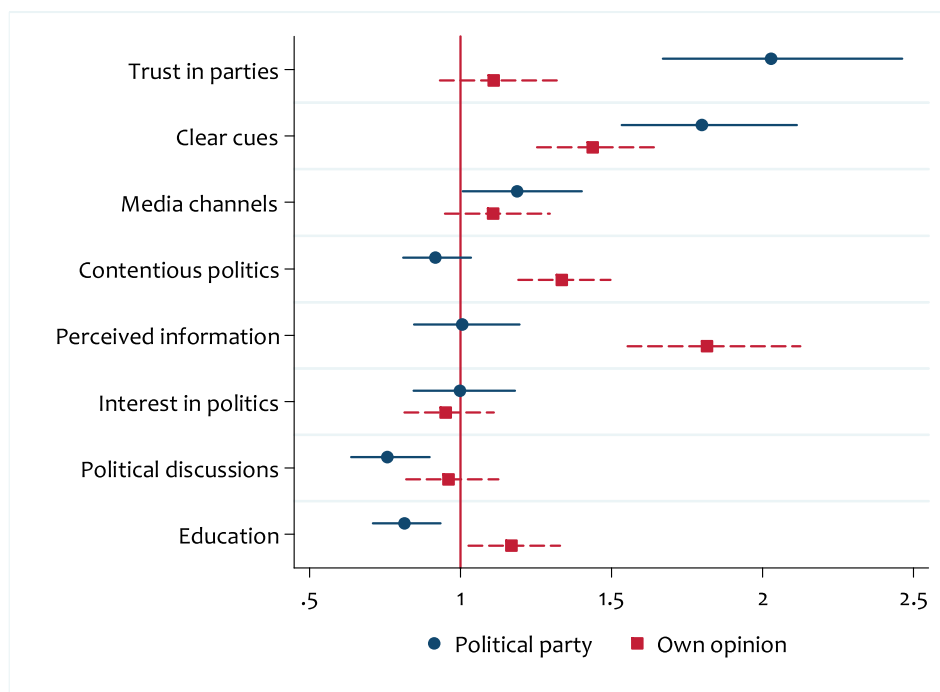


Figure 2. The effects of party cues and following own opinions in referendum voting.



from external sources. This variable has no effect on the other group of respondents: those who consider themselves as being well informed about the referendum topic follow party cues to an equal extent as the poorly informed individuals.

The regression analysis finds no effect of political interest on the two groups of voters. The bivariate relationships identified a positive correlation between having high interest in politics and following one's own opinion. This relationship disappears when putting the variable into a common model with other determinants. One possible explanation could be that political interest, in accord with the theoretical considerations, is closely related to both knowledge, or a feeling of being well-informed, and education, thus losing its explanatory power in the joint model. Individuals with a high level of political interest are also the ones with a high level of political awareness/knowledge and education; they tend to follow politics more attentively and know more than their less interested co-citizens.

The absence of political discussions with other people online or offline is favorable to a higher importance given to political parties in shaping the voting decision in referendums (OR = 0.76, statistically significant). One possible explanation is that citizens who do not engage in an exchange of ideas with other people have fewer sources of information and fewer opportunities to distill their opinion on the matter. Instead, they can use the opinion of the party as heuristics that can help them with a choice. This happens especially with technical issues such as tax law interpretation in the 2015 Polish referendum or with issues that are less salient for the population such as the introduction of the right to recall in the 2019 Moldovan referendum.

Similar to what was observed in the correlations, less-educated respondents are more likely to see themselves influenced by party cues, while better-educated people consider that they follow their own opinions in expressing a vote in referendums. This might be related to the sense of internal efficacy and political awareness. As previous research outlined, individuals with lower levels of education tend to have less knowledge and understanding of politics and feel less competent in deciding about issues they do not think they know enough about. Hence, one of their strategies is to use the easily available cues from their parties to overcome their information shortfalls. For instance, in the 2016 Hungarian referendum on migrant quotas, education played a role in two ways. First, those who have low levels of education usually work in low-skilled sectors and feel more threatened by the newcomers. Second, they fear to lose their job and they are more receptive toward the populist rhetoric by the government party.

## Conclusions

This article aimed to explain why citizens follow party cues or their opinions from prior to a campaign in deciding how to vote in referendums. The analysis uses individual-level data from original surveys conducted in the aftermath of seven referendums in Eastern Europe. The results indicate that the survey respondents use party cues in their voting decisions when they trust political parties, perceive that the cues are clear, and use the media channels used by parties to promote their messages. Those respondents who do not discuss a referendum with others and who are less educated are likely to follow the shortcuts provided by political parties.

People vote according to their opinion prior to the referendum campaign when they feel that they are well informed about the referendum topic, when they engage in contentious political participation, and when they are more educated. Contrary to many studies on political participation (Arceneaux 2008; Ciuk and Yost 2016), political interest does not appear to have an impact on voting choice in referendums among either the voters following party cues or those driven by their own opinions.

These findings have theoretical and empirical implications for the study of voting in referendums. At a theoretical level, the analysis shows that there are other drivers for voting in a referendum apart from party cues. It complements the vast literature explaining that voters follow the positions of their preferred parties (Colombo and Kriesi 2017; Hobolt 2005; Lupia and Matsusaka 2004). Many voters in the covered referendums use their opinion prior to the referendum in making a choice on the ballot. The two groups of voters are almost entirely different: party cue takers and own opinion followers overlap to a very small degree. This indicates the necessity to include the existence of an established opinion in future analytical frameworks about voting behavior in referendums.

The empirical implication lies in the identification of factors that determine whether voters choose party cues over their own opinion or the other way around. Except for clear cues that have a positive effect on both groups of voters, the other determinants have specific effect, often in different directions. There appears to be a pattern among the voters, which can be useful also for policymakers in general and for referendum initiators in particular. For example, political parties will know that they can influence voting behavior in those settings in which they are trusted, when they send clear cues to the electorate, and when voters use traditional and social media extensively for information purposes. The first and the third feature are usually known prior to campaigns, and thus political actors can easily shape their actions accordingly.

This article has some limitations. One of the most obvious is the use of citizens' subjective view of how they came to their voting decision. The analysis relies on self-reported values and that is why the interpretation of these results is quite cautious. Post-hoc self-reported observations may not be accurate, as we do not always recognize what influences our decisions. As earlier research shows, it is quite common for individuals to engage in hindsight rationalizations in an attempt to justify their own behavior, using arguments that did not play a role when they took a decision (Haidt 2012). Moreover, a social desirability bias might be at play, with respondents feeling compelled to report that they "think for themselves" and made up their mind independently. However, as is the case with most surveys, we cannot fully ensure that respondents were objectively truthful in their responses, and an investigation of subconscious mechanisms of opinion formation would have significantly exceeded the realm of this paper. Future research could address this point by measuring the opinions before, during, and after the start of a campaign and controlling for media exposure.

Another avenue for future research could be a more in-depth analysis of the causal mechanisms identified in this article. The results indicate general patterns across several referendums, but it is important to know how voters decide whether they follow the



cues or their opinions. Consequently, semi-structured interviews or focus groups with themes focusing on how that decision is taken can be of great value. At the same time, further research could focus on intensity of cues and voters' exposure to cues. One limitation of our approach was that we could not account for the role played by political parties and the timing of their involvement in a referendum campaign. For example, some of the referendums are called by political parties, while in other cases parties joined the campaign at a somewhat later stage. These two supplementary variables will increase the complexity of explanations and their accuracy in predicting voting behaviors.

## Notes

1. We cannot know with certainty whether an individual follows their own opinion or is, in fact, influenced by cues without being able to identify it. Since exploring the subconscious mechanisms of opinion formation would exceed the realm of this article, we are interested in the subjective (maybe not accurate) view of respondents about how independently they came to the voting decision.
2. The online survey was distributed to Facebook groups, on discussion forums, and to e-mail addresses we received from respondents (snowball). We used the same questionnaire translated into the national language of every country; for Moldova we used two questionnaires—in Romanian and in Russian.
3. We ran statistical models with the referendums as dummy variables and the results are very similar to what we report in the article.
4. We control also for a series of other variables such as the left–right placement, gender, age, etc. None of them has a relevant effect on the DVs and they were excluded from the analysis to keep the models parsimonious.
5. We test for multicollinearity in the multivariate models and the results indicate there are no reasons for concern. Multicollinearity is not an issue: the correlation coefficients between the IVs are small (below 0.30) and the VIF values are lower than 1.35 for every estimate.

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## ORCID

Sergiu Gherghina  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6627-5598>

Nanuli Silagadze  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6251-7011>

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## Appendix A. An Overview of the Referendums Included in the Analysis

Country	Year	Questions	Turnout (%)
Bulgaria	2016	Two-round system for parliamentary elections	50.81
		Compulsory voting	
		Political funding	
Hungary	2016	Migrant quota referendum	44.04
Moldova	2019	Reducing the number of parliamentarians	38.95
		Introducing the right to recall	38.93
Poland	2015	Introducing single-member constituencies	7.80
		Financing of political parties	
		Tax law interpretation	
Romania	2018	Defining family in constitution (anti-same sex marriage)	21.10
Romania	2019	Prohibit amnesties and pardons for corruption offenses	41.03
		Prohibit the government from passing emergency ordinances concerning the judiciary	40.81
Slovakia	2015	Same-sex marriage ban	21.41
		Same-sex adoption ban	
		Sex education or euthanasia education choice	

## Appendix B. The Descriptive Statistics of the Variables Included in the Analysis

	Mean	Std dev.	Min.	Max.	N
Party influence	1.76	0.99	1	4	1443
Own opinion	3.16	1.03	1	4	1592
Trust in parties	1.76	0.63	1	4	1651
Clear cues	3.16	0.81	1	4	1495
Media channels	1.06	0.70	0	2	1825
Contentious politics	1.15	0.99	0	3	1825
Perceived information	3.41	0.72	1	4	1822
Interest in politics	3.21	0.72	1	4	1819
Political discussions	1.11	0.70	1	4	1825
Education	4.03	0.82	1	5	1641

## Appendix C. Model Specifications for the Ordered Logistic Regression (Figure 2)

	Political parties		Own opinion	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Trust in parties	2.03**	2.03**	1.11	1.11
Clear cues	1.78**	1.80**	1.44**	1.44**
Media channels	1.25**	1.19*	1.11	1.11
Contentious politics	0.86**	0.92	1.34**	1.34**
Perceived information	0.95	1.01	1.82**	1.82**
Interest in politics	0.97	0.99	0.94	0.95
Political discussions		0.76**		0.96
Education		0.81**		1.17*
N	1,306	1,287	1,401	1,376
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.05	0.06	0.05	0.06
Log likelihood	-1416.44	-1381.82	-1574.52	-1532.95

Table entries are odds-ratios; \*\*p < 0.01; \*p < 0.05.