



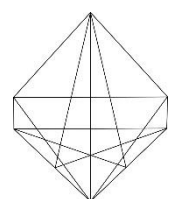
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The Wiggle Room of Legitimacy in Democratic Decisions: The Case of Referendums*

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Abstract

Political decisions based on democratic procedures increase the legitimacy of the decisions. Yet, there is distrust in the representative system, sparking demand for more direct citizen participation. Can referendums solve the legitimacy crisis of democracy? We argue a conditional no. Utilizing a conjoint experimental design, we show that a free and fair referendum can go from being considered legitimate to being considered illegitimate based only on knowing the turnout, majority size, and outcome of the referendum. When learning of a referendum with high turnout, large size of majority, and an outcome that is favorable to their preference, almost everyone thinks that the government should follow a referendum. Conversely, only one out of four hold the same view when the referendum has a low turnout, small size of majority, and an outcome that goes against their preference. In referendums, a win is not always perceived as a legitimate win.

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1 Introduction

I will totally accept the election
results if I win

2016 US Presidential Candidate
Donald Trump (Diamond, 2016)

Legitimate political decisions facilitate implementation of the decision outcome. When a decision is perceived as legitimate, the citizens willingly comply even when the likelihood of punishment is low (Tyler, 2006). A virtue of democratic decision-making procedures is that the foundations in which decisions are made are thought to enhance the legitimacy of the decision (Dahl, 1989). Decisions made by, and for the people are thought to make the citizens likely to willingly comply with the outcome.

Arguably, the use of referendums may enhance public support for democracy in a time when “critical citizens” demand new alternative forms of political participation (Norris, 1999; Gherghina, 2017). The direct link between the citizens preferences and the decision-outcome is an important property of referendums, and different forms of direct democratic initiatives have grown in popularity in contemporary Europe (Ferrin and Kriesi, 2016; Scarrow, 2001; Donovan and Karp, 2006). There is thus a need to investigate to what degree people perceive referendums as a legitimate decision-making procedure and whether it makes citizens more willing to comply with the result.

In any referendum, three critical dimensions will always vary: The turnout, the size of the majority, and the outcome. We investigate whether people hold the perception that one majority is as good as any other majority – or whether legitimacy beliefs actually are more nuanced. Do people think that the government should follow any result once the issue is decided on in a referendum, or do they change opinion when learning about the attributes of the specific referendum?

Utilizing a conjoint experimental design, we propose an imagined scenario where European Union membership is put out for a referendum. The experiment is carried out within the Norwegian Citizen Panel – an online, general population survey panel of the Norwegian population. The question is whether or not Norway should join the EU. Norway has previously held two EU referendums (1972 and 1994).

The respondents are given different scenarios, where turnout level, size of majority, and outcome are varied. Some respondents are not exposed to this information before they are asked to assess whether the outcome should be followed by the government. The experimental design thus allows for comparisons of *ex ante* and *ex post* assessments of the legitimacy of a referendum as a political decision making procedure.

The results reveal an important insight into the dynamics of politics. By varying these three

attributes of a referendum – turnout, majority size and outcome favorability – the share of citizens that think the result should be followed by the government spans from virtually everyone to only a quarter of the population. Hence, holding an advisory referendum on an issue does not necessarily give legitimacy to the ultimate decision.

2 Democratic decision-making and legitimacy

Max Weber defined legitimacy as a conviction on the part of persons subject to authority that it is right and proper and that they have some obligation to obey, regardless of the basis on which this belief rests (see (Uphoff, 1989)). When a decision is perceived as legitimate, citizens willingly comply, even when the likelihood of punishment is low (Tyler, 2006). When a decision is perceived as illegitimate, citizens must be forced into compliance by other means, such as the use of force. A regime, institution or any other authority has a self-interest to be perceived as legitimate, as it will decrease the implementation costs of policies.

The virtue of democratic decision-making procedures are put forth as a legitimizing attribute of democratic regimes (Dahl, 1989). Decisions are made of, by, and for the people, which in itself is thought to bring legitimacy to the system. Yet, democracy is under pressure from within; from dissatisfied democrats who defend the principles of democracy but are unhappy with the current application of these principles (Norris, 1999; Dalton, 2004). Scholars continuously search for innovations that enhance involvement, participation, and decision-making influence among the citizens. The use of referendums and other forms of direct democracy is sometimes viewed as innovations that could have a positive effect on public support for representative democracy, and in the end also increased democratic legitimacy. Different forms of direct democratic initiatives have become increasingly common in contemporary Europe (Ferrin and Kriesi, 2016; Scarrow, 2001; Donovan and Karp, 2006). The most frequently used form of direct participation has been the use of referendums and many European countries have used this instrument to decide on participation in the European integration process (Hobolt, 2006), most recently manifested in the British “Brexit” vote in 2016. There has been an increase in the use of referendums over the years, but the people want more (ESS, 2012; Gómez and Palacios, 2016).

Attempts to increase citizen influence through direct democratic instruments have sometimes been viewed as a response from the elites to growing demand for alternative forms of participation, i.e. from the inside of the political system. Thus, the expansion of direct democratic forms of participation could be viewed as an attempt to “save” representative democracy on behalf of the representatives (Donovan and Karp, 2006). From the “outside”, demands for direct democracy are increasingly common among

people who feel alienated from the political system. The strongest support for more direct democracy is to be found among people who are less interested and informed, suspicious of government, and more politically extreme (Bowler and Donovan, 2016; Dalton, Burklin and Drummond, 2001). Populist parties and voters often regard the conflict of interest between the “innocent” people and the “corrupt” elite as the main problem of democracy. Thus, direct democratic innovations, such as referendums, are regarded as important means for “ordinary people” for taking power back from “the elites” (Bowler and Donovan, 2016; Donovan and Karp, 2006).

2.1 Can referendums increase the legitimacy of political decisions?

Procedural fairness theory argues that authorities are being evaluated by citizens along two dimensions: (I) their ability to make subjects see that the decisions they make are based fair decision-making procedures (procedural fairness); and (II) their ability to deliver favorable outcomes for all (distributive justice) (Lind and Tyler, 1988; Thibaut and Walker, 1975). These dimensions are often studied in decision-making within the spheres of schools, workplaces, courts, and so on. The message from this literature to political science is that people do share common perceptions of what is a fair decision-making procedure, and that if these are applied, people will be more likely to accept the decision outcome (Levi, Sacks and Tyler, 2009; Daly and Tripp, 1996). In the political context this means that subjects should be more willing to accept an outcome which to their group or individual person is unfavorable, if the procedure that led up to this point is perceived as fair.

Thus, from a procedural fairness perspective, referendums could very well have the potential to increase the legitimacy of the political system from the input side. ‘Input-oriented’ legitimacy, as defined by Scharpf (1999), involves political participation by the people. Referendums appear appealing because they promise a more direct, transparent decision-making procedure that can increase the input legitimacy of the political decision.

2.2 Turnout, size of majority, and outcome favorability

Yet, referendums are not alike. In any referendum, three critical dimensions will always vary: The turnout, the size of the majority, and the outcome. Some referendums are close races, with a large minority on the losing side. Some have low turnout. For many of the affected individuals, the outcome is unfavorable. These factors matter for the legitimacy of the specific referendum.

2.2.1 The will of the people

The level of turnout and the size of majority signals the share of the population who back the winning side. This could matter firstly if people believe in the wisdom of crowds; the collective's ability to make better choices than the individual (Hayek, 1945; Landemore and Elster, 2012; Surowiecki, 2004). The consensus heuristics and the cognitive response mechanisms both emphasize the epistemic value in the majority opinion (Mutz, 1998), and may explain the mechanisms behind why individuals would think it is right to follow the majority in a referendum. The former mechanism refers to the majority opinion as an informational cue to the individual about what is regarded to be the "correct" view. The latter refers to how individuals rehearse the reasoning of others' views, inducing attitudinal change by priming these thoughts.

Secondly, people may also feel obliged to comply with the majority because they feel it is their duty as democratic citizens to do so, or because they perceive the social costs of non-compliance as too high. Just like individuals suppress their opinion on issues because they perceive themselves to be in minority and fear social sanctions as a consequence of being on the losing side (Noelle-Neumann, 1974; Kuran, 1997), they may comply with the majority opinion because they fear the costs of going against the majority will.

According to this logic, people will be more willing to accept an outcome that shows clear support for the winning side.

2.2.2 Loser's compliance

From a perspective of democratic legitimacy, electoral losers are the crucial players in the democratic game, since they will have to be governed by those they disagree with. Consequently, many studies have shown that individuals having voted for losing parties express lower levels of political support and trust than those voting for parties ending up in government (Anderson et al., 2005; Anderson and Guillory, 1997; Esaiasson, 2011; Anderson and LoTempio, 2002). It is therefore imperative to generate new and better knowledge about what – if any – political decision-making procedures can soothe the negative effect of unfavorable outcomes. The experimental evidence so far suggests that fair procedures, such as citizen involvement, in decision-making is less important than a favorable outcome (Skitka, Winquist and Hutchinson, 2003; Esaiasson et al., 2016; Arnesen, 2017; Arnesen and Peters, forthcoming). The findings support observational studies arguing that a political authority will enjoy support when it delivers favorable policy outcomes or at least is perceived by the citizens as unbiased (Estlund, 2009; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002; Rothstein, 2009). Output legitimacy thus trumps input legitimacy, which means that in politics, it matters more what you get than how you

get it. Following this, we expect that the losers will be less willing than the winners to accept the result in a referendum.

2.3 Hypotheses

We aim to investigate the legitimacy of referendums as a political decision-making procedure. The point of departure is the assumption that people think the results of a referendum should be followed, regardless of the attributes of the referendum itself. Thus, the null hypothesis stipulates that support for implementing the result is independent of the type of contextual variations described above. The alternative hypotheses may be formulated in the following way:

Hypothesis 1: *The lower the level of turnout, the less legitimate is the referendum.*

Hypothesis 2: *The smaller the size of the majority, the less legitimate is the referendum.*

Hypothesis 3: *Losers perceive the referendum as less legitimate than winners do.*

3 Research design

We explore how people evaluate referendums using a conjoint experiment in a population-based probability online survey sample. The experiment portrays a scenario where the issue of Norwegian EU membership once more is subject to a referendum.

3.1 Referendum experiment on EU membership in Norway

In 1972 and 1994 Norwegians voted on whether or not Norway should apply for a membership of the European Union (EU). In both cases, a majority voted against EU membership (53.5 and 55.2 percent; turnout of 88.6 percent and 79.2 percent, respectively). Hence, we expect that many Norwegians participating in this survey experiment are informed about the actual procedures, and potential consequences, of this type of referendum.

The relevance of the study is also highlighted when considering data from the Norwegian EU referendum survey, conducted before, under, and after the referendum in 1994 (Moen, Øyangen and Jenssen, 2012). Before the referendum, the respondents were asked if they are for or against Norway applying for membership in the EU. After the election, they were asked about what decision-making procedure they preferred, i.e. decision by the parliament, or referendum. Table 1 shows that the "No" voters – the winners – overwhelmingly thought that the referendum result should be followed. Conversely, four out of ten "Yes"-voters preferred the government had decided.

The observational data illuminate an important part of our research question, but do not tell the

Decision-making preference	Referendum outcome	
	<i>Unfavorable</i>	<i>Favorable</i>
Prefer parliament	38%	7%
Prefer referendum	62%	93%
Sum	100%	100%

N Unfavorable = 794, N Favorable = 1,322

Source: Moen, Øyangen and Jenssen (2012)

Table 1: Norway 1994 referendum

full story. In line with the multi-dimensional approach of conjoint experiments, the motivation behind our design is to present the respondents with different ex post attributes of the referendum and letting them evaluate its legitimacy. The advantage of experiments is that the variables of interest can be manipulated by the researcher while keeping other factors constant (Shadish, Cook and Campbell, 2002). This experimental design allows us to randomly vary the favorable/unfavorable outcome as well as turnout and majority-size. A defining feature of conjoint experiments is that they can handle complex choice situations where more than one attribute has an important influence on the choice, while regular experiments typically expose the subjects to one or two treatments. Normative judgments and definitions are typically based on various attributes of multifaceted objects rather than single dimensions, and these attributes are integrated into a single, coherent judgment (Auspurg, Hinz and Sauer, 2017).

3.2 Data

The experiment was implemented in the Norwegian Citizen Panel (NCP) during the fall of 2016, with a total 1043 participating respondents. The NCP is a probability-based general population online survey panel administered by the Digital Social Science Core Facility (DIGSSCORE) at the University of Bergen.¹ The panel recruits panelists through random sampling from the official national population registry. The appeal of survey experiments in probability samples comes from the possibility of making causal inferences from a representative sample of the population (Mutz, 2011). For more details about response rates or other methodological questions about the data we refer to the NCP methodology reports (Skjervheim and Høgestøl, 2017).

¹The data applied in the analysis in this publication are based on “Norwegian Citizen Panel Wave 7, 2016”. The survey was financed by the University of Bergen (UiB) and Uni Rokkan Centre. The data are provided by UiB, prepared and made available by Ideas2Evidence, and distributed by Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD). Neither UiB, Uni Rokkan Centre nor NSD are responsible for the analyses/interpretation of the data presented here.

3.3 Experimental design

Prior to the experiment, respondents are asked whether they support or oppose Norwegian membership in the EU (yes/no). Each respondent is then presented with a hypothetical referendum on EU-membership. We present them with the following (translated) vignette,

We are interested in examining what mandate the government needs to make important decisions on behalf of the people. Imagine that there would be a new debate regarding EU membership for Norway and that an advisory referendum was held regarding the issue.

|referendum_description

In such a case, should the government act according to the result of the referendum, even if the majority in Parliament disagrees?

- *Yes*
- *No*

where |referendum_description is a sentence describing the ex post properties of the referendum. The hypothetical referendum vary in *the size of turnout, the size of majority, and which side won (outcome)*, with each of these pieces of information having a .5 probability of being shown. The possible treatment values are shown in Table 2. The referendum had $5 \times 4 \times 3 = 60$ possible descriptions. All descriptions are shown in the online appendix. Thanks to the large number of respondents in the survey panel, each respondent only had to evaluate one task, ensuring that the units of observation are independent from each other at the respondent level.

Treatment	Value	N obs	% obs
Outcome	Not shown outcome	359	0.34
	Against EU membership won	348	0.33
	For EU membership won	336	0.32
Size of majority	Not shown majority	489	0.47
	51%	180	0.17
	55%	186	0.18
	70%	188	0.18
Size of turnout	Not shown turnout	516	0.49
	35%	125	0.12
	47%	128	0.12
	53%	141	0.14
	85%	133	0.13

Table 2: The different treatments and their possible values.

The specific turnout levels are chosen to represent the spectrum going from a referendum with a high turnout (85 percent) to a low turnout (35 percent). The mid-levels intends to capture any threshold effect where slightly above and below half of the electorate turn out to vote. The size of the majority intends to measure the influence of a slight majority (51 percent), and clear majority (55 percent), and a majority of more than two thirds.

Legitimacy is usually measured as a property of an action or a decision *ex post facto*. It may be a value-based measure of legitimacy that has a question about how willing the respondents are to comply with the outcome, or it may be a behavioral measure where subjects help or hinder the implementation of a decision (Dickson, Gordon and Huber, 2015).² To be able to identify the effect of the referendum’s outcome, the control groups will not be shown the outcome. It makes little sense to evaluate an action or decision without knowing what that action or decision is. Instead the respondents are therefore asked to decide whether or not the government *should* act according to the result of the referendum. In addition, we add the qualifier that they should do so regardless of what the majority in Parliament want. Hence, for our purpose, *we operationalize the legitimacy of the referendum as whether or not it is evaluated as a necessary and sufficient condition for acting on behalf of the people.*

3.4 Identification

We hypothesize that both the size of turnout, the size of the majority, and the direction of the outcome will affect the evaluation of legitimacy. Following Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto (2014), we test each of these by estimating the Average Marginal Component Effect (AMCE) for each treatment value with the no-information-showed condition as control. In order to correctly identify the AMCEs we make certain assumptions (see Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto 2014 and Bansak et al. 2017), including the orthogonality of the different treatments. For example, we assume that the order we present the treatments (which we do not randomize since they are presented in a sentence format) do not affect the estimates.

For both the size of turnout and the size of the majority we expect that a lower value has a lower AMCE. For example, formally, that $\beta_{at\ 35\%}^{turnout} < \beta_{at\ 85\%}^{turnout}$ and $\beta_{of\ 51\%}^{majority} < \beta_{of\ 70\%}^{majority}$. We also hypothesize that a favorable outcome will create a more positive evaluation of legitimacy than an unfavorable outcome. Formally we expect that $\beta_{unfavorable}^{outcome} < \beta_{favorable}^{outcome}$. To measure "outcome favorability" we match the respondents' (pre-treatment) stated preference with the outcome of the referendum, so that a favorable outcome means they are the same and an unfavorable outcome means they are not.

²see discussion of value-based and behavioral conceptualization of legitimacy in (Levi, Sacks and Tyler, 2009)

4 Results

The expected probability of thinking the government should follow the referendum when we do not show any information about how it fared is 83 percent, with a 95 percent confidence interval of 77.5 to 88.7. Without being given explicit information about turnout, size of majority, or the winning side, a large majority would consider the referendum legitimate.

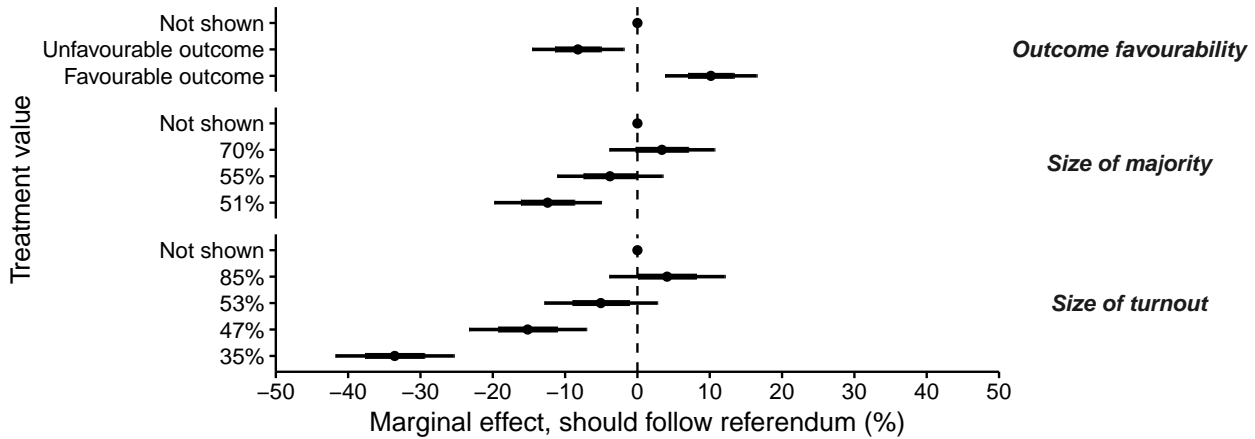


Figure 1: This plot shows point estimates of the effects (AMCEs) of the randomly assigned referendum properties on the probability of thinking that the government should follow the referendum. The bars shows one and two times the standard error, i.e. approximately 68 percent (thick bars) and 95 percent (thin bars) confidence intervals.

We hypothesized that low turnout, small majority, or an unfavorable outcome, should substantially reduce this probability. Supporting our expectations, Figure 1 shows that all treatments affect people’s propensity to evaluate the referendum as legitimate. The figure shows the difference in probability of thinking that the government should follow the referendum for each treatment value with no-information-shown as control condition (AMCEs). The results clearly show that knowing the level of turnout affects the legitimacy of the referendum, providing strong support for our first hypothesis. When the referendum has a turnout of 85 percent, the probability is about the same, or maybe a little higher (by less than one percentage point), as when we show no information about turnout. When the turnout drops to 35 percent, however, the probability drops by 33.5 percentage points [-41.7, -25.4]. Notably, the difference in effect of 85 percent and 53 percent is not that large (-4.1 [-3.9, 12] and -5.1 [-12.9, 2.8], respectively) compared to the difference between 47 percent and 35 percent (-15.2 [-23.3, -7.1] and -33.5 [-41.7, -25.4], respectively), although the difference turnout is the same.

The data also provide support for the second hypothesis about a positive relationship between majority size and perceived legitimacy. Going from the control condition to a majority of 51 percent decreases the probability by 12.4 percentage points [-19.7, -5].

The third hypothesis, stipulating that losers will perceive the referendum as less legitimate than

winners, also receives strong support. Those on the losing side are significantly less likely to perceive the procedure as fair compared to those on the winning side. Compared to the control condition, an unfavorable outcome lowers the probability by 8.2 percentage points [-14.5, -1.9] while a favorable outcome increases the probability by 10.1 percentage points [3.8, 16.5].

4.0.1 The bounds of referendum legitimacy

Figure 2 shows the the expected probability of thinking that the government should follow the referendum for different combinations of referendum properties. The probabilities are estimated from a logistic regression model.

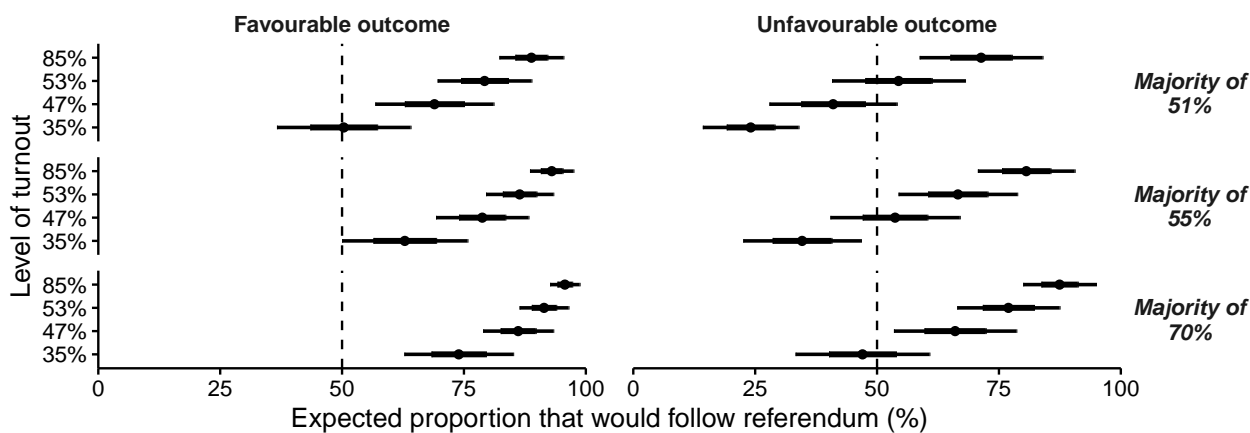


Figure 2: This plot shows the estimated probability of thinking that the government should follow the referendum for different randomly assigned referendum properties. The bars shows one and two times the standard error, i.e. approximately 68 percent (thick bars) and 95 percent (thin bars) confidence intervals. The probabilities are estimated from a logistic regression model.

This provides some sense of the bounds of legitimacy in the case of referendums. With a high turnout and a favorable outcome the proportion evaluating the referendum as legitimate essentially approaches everyone. However, with low turnout and small majority, only about half of those who got a favorable outcome, and about one third of those who got an unfavorable outcome, would evaluate it as legitimate. The results show that, even in a case such as Norway, where there would be no expectation of electoral misconduct, a referendum can go from clearly being considered legitimate to clearly considered not legitimate by just varying the level of turnout, majority size, and outcome favorability.

4.1 The role of outcome favorability

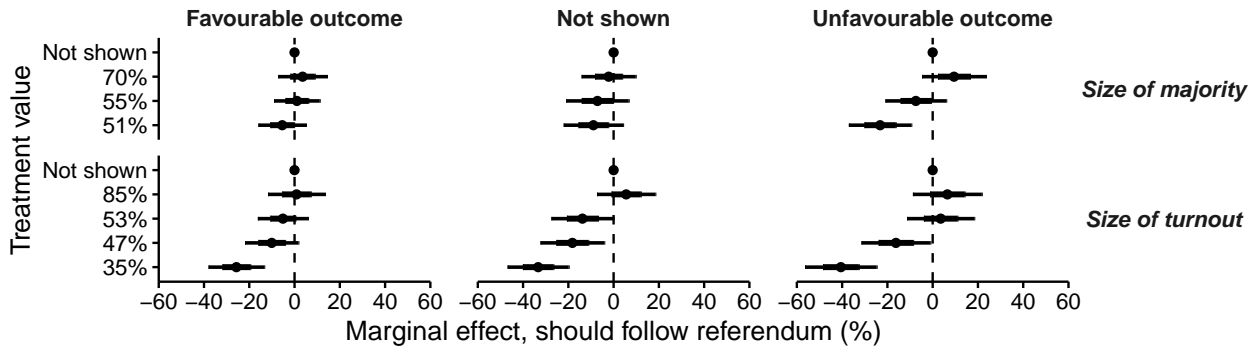


Figure 3: The three plots shows estimates for when the outcome is favorable, not shown, or unfavorable, respectively. The dots represent the point estimates of the effects (AMCEs) of the randomly assigned referendum properties on the probability of thinking that the government should follow the referendum. The bars show one and two times the standard error, i.e. approximately 68 percent (thick bars) and 95 percent (thin bars) confidence intervals.

Figure 3 demonstrates how the size of the majority affects legitimacy when the outcome is perceived as unfavorable rather than favorable, while the effect of turnout remains similar. When either perceived as favorable, or not shown, the size of the majority have little or no effect on the legitimacy of the referendum. When perceived as unfavorable, however, going from the control condition to a majority of 51% decrease the probability of thinking that the government should follow the referendum with 24 percentage points [-36, -9]. Similar tendencies are observed in the interaction between turnout and outcome favorability, though not as pronounced.

5 Discussion and conclusion

When defending the narrow victory in the 2017 Turkish referendum on a constitutional reform package, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan invoked a football analogy, saying "It doesn't matter if you win 1-0 or 5-0. The ultimate goal is to win the game." (Anderson and Masters, 2017). Yet, we have shown that the legitimacy of the referendum evaporates simply by varying the levels of three common referendum attributes. The findings uncover an important insight into the dynamics of politics: Whether or not a referendum is perceived as the final verdict by the people heavily depends upon the turnout, the size of the majority, and the favorability of the outcome. When the turnout is low, and the size of the majority is small, it will be more difficult to carry out the decision. Citizens, and especially the losers, will search for ways to impede implementation of the decision. Citizens do not necessarily view a win as a win, and in certain cases members of parliament on the losing side may have significant public support when refusing to follow the outcome of the referendum.

Democratic political decision-making will produce winners and losers, and the crucial issue is to

establish democratic procedures that are acceptable to the losers. In politics, the true fairness or unfairness of a decision-making procedure is often a matter of debate (Doherty and Wolak, 2012). Many social psychological experiments show that outcomes should matter more in the absence of fair procedures (Brockner, 2002; Brockner and Wiesenfeld, 1996; Siegel et al., 2005). Daly and Tripp (1996) argue that in cases where the procedural characteristics are lacking, procedural fairness is more sensitive to self-interest concern. The findings presented in this paper indicate that the outcome itself constitutes an important part of the assessment of referendums as political decision making procedure. Winners and losers have different perceptions about the legitimacy of a referendum, and their status also interacts with how they perceive the size of majority to legitimize the referendum. This large discrepancy between winners and losers and how they evaluate the result of a referendum shows that having people to agree on what is a fair democratic decision-making procedure will be difficult, if not impossible. Thus, in politics, there may not be such a thing as an acceptable decision to all. If this is true, a democratic decision-making process can only be sustainable if it over time (i.e. by expectation) produces alternate winners and losers.

Meta-analytic reviews in social-psychology demonstrate that outcome fairness and outcome favorability are empirically distinct concepts (Skitka, Winquist and Hutchinson, 2003; Colquitt et al., 2013). These findings do not travel to political science. In politics, the outcome also influences the perceptions of the decision-making procedure itself: *What* you get also influences your perceptions about *how* you got it. When the outcome is favorable, the decision procedure is perceived as legitimate; when the outcome is unfavorable, the very same decision procedure is considered illegitimate. Hence, input legitimacy is not independent from output legitimacy, but rather dependent upon it.

All the scenarios proposed to the respondents in the experiment are realistic situations that frequently occur in referendums, and none of them question the legality of the referendum as such. The sizes of the treatment effects may be particular to the issue and the context; referendums about less polarized issues and in other contexts may be regarded differently by the citizens. Citizens of Switzerland, for instance, may accept lower turnout levels given that they issue several referendums every three months. A referendum with lower political implications may be more acceptable because the outcome matters less to the citizens. The citizens' experience with referendums and their perceptions of public opinion distributions are likely to create anticipations about the level of turnout, and the likely outcome. Further research on the legitimacy of political decision making procedures should investigate how, if at all, citizens can agree upon how to make acceptable collective decisions. With regards to referendums, research is warranted on I) the mechanisms that may account for the positive relationship between turnout, majority, and the legitimacy of a referendum; II) to what extent the ref-

erendum issue and context moderate the influence of the three attributes turnout, majority size, and outcome favorability; II) how *ex ante* agreements about turnout thresholds in referendums influence acceptance of the result; and IV) what other attributes can influence the legitimacy of a referendum.

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