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Public Support for Referendums: The Role of the Media

ANDREAS R. T. SCHUCK and CLAES H. DE VREESE

Previous research is unclear about which citizens support the use of referendums and how a referendum campaign can affect support for direct democracy. This study investigates, first, the factors that determine support for referendums and, second, the role of the campaign in changing support. This is done in the context of the 2005 Dutch EU Constitution referendum. A media content analysis of national media (N = 6,370) is combined with panel survey data (N = 1,008). The results suggest that those who felt more politically disaffected were more supportive of referendums. Furthermore, higher levels of exposure to tabloid style campaign news led to increased approval of referendums. In a second step, the mechanism behind this effect was tested using an experiment (N = 580). When exposed to negative tabloid style news about a referendum proposal, opponents perceive the assumed consequences as more of a threat. This threat perception increased their support for a referendum on the issue at stake as a means to prevent the proposal. The article concludes with a discussion about the conditions under which a dynamic like this is likely to unfold and when alternative explanations for referendum support apply.

The use of referendums has become increasingly popular in recent years (e.g. Butler and Ranney 1994; Hobolt 2009; Scarrow 2001; Setälä 1999). Referendums are believed to increase the legitimacy of political institutions and are seen as an instrument to create a greater sense of political efficacy (Bowler and Donovan 2002; but see Dyck and Lascher 2009) and to engage citizens (e.g. Fishkin 1995; Mendelsohn and Parkin 2001). Stimulating citizen participation in political decision-making is seen as an effective way to tackle contemporary problems such as increasing levels of political apathy (Budge 1996). Some scholars argue that the periodic use of referendums could prevent the rise of anti-democratic movements (Resnick 1997) and would serve well as a permanent instrument of civic education

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(Barber 1984). Others warn that the use of referendums could open the door to populism (Dalton *et al.* 2001) and foster political intolerance (Sartori 1987) because of the polarisation of political discourse.

Whereas scholars disagree on the potential benefits and threats of direct democracy, referendums are generally popular among the public (Bowler and Donovan 1998; Mendelsohn and Parkin 2001). Yet there are different explanations for *why* citizens support referendums. Previous research has yielded mixed findings on whether the referendum opportunity is either more embraced by those who are already more politically involved (e.g. Donovan and Karp 2006) or rather by those who feel disaffected with traditional party-based politics (e.g. Dalton *et al.* 2001).

Given the increasing use of referendums, it is important to learn more about the factors that determine public support for such direct democratic means. Furthermore, whereas public demand for more direct forms of political participation is increasing and politics is responding to this demand (LeDuc 2003), referendum support is still most often seen as a static concept or stable attitude. Not much is known about the factors that account for *change* in referendum support on the individual level. No study so far has looked at, for example, the potential of the referendum campaign to increase or decrease individual referendum support. However, campaigns represent pivotal moments in the formation of public opinion and the individual referendum experience is very much tied to the campaign. Political issues are publicly discussed during campaigns and receive extensive media attention. Attitudes can be influenced and opinions can be shaped not only with regard to the issue at stake but also with regard to the referendum instrument itself. Thus, understanding the dynamics of the campaign can add to our understanding of what shapes individual support for referendums and how stable or flexible such attitudes are over time.

We focus our attention on a referendum on a topic of European integration which has been the focus of numerous national referendums over recent decades (see e.g. Hobolt 2005, 2009; Hug 2003; Hug and Sciarini 2000). This article reports on the findings of two complementary studies. The first part investigates the factors that determine support for referendums in the context of the Dutch 2005 EU Constitution referendum and we examine the role of the news media in *changing* individual-level support over the course of the campaign. The second part takes the investigation one step further and explores the underlying mechanisms of *how* the news media can affect referendum support.

Study 1: Public Support for Referendums and the Role of the Campaign

Previous research has yielded inconclusive results on the motives behind individual referendum support (e.g. Dalton *et al.* 2001; Donovan and Karp 2006). The present study attempts to answer the question *who* supports referendums and also to assess the role of the campaign in *changing* support.

This is within the context of the Dutch 2005 EU Constitution referendum in which a majority of 62 per cent voted against the proposal. The question, however, remains who embraced the referendum opportunity the most and how the campaign affected individual approval. Previous research has come up with two hypotheses in an attempt to explain public support for referendums. First, the *cognitive mobilisation* hypothesis claims that people with greater cognitive resources, such as education or knowledge, are more likely to make use of the referendum opportunity since they arrive at more informed decisions and are more motivated to participate in the political process. This explanation is based on the observation that citizens are increasingly less willing to leave political decision-making solely up to political authorities and are demanding a more active role themselves (e.g. Dalton 1984; Inglehart 1990). In this perspective the increasing demand for forms of direct democratic participation is linked to an increase in political skills among citizens. Thus, those citizens who are more interested in politics and more willing to participate are also seen as more likely to support referendums since they represent an additional opportunity for political expression.

On the contrary, the *political disaffection* hypothesis claims the exact opposite. In this perspective, referendums are expected to be embraced especially by those citizens who feel disconnected from traditional party politics and who are at the margins of the political process. For them a referendum offers an alternative way of political expression which can have a concrete and immediate impact on political processes. Indeed, some research suggests that the increasing demand for the use of direct democracy stems predominantly from citizens who hold a more critical or sometimes even cynical attitude towards politics while at the same time they remain committed to democratic principles (e.g. Inglehart 1999; Norris 1999). Thus, in this perspective the driving force for support for direct democratic means is dissatisfaction or disillusionment with governments and the political process as a whole. Dalton *et al.* (2001), for example, argue that popular support for direct democracy is highest among those who are at the periphery of politics (see also Donovan *et al.* 2009) and who are less interested and less informed than other citizens. Thus, support for direct democracy in this perspective is not seen as primarily linked to a desire for more political participation or responsibility but rather to the dissatisfaction with traditional political representation (e.g. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2001). This also points to a more normative aspect of the issue, namely the potential for direct democratic means to give rise to populist forces (see Dalton *et al.* 2001), as most populist parties are in strong support of referendums (Bowler *et al.* 2003).

Popular support for direct democracy is generally high (e.g. Bowler and Donovan 1998; Dalton *et al.* 2001; Mendelsohn and Parkin 2001). However, previous research has yielded inconclusive results as to *who* is most supportive. Some studies support the political disaffection hypothesis

(Dalton *et al.* 2001; Gilljam *et al.* 1998) and others support the cognitive mobilisation hypothesis (Donovan and Karp 2006) while some find no support for either explanation (Craig *et al.* 2001). Based on the mixed findings of previous research this study tests both the cognitive mobilisation hypothesis and the political disaffection hypothesis as complementary rather than alternative explanations for public support for direct democracy:

H1: Higher levels of political involvement are related to higher levels of support for public referendums (cognitive mobilisation hypothesis).

H2: Higher levels of political disaffection are related to higher levels of support for public referendums (political disaffection hypothesis).

Additionally, the role of the campaign in *changing* individual support for referendums is assessed.

The Role of the Referendum Campaign

No study so far has set out to explain the factors that account for *change* in individual support for referendums and which role referendum campaigns can play in affecting approval of such direct democratic means. However, opinions are shaped and opposing views are publicly discussed during campaigns. Referendum campaigns have the potential to increase levels of political interest and knowledge (Mendelsohn and Cutler 2000). Higher levels of media attention devoted to a referendum issue can foster public deliberation and contribute to feelings of higher political competence among citizens (Bowler and Donovan 2002). Importantly, a national referendum campaign is a key event and not only gives momentum to the issue at stake, but also to the referendum instrument as such. In this context the news media play a pivotal role in providing cues for the public on what to think about referendums. The media are of special importance for voters, being the main source of new information (Bennett and Entman 2001; Dalton 2002; de Vreese and Semetko 2004a). In fact, EU citizens have repeatedly reported TV news and newspapers to be their most important source of information (e.g. European Commission 2003/04), and also their most important information source during referendum campaigns (e.g. Janssen *et al.* 1998). Thus, the information environment that is provided by the news media is also of key importance in the formation of opinions regarding the referendum instrument itself.

This study focuses on the *evaluative tone* towards the referendum proposal in campaign news, which we consider to have the potential to affect citizens' opinions about referendums. Previous studies show that the tone of news coverage during a campaign can influence attitudes towards the issue at stake (e.g. Druckman and Parkin 2005). In an EU context, studies have shown how the tone of news coverage can affect voting behaviour in referendums (de Vreese and Semetko 2004b) or citizens' support for further

enlargement (e.g. de Vreese and Boomgaarden 2006; Maier and Rittberger 2008). Schuck and de Vreese (2006) demonstrated how news coverage portraying EU enlargement as a 'risk' not only depressed individual-level support but also personal benefit expectations. These findings on the impact of the tone of news coverage on individual attitudes tie into findings of studies in health communication, which have shown how media coverage of health issues can induce feelings of being at risk (e.g. Morton and Duck 2001), which in turn has the potential to mobilise people to engage in self-protective behaviour. Thus, the tone of news coverage in a referendum campaign could either make people more excited about the use of referendums as a means of direct democracy but it could also exert an influence by making people feel uneasy about certain consequences and thus more supportive of referendums as a tool to prevent an unwanted outcome. The analysis distinguishes between broadsheet and tabloid media outlets since previous research has shown that tabloid news coverage has a higher emotional appeal as compared to more serious broadsheet news coverage (e.g. Schönbach 2000) which might cause possible effects due to enhanced information processing (Grabe *et al.* 2000).

Since any potential media-driven campaign effect with regard to increases or decreases in public support for referendums has to be contingent upon the content characteristics of campaign news coverage we formulate a research question rather than a formal hypothesis:

RQ1: How do higher levels of exposure to news coverage during a campaign affect public support for referendums?

Method

This study employs a multi-method research design combining a media content analysis and a two-wave panel survey, first, to assess how the news media covered the referendum and, second, to investigate what factors determine public support for referendums and how the campaign affected *change* in referendum support on the individual level.

Content Analysis

Design. The content analysis was carried out on news items of all major national Dutch newspapers and national TV news and current affairs programmes in the six weeks leading up to the referendum. The content data stem from the EU Constitution Referendum Study conducted at the Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR) at the University of Amsterdam. Detailed information on the design of this study is published elsewhere (Schuck and de Vreese 2008) and is available upon request from the authors.¹ This study concentrates on the tone towards the EU Constitution in campaign news coverage since the way the referendum is

covered is expected to potentially affect what people think of referendums as a means of direct democracy.²

Two-Wave Panel Survey

Procedure. Our panel data stem from a two-wave panel survey conducted by GfK Benelux on behalf of the University of Twente, the Netherlands (see Aarts and van der Kolk 2006). The survey consists of a pre- and post-referendum panel component. The sample frame was formed by an existing large household panel. The response rate was 66 per cent in wave 1, and 81 per cent in wave 2 with a net sample of 1,008 respondents participating in both waves.³ The interviews were conducted by means of computer-assisted web-based interviewing (two-thirds) and computer-assisted telephone interviewing (one-third).

Sample characteristics. The sample consists of 47.4 per cent male, average age is 48.3 years ($SD = 15.98$). Most respondents are household heads (59.8 per cent), and have a net income between €1,300 and €1,500 per month (14 per cent). Compared to census data the sample is representative of the Dutch electorate.⁴

Measures of Two-Wave Panel Survey

The specific wording and the descriptives for all variables listed below can be found in the Appendix. To test both the cognitive mobilisation hypothesis and the political disaffection hypothesis we specify one OLS regression model explaining general approval of referendums. Furthermore, we specify one OLS regression model explaining *change* in general approval of referendums. This second model includes media and campaign exposure measures as the key independent variables as well as several control measures in order to predict *change* in referendum approval over the course of the campaign.

Dependent Variable

Approval of referendums. Respondents indicated their general approval of public referendums on a five-point Likert scale reaching from 1 – strong disapproval of public referendums to 5 – strong approval of public referendums both in wave 1 ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 1.19$) as well as in wave 2 ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 1.14$).⁵

Independent Variables

Cognitive mobilisation. For the cognitive mobilisation hypothesis we assume that greater cognitive resources make it more likely that people support direct democratic means since they are better able to arrive at an informed

decision and thus embrace the opportunity of getting more politically involved. We control for socio-demographic factors such as age, gender, and education.⁶ The assumption is that younger voters and those with higher education are more supportive of referendums. Findings on gender have been inconclusive in past research. Age is measured in years, gender is coded as male and education is measured on a six-point scale consisting of obtainable Dutch educational qualifications (from low to high). Furthermore, in order to mirror individual motivation we asked if respondents had participated in the last national election and included a measure combining general political interest as well as specific interest in EU affairs.⁷ According to the cognitive mobilisation hypothesis, those who participated in the last general election and those with higher political interest should be more supportive of referendums.

Political disaffection. The political disaffection hypothesis claims that those who are cynical about politics, disengaged and at the margins of the political process are more supportive of referendums as an alternative way of getting involved and having a say. Thus, in order to see if voters at the ‘periphery of politics’ (Dalton *et al.* 2001) are more engaged by referendums we include two dummy variables representing right political and left political leaning as opposed to centrist views (see also Donovan and Karp 2006). We also include a variable indicating if respondents voted for a losing party in the last general election and thus have to be considered as being in opposition to the incumbent government.⁸ Another factor which represents detachment from the political process was if someone had not voted in the last general election.⁹ According to the political disaffection hypothesis, those feeling less politically efficacious and those less satisfied with democracy are also expected to be more in support of a referendum. Political efficacy was measured as an index consisting of four items and we include measures both for satisfaction with domestic democracy as well as for satisfaction with EU democracy.¹⁰

Campaign model. This study specifically tests to what extent the campaign contributed to *change* in approval of referendums. In order to mirror *change* in between the two panel waves we include the time 1 measure for referendum approval in the model (see de Vreese and Semetko 2004a; Markus 1979). We also control for vote choice (yes or no) as well as a list of other control variables.¹¹ Furthermore, we add a measure for campaign evaluation consisting of two items.¹² In addition, respondents were asked to indicate their frequency of interpersonal communication about the referendum. The key independent variable in the campaign model, however, is media use. In our panel survey we asked respondents for their use of those media outlets that are included in our content analysis. For television news we distinguish between exposure to the main public TV news show *NOS Journaal*, the main private programme *RTL Nieuws*, and the main current

affairs programme *NOVA/Den Haag vandaag*. For newspaper coverage we built two additive index scales, one for tabloid outlets (*Telegraaf*, *Algemeen Dagblad*, *Metro*) and one for broadsheet outlets (*NRC Handelsblad*, *Volkskrant*, *Trouw*) (see Appendix). Furthermore, we asked how often respondents visited websites on political subjects during the campaign.

Results

Content Analysis

Tone of campaign coverage. The tone of news coverage can influence how people think about an issue during a campaign and consequently also how people think about the referendum instrument as such: 34.8 per cent ($n=454$) of all items were positive in tone towards the EU Constitution and 20.2 per cent ($n=263$) were negative; 36.5 per cent ($n=475$) carried no valence and an additional 8.5 per cent ($n=111$) were balanced in tone. In order to compare the evaluative tone towards the Constitution across outlets we built a scale (reaching from -1 to $+1$), which is based only on those news items with either a positive or a negative evaluation of the EU Constitution ($M=0.27$, $SD=0.96$, $n=717$).¹³ Tabloid newspapers were significantly less positive in their evaluation ($M=0.08$, $SD=1.00$, $n=205$) as compared to broadsheet newspapers ($M=0.33$, $SD=0.94$, $n=433$), $t(636)=-3.09$, $p<0.01$; and they were also significantly less positive compared to the current affairs TV news programme *NOVA/Den Haag vandaag* ($M=0.40$, $SD=0.92$, $n=47$), $t(250)=2.02$, $p<0.05$.¹⁴

Two-Wave Panel Survey: Cognitive Mobilisation and Political Disaffection

Table 1 yields little support for the cognitive mobilisation hypothesis. On the contrary, most of the signs point in the opposite direction to what would have been expected. Lower levels of interest, motivation and education are related to higher levels of approval. These findings yield indirect support for the political disaffection hypothesis. Indeed, Table 1 further supports the main assumptions of the political disaffection hypothesis. Almost all signs are in the expected directions. Lower levels of political efficacy and dissatisfaction with domestic democracy are especially related to higher levels of referendum support.¹⁵ Thus, this study has found more support for the political disaffection hypothesis than for the cognitive mobilisation hypothesis.¹⁶

Campaign Model

Looking at how referendum support has changed between our two panel waves we find that overall public support for referendums slightly increased over the course of the campaign. On the individual level we see an increase in the average change in support between the two panel waves ($M=+0.13$,

TABLE 1
OLS REGRESSION TESTING COGNITIVE MOBILISATION HYPOTHESIS AND
POLITICAL DISAFFECTION HYPOTHESIS AND EXPLAINING GENERAL
APPROVAL OF PUBLIC REFERENDUMS

Cognitive mobilisation		
Gender (male)	-0.004	(0.078)
Age	-0.005	(0.003)
Education	-0.068**	(0.026)
Political interest	0.031	(0.078)
Voted in last election	-0.021	(0.164)
Political disaffection		
Political orientation (left)	0.114	(0.110)
Political orientation (right)	0.017	(0.095)
Voted for losing party	0.125	(0.087)
Political efficacy	-0.805***	(0.127)
Satisfaction with domestic democracy	-0.140*	(0.067)
Satisfaction with EU democracy	0.059	(0.068)
Adjusted <i>R</i> -square	0.08	
<i>R</i> -square change (incl. political disaffection variables)	***	
<i>N</i>	862	

Note: Cell entries are unstandardised coefficients (standard errors in parentheses).

* $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; *** $p \leq 0.001$ (two-tailed).

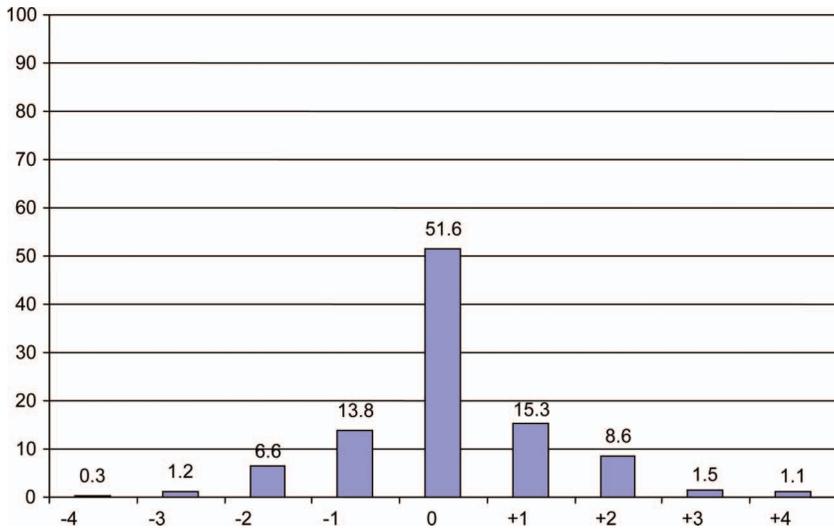
SD = 1.19).¹⁷ Although the net change seems negligible at first sight, Figure 1 shows that there has indeed been considerable change in support ratings for referendums on the individual level. Almost half of the respondents have changed their degree of support, 26.5 per cent became more supportive and 21.9 per cent became more sceptical of referendums over the course of the campaign.

Table 2 shows that the campaign mattered for changes in referendum support. Adding our media variables to the model significantly increases the explanatory power of the overall model.¹⁸ In particular, we find that higher levels of exposure to campaign news in tabloid newspapers are related to increases in support for referendums.¹⁹ As we know from our content analysis, these outlets carried a larger share of negative news as compared to other outlets. Furthermore, higher frequency of internet use is related to a drop in support. In a next step, we address the question *how* news affect support for referendums and investigate which underlying mechanisms can account for these effects.

Study 2: Explicating the Underlying Mechanisms of the Effects of News on Referendum Support

The first part of this article showed that higher levels of exposure to *tabloid* news during the EU Constitution referendum campaign increased referendum support and that these outlets carried a larger share of negative news as compared to other outlets. The second part now investigates the underlying mechanisms behind these effects and explores *how* tabloid news

FIGURE 1
INDIVIDUAL CHANGE IN GENERAL APPROVAL OF PUBLIC REFERENDUMS
OVER THE COURSE OF THE CAMPAIGN



Note: Numbers are percentages indicating the extent to which respondents ($N = 1,008$) have either decreased (minus), increased (plus) or remained stable (zero) in their support for referendums over the course of the campaign on a scale from 'minus 4' (maximum decrease in support) to 'plus 4' (maximum increase in support). 51.6 per cent of all respondents remained stable in their general approval of referendums over the course of the campaign, 48.4 per cent changed in their support for referendums.

TABLE 2
OLS REGRESSION EXPLAINING *CHANGE* IN GENERAL APPROVAL OF PUBLIC
REFERENDUMS OVER THE COURSE OF THE CAMPAIGN

Time 1 control		
Approval at time 1		0.395*** (0.037)
Vote choice		
Vote choice (no)		0.366*** (0.099)
Campaign variables		
Interpersonal communication		0.063 (0.062)
Campaign evaluation 1 ('sincere')		0.022 (0.045)
Campaign evaluation 2 ('informative')		0.050 (0.047)
News variables		
Tabloid newspapers		0.457* (0.222)
Private TV news (RTL Nieuws)		0.064(*) (0.038)
Broadsheet newspapers		0.507 (0.319)
Public TV news (Nos Journaal)		-0.042 (0.061)
TV current affairs programmes		-0.021 (0.047)
Internet use		-0.109* (0.047)
Adjusted <i>R</i> -square		0.31
<i>R</i> -square change (incl. news variables)		*
<i>N</i>		538

Note: Cell entries are unstandardised coefficients (standard errors in parentheses).
(*) $p \leq 0.10$; * $p \leq 0.05$; *** $p \leq 0.001$ (two-tailed).

can affect referendum support. This is done within the context of the signing of the Treaty of Lisbon by the EU heads of government in December 2007.²⁰

A lot of scholarly debate has focused on the increasing 'tabloidisation' of news in recent years. This process implies an upgrading of scandal and 'infotainment' at the expense of hard news and a spill-over of this trend from the popular to the quality press (Franklin 1997; Langer 1997). In an increasingly competitive market and under mounting commercial pressure, news media have to attract large audiences. As a consequence of this process, tabloid newspapers are characterised as paying extra attention to the 'saleability' of information (Esser 1999).

This market orientation is thought of as resulting in the adaptation of tabloid news values such as entertainment, sensation, negativity, or human interest stories (Franklin 1997; Harcup and O'Neill 2000) in order to generate more involvement and attract more interest from the audience. At the same time there is less space devoted to information (Rooney 2000) such as more serious international or political news coverage (Connell 1998; McLachlan and Golding 2000; Uribe and Gunter 2004; Winston 2002). However, aside from the topical focus in tabloid news coverage there are also certain *formal features* which are characteristic of tabloid news. McLachlan and Golding (2000) identify the use of more pictures, bigger headlines and less text as typical for tabloid news coverage (see also Djupsund and Carlson 1998). Furthermore, tabloid and broadsheet reporting differ in the choice of lexical items used (Jucker 1992). The vocabulary of tabloid news consists of comparatively shorter expressions (Freeborn 1996), more informal expressions (Jucker 1992) and more use of emotional language such as expressions of extreme (positive or negative) evaluation, for example rhetorical questions, appeals or superlatives in headlines (Schönbach 2000). Furthermore, not only is the coverage as such more personalised (Sparks 2000; Uribe and Gunter 2004), presenting public figures as private persons, but there are also more attempts to approach readers more personally and in this way involve them more. Also, with regard to layout and design, tabloid news coverage shows more attempts to structure content in order to make it more easily accessible for readers, for example by emphasising certain parts of the text using bold type or bigger fonts (Schönbach 2000).

Importantly, such differences in reporting style between tabloid and broadsheet news can result in different perceptions among readers (Jucker 1992). Formal features of news coverage have been shown to affect readers' interpretations and the meaning derived from a story (Grabe *et al.* 2000, 2003). It has been shown, for example, that tabloid-style reporting increases arousal and attention while at the same time it is seen as less informative compared to broadsheet-style reporting (Grabe *et al.* 2000). Arousal of interest through exposure to tabloid news leads to an increase in attention which can have important consequences for information processing. Stimulating news content

(e.g. drama etc.) which is packaged in tabloid style can overload information processing resources. On the other hand, non-stimulating content (such as political news) packaged in tabloid style can foster information processing (e.g. increase information storage and retrieval). In this way, tabloid-style reporting is capable of increasing readers' attention and interest in the topic and enhancing the effect of political news on audience evaluations.

The Mediating Role of Threat Perception

Exposure to tabloid style news can lead to an exaggerated perception of the importance of a topic as well as of the seriousness of a situation (Grabe *et al.* 2003). This study assumes that tabloid-style reporting of a non-stimulating news story (such as the EU Treaty of Lisbon) will lead to greater arousal of interest and attention and thus more thorough information processing as compared to broadsheet-style reporting. This means that respondents who are exposed to a tabloid-style news story about the Treaty of Lisbon should arrive at a perception of greater importance of the topic and greater seriousness of the situation.

A respondent who *opposes* the Treaty and is exposed to a tabloid-style news story about the topic should attach greater importance to a negative evaluation of the situation. In turn, it can be expected that this results in greater support for the idea to hold a public referendum on the issue as a possible way to prevent the Treaty from coming into force. This dynamic can be expected to further depend on the tone of the article towards the Treaty. We expect that the dynamic we describe for opponents of the Treaty is more pronounced in the case of a tabloid-style article which is *negative* in tone towards the Treaty as compared to one which is positive in tone. In the case of a negative tabloid article the potential consequences of the Treaty should be perceived most negatively among opponents and support to hold a referendum on the issue should be strongest. Previous research has shown that mass media can indeed increase threat perceptions among people (Morton and Duck 2001; Tyler and Cook 1984) and the perception of threat has the potential to mobilise people in order to avoid negative consequences (e.g. Kalichman and Coley 1995; Raghurir and Menon 2001; Rothman and Salovey 1997; Schneider *et al.* 2001). This study thus tests threat perception as a potential mediator for the effect of negative tabloid style news on referendum support among opponents of the Treaty:

H3: Opponents feel more threatened by the potential consequences of a policy proposal when exposed to tabloid rather than broadsheet style news, which makes them more supportive of holding a public referendum on the issue (mediation hypothesis).

H4: Opponents feel more threatened by the potential consequences of a policy proposal and are more supportive of referendums when exposed to negative news as compared to positive news (negativity hypothesis).

Method

To test the effect of tabloid-style vs. broadsheet-style news reporting on support for referendums we conducted an experiment: first, we tested whether the style of reporting (tabloid format vs. broadsheet) and the tone of reporting (negative vs. positive) affects referendum support and then whether threat perception is a mediator for the effect of tabloid news on referendum support.

Experiment

Design. To test the possible effects of positive and negative tabloid-style vs. broadsheet-style reporting on support for referendums, we used a 2×2 between-subjects experimental design with random assignment to one of four conditions. Within this design the first condition exposed respondents to a broadsheet-style news story with a positive tone towards the Treaty of Lisbon and the second condition exposed respondents to a broadsheet-style news story with a negative tone. The third condition is a tabloid-style news story with a positive tone towards the Treaty and the final condition is a tabloid-style news story with a negative tone. We employed a randomised post-test design as has often been done in previous media effect research (see e.g. Nelson *et al.* 1997; Price *et al.* 1997), in order to detect between-group differences and to avoid pre-test sensitisation (see e.g. Campbell and Stanley 1966).

Procedure. The experiment was conducted in January 2008 by the Dutch Institute for Public Opinion Research and Market Research TNS NIPO (Amsterdam/The Netherlands). Participants first completed a pre-test questionnaire asking for demographic details and a number of political predispositions. Next, participants were exposed to a news article establishing the four alternative conditions. Finally, participants completed a post-test questionnaire which asked for their support for holding a public referendum on the Treaty of Lisbon and their assessment of the perceived consequences of the Treaty (threat perception).

Sample. A representative sample was drawn from the TNS NIPO database, a database of 200,000 respondents representative of the Dutch population. Respondents filled in the questionnaire on their own computer (CASI). In total 580 individuals participated in the experiment (52.9 per cent females, age = 18–81 [$M = 46.9$, $SD = 16.47$]), 154 in the positive broadsheet condition, 137 in the negative broadsheet condition, 140 in the positive tabloid condition and 149 in the negative tabloid condition. The response rate was 72.7 per cent.

Stimulus material. The experimental stimulus material consisted of a news article written either in tabloid or broadsheet style with either a positive or a

negative tone towards the Treaty of Lisbon (available from authors upon request). The news articles were produced for the study rather than selected. This gives full control over the experimental manipulation, and it ensures that no respondent has been exposed to the article in advance. In both versions, tabloid and broadsheet, the storyline was identical, dealing with a general discussion of the assumed consequences of the EU Treaty of Lisbon, framed in either positive or negative terms. However, the tabloid versions were shorter than the broadsheet versions, the average number of words per sentence was less as well. More catchphrases, common everyday expressions as well as value-laden expressions were used. More exclamation and question marks appeared in the tabloid versions, and two paragraphs instead of one were printed in bold. Furthermore, the writing style was more personal and the headline was bigger and phrased in more emotional terms.

Manipulation check. A manipulation check revealed successful manipulation. Respondents were asked if the article they had just read was more negative or more positive towards the EU Treaty of Lisbon (1 – very negative, 7 – very positive). Respondents in the positive broadsheet version ($M = 4.75$, $SD = 1.49$) perceived the tone of the article as significantly more positive compared to respondents in the negative broadsheet condition ($M = 3.03$, $SD = 1.17$), $t(289) = 10.88$, $p < 0.001$. Respondents in the positive tabloid condition ($M = 4.80$, $SD = 1.68$) also perceived the article as significantly more positive as compared to respondents in the negative tabloid condition ($M = 2.85$, $SD = 1.27$), $t(287) = 11.14$; $p < 0.001$.

Measures of Experiment

Dependent variable: referendum support. Respondents were asked on a seven-point scale to what extent they would support the idea of holding a public referendum on the EU Treaty of Lisbon (1 – strongly against, 7 – strongly in support) ($M = 4.32$, $SD = 1.84$).

Moderating variable: EU support. Our analysis distinguishes between respondents who are in support of the EU (supporters) and those who are sceptical towards the EU (opponents). The degree to which each respondent supports or opposes the EU was assessed as a pre-intervention measure with four questions on five-point Likert scales covering the following dimensions: (1) general EU support, (2) support for the Euro, (3) support for EU enlargement, and (4) support for Dutch EU membership.²¹ All four items together build a reliable scale (Cronbach's alpha = 0.71) on which higher scores represent higher levels of EU support ($M = 3.02$, $SD = 0.72$). For our analysis we built two groups above and below the mean and classify individuals as either being opponents ($n = 225$) or supporters ($n = 355$).

Mediation analysis. In order to explain the underlying mechanism behind the effect of tabloid-style vs. broadsheet-style news reporting on referendum support we test threat perception as a potential mediator. Therefore, we asked respondents how likely they thought it was that the Treaty of Lisbon would have negative consequences in the future (see e.g. Morton and Duck 2001; Tyler and Cook 1984). Threat perception is measured with three items as a post-intervention measure on five-point Likert scales (1 – very low, 5 – very high). We distinguish between different levels of increasing psychological distance from the respondent (Perloff 1993) and asked respondents how likely they thought it was that the Treaty of Lisbon would have negative consequences with regard to (1 – *personal level*) one's own personal future ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 0.97$), (2 – *group level*) the future of one's friends and family ($M = 3.09$, $SD = 0.90$), and (3 – *societal level*) the future of the Netherlands ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 1.00$). All three items together built a reliable scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.88$) on which higher scores stand for higher threat perception ($M = 3.13$, $SD = 0.86$).

Results

The experimental manipulation (broadsheet vs. tabloid) affected referendum support among the opponents of the proposal. Taking both tabloid (positive and negative) and both broadsheet conditions together we find that opponents in the two tabloid conditions ($M = 5.00$, $SD = 1.96$) expressed significantly higher support for referendums compared to opponents in the two broadsheet conditions ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 1.95$) ($F(1,224) = 4.70$, $p < 0.05$). Supporters were found to be generally less in favour of referendums compared to opponents and did not differ in support between the broadsheet ($M = 4.09$, $SD = 1.75$) and the tabloid ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 1.67$) conditions.²²

Next, we take a closer look at the tone of coverage and how it matters for the pattern we just described. As Table 3 shows, and in line with our expectation, opponents are particularly more supportive of referendums

TABLE 3
REFERENDUM SUPPORT OF OPPONENTS AND SUPPORTERS IN TABLOID AND BROADSHEET CONDITIONS (POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE CONDITIONS)

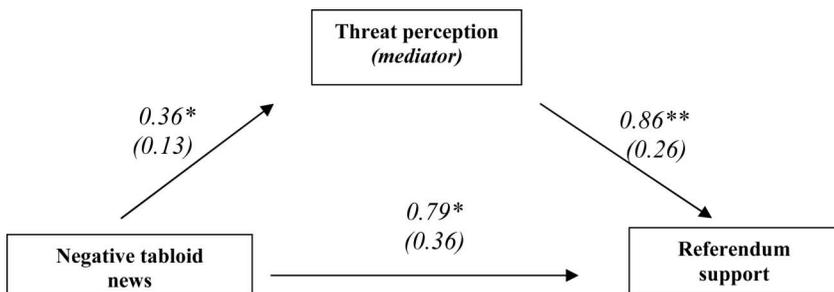
	Broadsheet condition positive (<i>n</i> = 154)	Tabloid condition positive (<i>n</i> = 140)	Broadsheet condition negative (<i>n</i> = 137)	Tabloid condition negative (<i>n</i> = 149)
Opponents (<i>n</i> = 225)	4.44 (1.98) <i>n</i> = 61	4.77 _d (2.01) <i>n</i> = 57	4.43 _a (1.93) <i>n</i> = 47	5.22 _b (1.81) <i>n</i> = 60
Supporters (<i>n</i> = 355)	3.95 (1.73) <i>n</i> = 93	3.96 _e (1.80) <i>n</i> = 83	4.24 (1.76) <i>n</i> = 90	4.09 _c (1.54) <i>n</i> = 89

Notes: Different subscripts *a,b* indicate significant between-condition difference with $p < 0.05$. Different subscripts *d,e* indicate significant within-condition difference with $p < 0.05$. Different subscripts *b,c* indicate significant within-condition difference with $p < 0.001$ (all two-tailed).

when exposed to *negative* tabloid news.²³ Opponents in the negative tabloid condition are significantly more supportive ($M = 5.22$, $SD = 1.81$) of referendums compared to opponents in the negative broadsheet condition ($M = 4.43$, $SD = 1.93$), $t(105) = -2.16$, $p < 0.05$.²⁴ In the positive tabloid condition, opponents are also more supportive towards referendums ($M = 4.77$, $SD = 2.01$) compared to opponents in the positive broadsheet condition ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 1.98$), however, the difference is not significant ($t(116) = -0.88$, $p > 0.05$).²⁵

As our findings show, opponents are more supportive towards referendums when exposed to tabloid-style reporting and this dynamic is stronger for negative reporting as opposed to positive reporting. Next, we test threat perception as a potential mediator for this effect. We first test for the effect of the negative tabloid condition (as opposed to the negative broadsheet condition) on threat perception and then for the effect of threat perception on referendum support (see Baron and Kenny 1986). Our findings show that opponents in the negative tabloid condition feel significantly more threatened ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 0.60$) as compared to opponents in the negative broadsheet condition ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 0.76$) ($F(1,106) = 4.76$, $p < 0.05$). Furthermore, higher threat perception significantly increases referendum support among opponents ($F(1,106) = 8.20$, $p < 0.001$). This gives a first indication for a mediated dynamic in which exposure to negative tabloid news makes opponents feel more threatened by the assumed consequences of the Treaty, which then results in a stronger urge to hold a public referendum as a means to prevent the Treaty from becoming effective. We assess this dynamic formally with the Sobel mediation test (see e.g. MacKinnon *et al.* 1995; Sobel 1982). As Figure 2 illustrates, the effect of negative tabloid-style reporting on higher support for referendums among opponents is mediated by increased threat perception (Sobel Test statistic = 2.11, $p < 0.05$).²⁶

FIGURE 2
MEDIATING ROLE OF THREAT PERCEPTION ON REFERENDUM SUPPORT
AMONG OPPONENTS



Note: Coefficients are path coefficients (standard errors in parentheses). * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed).

General Discussion

This article first set out to test two complementary hypotheses in order to answer the question *who* is most supportive of referendums as a means of direct democracy. Furthermore, this study is the first not to treat referendum support as a static concept and to assess the role of the campaign in *changing* referendum support on the individual level. Our findings indicate that the referendum opportunity is particularly embraced by those who feel more politically disaffected compared to those who display higher levels of political involvement. Furthermore, we showed that higher levels of exposure to *tabloid*-style campaign news increased support for referendums. These outlets carried a larger share of negative news compared to other media. In a second step, we investigated the underlying dynamics behind these effects and showed how negative tabloid-style news about a policy proposal can lead to increased threat perception among opponents of the proposal. In turn, this threat perception increases support for holding a referendum on the issue as a way to prevent an unwanted scenario.

Based on our findings it seems that referendums are welcomed as an alternative method of political expression, distant from established processes of political participation, especially by sceptical citizens who see such direct democratic means as an effective opportunity to veto political decisions which are otherwise just decided upon by the political elites. This is in line with previous research stressing the potential of direct democracy to tackle symptoms of political apathy (Budge 1996) and engage the otherwise unengaged (Dalton *et al.* 2001; Gilljam *et al.* 1998). The dynamic shown in this study demonstrates how a referendum triggered by the political elites can backfire and engage especially those who are most critical. These citizens might hold critical views towards the political process but at the same time they stay committed to democratic principles and embrace the opportunity to have a say (Inglehart 1999; Norris 1999).

Our findings might apply in particular to a situation in which the referendum was initiated and supported by the political elites and involvement in the topic was high and the issue at stake was discussed controversially in public. This particular context might function as a sort of condition specification for when the political disaffection model is superior to the cognitive mobilisation model. The motives, then, behind support for referendums have to be seen as rather defensive (veto function) and issue-oriented. Outside the context of government-initiated referendums, the question remains to what extent disaffected citizens would become involved in citizen initiatives organised to achieve a positive outcome and to change the status quo.

On the other hand, the cognitive mobilisation hypothesis might yield more support in a context in which issue involvement and the level of public

debate are rather low and the issue is less controversial. Previous studies, in line with our findings, have yielded stronger support for the political disaffection hypothesis in Europe (Dalton *et al.* 2001) and especially for the Nordic countries (Gilljam *et al.* 1998), whereas the cognitive mobilisation hypothesis received more support in countries with an established tradition in the use of referendums such as Canada, New Zealand, or Switzerland (Donovan and Karp 2006). This could mean that in a context in which referendums are not seen as a special occasion and are applied more often, those with higher cognitive resources remain more committed to the practice. The political disaffection hypothesis might be more applicable instead in contexts in which referendums are the exception rather than the norm. That being said, we need to point to the fact that a lot of research investigating public support for referendums and direct democracy has utilised different operationalisations of this concept, limiting the possibility to compare results across studies and carrying the implication to be cautious with regard to the interpretation of findings. Support for direct democracy is not necessarily the same as general support for referendums or support for holding referendums more frequently and thus findings are not always directly comparable and different explanatory factors might matter in different scenarios. This is linked to the fact that the explanatory power of models explaining referendum support and/or support for direct democracy is generally low, stressing the need to investigate further which other factors play a role in determining support. This study has investigated general support for referendums whereas in our experimental setting our dependent variable pertained to support for referendums on a specific topic. Since this second part of the study was meant to investigate a particular mechanism accounting for changes in referendum support in response to news coverage, we consider this approach to be appropriate; however, future research will have to disentangle the underlying notion of referendum support and/or support for direct democracy and needs to carefully consider the operationalisation of the dependent variable before drawing conclusions across countries and contexts.

Unsurprisingly, our analysis does show that vote choice, i.e. the experience of being on 'the winning side', has a substantial impact on individual referendum support. But, importantly, our analysis also shows that news coverage of the campaign has an effect on how citizens evaluate referendums above and beyond vote choice. This latter aspect has been the substantial focus of the present study and we regard it as one important contribution that it has shown *how* the news media have the potential to affect referendum support. Our findings are in line with previous research which has shown that the style of reporting can affect readers' interpretations of news (Grabe *et al.* 2000; Jucker 1992). Tabloid-style news reporting can lead to the perception of a situation as more serious (Grabe *et al.* 2003). In this way, opponents of a referendum proposal can become more threatened by the consequences of a positive outcome. In line

with studies in health communication (Raghubir and Menon 2001; Schneider *et al.* 2001), we find that these citizens become mobilised to avoid assumed negative consequences. In the context of this study, this avoidance strategy results in higher support for referendums as the equivalent means to other self-protective behaviour (e.g. receiving health screening to prevent disease). Future studies should identify more of these cognitive and psychological processes that underlie the effects of news coverage on individual referendum support and expand such investigations to different referendum contexts. Furthermore, future research needs to investigate the role of different types of information, such as the reference points of positive and negative evaluations in news coverage (e.g. regarding referendums as such, the specific referendum proposal, or different sub-elements of the issue at stake) that can cause different mediation processes, involving different potential mediators, which could affect support for referendums.

Finally, referendums play an important role for the involvement of citizens in EU democracy. Since the European Parliament is the only EU institution which is directly and democratically elected, national referendums are of especial importance and one of the few opportunities for citizens to directly engage in EU politics. Our data also show that the negative experience of seeing the referendum fail did not substantially decrease support for direct democracy among supporters of the referendum proposal, and at the same time it did increase support among opponents. This could mean that direct democracy becomes more popular the more citizens are exposed to it. Although the Dutch 2005 referendum formally 'failed', it was a success in a more normative way and as an exercise in democracy: it engaged the least politically involved and those who are most sceptical about politics. The use of referendums in the EU might help not only in the creation of a common European identity (Hug 2003) but also to overcome the democratic deficit the EU often has been accused of (e.g. Meyer 1999; Scharpf 1997; Schmitter 2000). Thus, referendums will not make people more supportive of European integration or the EU in any direct way, but they can result in greater perceived legitimacy of the EU among its sceptics and least involved citizens and thus improve the democratic nature of the EU, which might prove to be one stepping stone towards more support after all.

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Notes

1. Six national daily newspapers were included into the analysis: *De Volkskrant*, *NRC Handelsblad*, and *Trouw* are all broadsheet newspapers and represent the Dutch national

quality press. *De Telegraaf*, *Metro*, and *Algemeen Dagblad* represent the national tabloid press. In addition, the most widely watched Dutch public evening news programme *NOS Journaal* (Nederland 1: 20.00–20.25), the main private program *RTL Nieuws* (RTL 4: 19.30–19.55), and the main public TV current affairs program *NOVA – Den Haag vandaag* were analysed. For the newspapers all articles on the front page, all articles on one randomly chosen page inside the newspaper and all articles about the referendum were coded. For the TV news programmes all news items have been coded and for the one TV current affairs programme all items about the referendum have been coded. In total 5,157 newspaper articles (1,213 TV items) were coded, of which 1,146 newspaper articles (158 TV items) dealt specifically with the referendum. The content analysis was conducted for all news items published or broadcast within the six weeks prior to the referendum (between 14 April 2005 and 1 June 2005). Coding was conducted by six Dutch native speakers. The unit of analysis and coding unit was the distinct news story.

2. We measured the overall tone towards the EU Constitution for all news stories dealing with the referendum. The tone was coded as either (1) more favourable for the Yes side than for the No side, (2) more favourable for the No side than for the Yes side, or as (3) balanced or containing (4) no valence. The coding decision was based on the sum of explicit statements per news item that had a qualitative dimension and that thematically referred to the EU Constitution. The findings we report are based on a scale measurement for tone (reaching from -1 to $+1$), which is based only on those news items with an either positive or negative evaluation of the EU Constitution ($M = 0.27$, $SD = 0.96$, $n = 717$). Inter-coder reliability for this measurement ranged from $\kappa = 0.74$ to $\kappa = 1$ (Cohen's Kappa).
3. Respondents in the first panel wave were interviewed in five sub-groups at different points in time. The first sub-group was interviewed starting 22 April, the second group starting 6 May, the third starting 13 May, the fourth starting 20 May and the last group only on 30 and 31 May. For the second panel wave all respondents were re-interviewed between 2 and 12 June. Accounting for all respondents of all sub-groups the original net response was 1,561 in the first wave and 1,284 in the second wave. Since our campaign effects model is meant to explain *change* in referendum support over the course of the campaign, we removed the respondents of the last sub-group from our analysis so that the final number of respondents for the analyses reported in this study was $N = 1,008$. Differences in the number of cases in the analyses we report in Tables 1 and 2 are due to item non-response (and 'don't know' answers) on a number of measures contained in the respective models.
4. Compared to CBS census data and with regard to gender, age, and education we report the following slight under- or overrepresentations. There is a slight under-representation of men in our net panel (47.4 per cent versus 49.5 per cent). Regarding age groups, 15–24 year olds are slightly underrepresented (7.2 per cent versus 11.9 per cent), 45–54 year olds are slightly over-represented (20.1 per cent versus 14 per cent) as well as 65+ year olds who are also slightly over-represented (17.4 per cent versus 13.7 per cent).
5. When testing the cognitive mobilisation hypothesis and the political disaffection hypothesis the time 2 measure is used as dependent variable. In the final campaign model the time 2 measure is the dependent variable and the time 1 measure is included as an independent variable in order test for individual change in approval over the course of the campaign (see Markus 1979 for a discussion of the use of lagged specifications in panel data).
6. The variance inflation factors (VIF) for the independent variables in the model we report (Table 1) are all below the value of two and thus sufficiently low, indicating the absence of multi-collinearity in our data.
7. Of our respondents 91.2 per cent reported to have voted in the last national election which reflects a well known bias in self-reported turnout (Granberg and Holmberg 1991). However, actual turnout has been high in the last Dutch national election (2002) which preceded the referendum (79.1 per cent).
8. 56.7 per cent of our respondents reported voting for a party currently in the opposition.
9. 8.8 per cent of our sample reported not having voted in the last general election.

10. Correlation analysis shows that both concepts are not entirely uni-dimensional ($r = 0.51$) (see also Karp *et al.* 2003).
11. More specifically, we control for age, gender and education as socio-demographic factors as well as for political interest, satisfaction with democracy in the Netherlands and in Europe and political efficacy (all measured as in the previous model). Furthermore, the variance inflation factors (VIF) for the independent variables in our final campaign model are all sufficiently low and below the value of two, thus indicating the absence of multi-collinearity.
12. Both concepts are not entirely uni-dimensional ($r = 0.22$) which is why we include both concepts as separate variables into our model.
13. Inter-coder reliability for this measurement ranged from $\kappa = 0.74$ to $\kappa = 1$.
14. Tone for other outlets: *NOS Journaal*: $M = 0.30$, $SD = 0.98$, $n = 20$; *RTL Nieuws*: $M = 0.33$, $SD = 1.00$, $n = 9$.
15. Additionally controlling for actual vote choice (yes/no) in the model reported in Table 1 does yield substantially similar findings. The strong effect of political efficacy remains, whereas satisfaction with domestic democracy and education do not show a significant impact anymore.
16. If tested in separate models, the political disaffection model (adjusted R -square = 0.08) explains more variance compared to the cognitive mobilisation model (Adjusted R -square = 0.02). The generally low R -square scores for these models are in line with previous studies (e.g. Donovan and Karp 2006) and point to the general difficulty of explaining support for direct democracy and the need to identify additional explanatory factors. We also tested the models with the time 1 measure as dependent variable yielding the same general patterns as we report. The only differences are that education and satisfaction with domestic democracy no longer have a significant impact whereas left political ideology is positively related to referendum support.
17. To assess changes in referendum support we subtract individual referendum support scores in wave 1 from individual referendum support scores in wave 2. Since referendum support was measured on five-point Likert scales the resulting scale for change in referendum support reaches from -4 (maximum decrease in support) to $+4$ (maximum increase in support).
18. In this model we also controlled for age, gender, education, satisfaction with domestic and EU democracy, political efficacy and political interest. Since we focus on the influence of the campaign and the news media on explaining *change* over the two panel waves we do not report the results for each of these controls in the table. We find that less educated voters and voters who feel less efficacious increased in their support for referendums over the course of the campaign. *Change* in vote choice over the course of the campaign as additional explanatory variable (not reported here) showed to have no significant impact on referendum support.
19. The effect of broadsheet newspapers remains insignificant ($p > 0.05$) also in a one-sided significance test.
20. The different versions of our stimulus article mirror a realistic and factual discussion of the assumed consequences of the Treaty of Lisbon framed in either positive or negative terms. Thus, we regard the context of our study as still realistic although no actual referendum on the Treaty of Lisbon took place in the Netherlands. However, the treaty had just been signed by the time we conducted our experiment and it still needed to be approved by all EU member states and several countries considered holding a referendum and Ireland, later, did hold a public referendum on the treaty.
21. A randomisation check revealed successful randomisation with no between-group differences with regard to age, gender and education. There also was no between-group difference with regard to our pre-intervention measure of EU support ($F(3,576) = 0.978$, $p > 0.05$). The random selection of subjects means that there are no initial differences between the different groups and that between-group differences which are detected later on as part of the post-test constitute evidence that subjects responded differently to the respective experimental intervention.

22. Whereas opponents and supporters in the broadsheet conditions did not differ significantly from each other in their support for referendums ($t(289) = 1.55, p > 0.05$), in the tabloid conditions opponents are significantly more supportive of referendums as compared to supporters ($t(287) = 10.86, p < 0.001$).
23. In a more conservative test of our hypothesis (not reported here) we excluded respondents who were categorised as opponents based on our pre-test measurement but later in our post-test expressed that they would have voted in favour of the Treaty. We also excluded respondents who were categorised as supporters but expressed that they would have voted against the Treaty in a hypothetical referendum. The results yield the same significant patterns as the ones we report.
24. As an alternative test of our expectation we tested a formal interaction model with an interaction term between the experimental condition (negative tabloid news vs. negative broadsheet news) and EU support controlling for main effects which yielded the same significant result ($F(3,282) = 5.59, p < 0.01$) and shows that the effect of negative tabloid news is moderated by EU support. The interaction term remains significant when both tabloid versions (positive and negative) and both broadsheet versions (positive and negative) are combined ($F(3, 576) = 8.10, p < 0.001$).
25. Furthermore, opponents in the positive tabloid condition ($M = 4.77, SD = 2.01$) are significantly more supportive of referendums as compared to supporters in the same condition ($M = 3.96, SD = 1.80$) ($t(138) = -2.37, p < 0.05$) and opponents in the negative tabloid condition are also more supportive of referendums ($M = 5.22, SD = 1.81$) as compared to supporters in the same condition ($M = 4.09, SD = 1.54$) ($t(147) = -4.08, p < 0.001$).
26. If both (positive and negative) tabloid conditions and both broadsheet conditions are combined the same mediation dynamic is detected as in the model we report (Sobel Test statistic = 2.00, $p < 0.05$).

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APPENDIX
OVERVIEW OF VARIABLES

Gender: Male = 1 (47.7 per cent); female = 0 (52.3 per cent).

Age: In years (M = 48.3, SD = 15.98).

Education: Seven levels of education (from lowest to highest)

Political interest (index): Two-item index scale from 1 (low interest) to 3 (high interest): (1) 'How much are you interested in politics in general?'; (2) 'How much are you interested in European politics?' (M = 1.82, SD = 0.54, $\alpha = 0.82$).

Political orientation: Respondents were asked to indicate their political orientation on an 11-point left–right scale and were coded as either leaning to the left (1–4) or leaning to the right (8–11). Two dummy variables were built representing respondents with left political ideology (18.1 per cent) or right political ideology (24.1 per cent) as opposed to centrist orientation.

Political efficacy (index): Four-item index scale from 0 (low level of efficacy) to 1 (high level of efficacy): (1) ‘Politicians do not care about opinions of people like me’, (2) ‘Parties are only interested in my vote, not in my opinion’; (3) ‘People like me have no influence on politics’; (4) ‘Politicians quickly lose contact with citizens’; (M = 0.29, SD = 0.33, $\alpha = 0.71$).

Satisfaction with domestic democracy and EU democracy: Two items measured on a scale from 1 (not at all satisfied) to 4 (very satisfied): Satisfaction with domestic democracy: ‘How satisfied are you with the way democracy works in the Netherlands?’ (M = 2.70, SD = 0.68); Satisfaction with democracy in the EU: ‘How satisfied are you with the way democracy works in the EU?’ (M = 2.30, SD = 0.66).

Interpersonal communication about referendum: 1 (almost never) to 4 (very often) rating scale: ‘How frequently have you discussed about the referendum with your friends, family or colleagues?’ (M = 2.88, SD = 0.80).

Campaign evaluation (2 items): Two items on a scale from 1 (fully disagree) to 5 (fully agree): (1) ‘The discussion about the EU Constitution was straightforward and sincere’ (M = 2.95, SD = 0.97); (2) ‘The campaign clarified the contents of the EU Constitution well’ (M = 2.05, SD = 0.94).

Exposure to campaign news coverage: Exposure to each newspaper outlet was measured by asking respondents if they turn daily or almost daily to an outlet and coded as either 0 – no or 1 – yes: Telegraaf: M = 0.19, SD = 0.40; Volkskrant: M = 0.08, SD = 0.27; Trouw: M = 0.03, SD = 0.18; NRC Handelsblad: M = 0.05, SD = 0.22; Algemeen Dagblad: M = 0.09, SD = 0.29; Metro: M = 0.16, SD = 0.36. Individual scores for Telegraaf, Metro, and Algemeen Dagblad have been summed up and divided by three to build an overall exposure index for tabloid newspapers (M = 0.15, SD = 0.20). Individual scores for Volkskrant, NRC Handelsblad, and Trouw have been summed up and divided by three to build an overall exposure index for broadsheet newspapers (M = 0.05, SD = 0.13). Exposure to the main public TV news show NOS Journaal, the main private news show RTL Nieuws, and the main current affairs programme was measured on four-point scales from 1 – less than once a week to 4 – almost daily (NOS Journaal: M = 3.44, SD = 0.95; RTL Nieuws: M = 2.67, SD = 1.20; NOVA Den Haag vandaag: M = 2.24, SD = 1.11). How often people visit websites

on political or social subjects was measured on a five-point scale from 0 – never to 4 – almost every day ($M = 0.66$, $SD = 1.02$).

Referendum support: ‘Some people think that in general it is a good thing that the people can exert an influence on the national parliament via referenda, some think this is not a good thing, and others do have an opinion somewhere in between. What is your opinion?’ (1 – ‘national referenda are a bad thing’, 5 – ‘national referenda are a good thing’) (wave 1: $M = 3.91$, $SD = 1.19$; wave 2: $M = 4.05$, $SD = 1.14$).