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Research Article

## The Strategic Use of Government-Sponsored Referendums in Contemporary Europe: Issues and Implications

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## Abstract

Referendums, especially those which are not constitutionally mandated, have often been used strategically in the context of both democratic and non-democratic regimes by political actors wishing to achieve specific goals. Engaging with the extant literature on the subject, this article analyses four government-sponsored referendums which took place between 2015 and 2016 in Greece, Britain, Hungary and Italy. The focus of the analysis is twofold. The first purpose is to debunk the political risk calculation underpinning the government's decision to sponsor a referendum in each of the cases considered. The second is to suggest that the strategic use of referendum by governments in contemporary Europe can be better understood if read in light of the recent upsurge of populist movements.

## Keywords

Referendum; European Union; Political risk.

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In recent times, the use of referendums meant as '[Devices] of direct democracy by which the people are asked to vote directly on an issue or policy' (Morel 2011: 2226) has increased in the context of democratic – as well as non-democratic – regimes worldwide. As reported by the Center for Research on Direct Democracy (c2d), 843 national level referendums were held worldwide between 1700 and 1970, while between 1970 and 2015 the global number of national level referendums was 1907 (c2d 2016). Aside from normative analyses hinging on the advantages and drawbacks of direct democracy (see for instance Setälä 1999), a central problem in empirical approaches to the study of referendums is how they are embedded and used in the framework of representative democracies (Mendelsohn and Parkin 2001). In the context of the European Union (EU) in particular, referendums are one of several 'political opportunity structures' critically influencing the extent to which the EU is becoming increasingly politicised at the domestic level (Bellamy and Kröger 2016: 126).

A strand of literature has emerged over the last few decades showing that, especially when referendums are not mandatory, governments can use them as tools to achieve specific political goals (Morel 2001; Walker 2003; Rahat 2009; Qvortrup 2016). This article is a theoretically-informed analysis of the most recent cases of government-sponsored referendums in EU countries: the July 2015 referendum in Greece on the acceptance of the bailout conditions proposed by the EU; the June 2016 'Brexit' referendum in the UK; the October 2016 referendum on the relocation of asylum seekers in Hungary; and the December 2016 referendum on constitutional reform in Italy. The selection of cases was performed on the basis of the most diverse method as defined by Seawright and Gerring (2008): the units of analysis are referendums which were all held in EU member states and were sponsored by incumbent governments after the beginning of the 2008 financial and economic crisis. However, in spite of these commonalities, they display substantial differences in virtually all other dimensions, including the substantive issue at stake, the political orientation of the governing party, the countries' membership/non-membership in the Eurozone, the sub-region (Southern, Northern and Central Europe) to which the countries under consideration belong. The concept of 'government-sponsored referendum' adopted here is a broad one, referring to cases in which referendums were not directly mandated by the constitution and governments had some

leeway in initiating the procedure, framing the referendum question, setting the timeline for the vote.

The focus is not on the ‘anti-hegemonic’ (weakening the government’s position) versus ‘pro-hegemonic’ (strengthening the government’s position) effects of government-initiated referendums as discussed by Smith (1976) and Qvotrup (2000). Rather, the purposes of the article are a) to debunk the political risk calculation underpinning the government’s decision to sponsor a referendum in each of the cases considered through a systematic analysis of official documents, party manifestoes and speeches; and b) to shed light on a phenomenon that is currently shaping EU politics both at the member states’ and at the Union’s level, suggesting that the strategic use of referendums in contemporary Europe can be better understood if read in connection with the recent rise of populist movements and their influence on domestic and EU-level policymaking. Unsurprisingly, populist movements often demand referendums as they represent a way to appeal directly to the will of the ‘people’, bypassing the normal mechanisms of representative democracy (Plattner 2010: 88). On the other hand, referendums which in many cases artificially – and often problematically – reduce complex issues to binary choices naturally lend themselves to the resort to populism, meant as a dynamic ‘discursive frame’ rather than a fixed attribute of certain actors (Bonikowski 2016: 14).

The next section summarises the main findings of the literature on the strategic use of referendums. In light of the theoretical framework outlined thereby, the following sections go on to explore the four cases mentioned above and to provide a comparative discussion of the case studies. The last section concludes the article.

## THE STRATEGIC USE OF GOVERNMENT-SPONSORED REFERENDUMS

As Lijphart famously put it, ‘when governments control the referendum, they will tend to use it only when they expect to win’ (1984: 203). Qvotrup’s (2000) empirical analysis of 128 ‘government controlled’ and ‘non-government controlled’ referendums held between 1945 and 1997 shows that even if government controlled referendums are a relatively small fraction (15.6 per cent) of all the cases considered, ‘there is, indeed, some support for the assertion that governments only submit issues to referendums when they have a good reason to suppose that they will be endorsed by the voters’, as only five out of twenty-five government controlled referendums had anti-hegemonic outcomes (Qvotrup 2000: 823). In a similar vein Walker (2003: 5) finds that

[p]roposing and/or calling a referendum can be seen similarly in a bargaining context to the use of force. Elites will use referendums to garner legitimacy and therefore win a policy debate if they *believe* that the people favour their position over their opponent. [Emphasis added.]

According to Matsusaka (2003), when calling for a popular vote on a certain issue or set of issues, governments basically signal the will to break down the bargaining process with the legislature and interest groups. This necessarily entails a calculation factoring in the deadweight costs of running a campaign as well as an assessment of the odds on and extent of the political gains potentially deriving from a favourable outcome. Assuming the deadweight costs are negligible, the government will decide to promote a referendum rather than, for instance, a negotiated solution to a given problem, if it estimates that the odds of reaping political gains deriving from a positive outcome are high, and/or that the extent of political gains deriving from a positive outcome is large. Naturally, the exact definition of political gains and political costs depends largely on the main purpose of the referendum and on the context in which it takes place. Recalling the main categories of motivations

singled out by the existing literature, political gains can be defined in terms of: 1) consolidation of the government's power, as typically happened in the case of plebiscitary mid-mandate referendums in France in 1969, 1972, 1992 (Morel 2001); 2) successful solution of tensions within the governing coalition, as in the case of the Socialdemokratiet leaders' decision to hold a referendum on European Economic Community (EEC) membership in Denmark in 1971; 3) success in passing a law or policy that would otherwise not have passed, as in the case of the Danish Single European Act referendum in 1986, which allowed the government to overcome the veto of a parliamentary majority opposing ratification (Borre 1986); 4) reinforcing a certain measure whose legitimation is politically indispensable, as in the case of the 1998 referendum on the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland (Morel 2001); and 5) securing a more favourable outcome in international negotiations using the referendum as a bargaining chip, as happened in the context of the negotiations for the European Constitution, when Spain's Prime Minister José María Aznar raised the issue of a possible referendum in order to obtain an increase in the Spanish vote share in the Council of Ministers of the EU (Qvotrup 2016). Vice versa, political costs can be defined as the loss of political capital deriving from an outcome contrary to the position advocated by the government itself, as happened for the 1969 referendum in France whose direct consequence was the resignation of President De Gaulle or the 1972 referendum in Norway on EEC membership, whose negative outcome led to a resignation of the Labour government (Valen 1973). The government's strategic decision to call a referendum can also be described as a 'political risk' calculation in the sense highlighted and empirically tested by Althaus, specifically the calculation made by elected officers regarding circumstances 'that have the potential to discredit, disempower or detach a political actor from their ability to rule' (2008: 69). Examples of such calculation will be discussed in the following sections.

### THE JULY 5<sup>TH</sup> 2015 REFERENDUM IN GREECE

During the sovereign debt crisis in Europe, Greece was in the eye of the hurricane. Troubles ostensibly started in October 2009, when the new socialist Finance Minister Papacostantinou disclosed that the country's deficit in that year would soar to 12.5 per cent of GDP, a much higher figure compared to the one estimated by the former Conservative government (Nelson, Belkin and Mix 2011). In May 2010, the government led by George Papandreou sought and obtained a first bailout worth 110 billion EUR by securing the support of the European Commission, the European Central Bank (ECB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the so-called 'Troika', in exchange for a first package of austerity measures meant to reduce drastically Greece's budget deficit. A new short-lived cabinet led by Lucas Papademos took over in November 2011 and finalised the negotiation of a second bailout package in February 2012; political instability led to new elections in May and June 2012, resulting in a government led by Antonis Samara which in turn was replaced by radical left Syriza party leader Alexis Tsipras after the January 2015 elections.

The newly elected Government had pledged to renegotiate the bailout conditions and put an end to austerity policies. However, on June 27 2015, after five months of fruitless negotiations with the country's creditors, Tsipras called a consultative referendum, asking the Greek people 'to rule on the blackmailing ultimatum' imposed by the Troika (Chrysolouras, Srivastava and Chrepa 2015). The referendum question read:

Should the outline of the agreement submitted by the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund at the Eurogroup of 25/06/15 and which is made up of two parts that constitute their unified proposal be accepted? The first document is entitled 'Reforms for the completion of the

current programme and beyond' and the second 'Preliminary Debt Sustainability Analysis for Greece'.

The Government openly claimed that the decision to hold a referendum was part of its negotiating strategy, and campaigned in favour of the 'No', basically engaging in a 'game of chicken' with the country's creditors, and playing the referendum wild card in the attempt to extract concessions from counterparts. According to the Prime Minister, a 'No' outcome in the July 5<sup>th</sup> referendum would have lent credibility to the Greek Government's negotiating position, signalling to counterparts that what they were offering was truly unacceptable because the Government's 'bottom line' was higher than the 'price' offered (Neale in MacBride and Neale 2016). Resorting to a referendum in this context would have equated with the use of force in the context of a typical 'high-stakes' negotiation (Weiss, Donigian and Hughes 2010).

On July 5 2015, the Greek voters cast their ballot, which resulted in an outright victory of the 'No' option (61.2 per cent of the vote with a 62.5 per cent turnout). However, a few days later, the Greek Government was back at the negotiating table and eventually signed a bailout agreement whose conditions were possibly harsher than those which had been originally rejected. This clearly contradicts *ex post* one of the narratives proposed by the opposition, that is that Tsipras's actual motivation to sponsor a referendum was to obtain a strong popular mandate to pursue his hidden agenda including a 'Grexit' from the European monetary union (Milioni, Spyridou and Triga 2016). Had this hypothesis been correct, the government could have legitimately refused further negotiation in the aftermath of the vote, *de facto* triggering a Grexit; yet the fact that this did not happen lends credibility to the 'bargaining chip' explanation, also suggesting – in light of the fact that the government led by Tsipras eventually bent to domestic and international pressures – that the Government had no 'best alternative to a negotiated agreement' in place (Weiss, Donigian and Hughes 2010). It can be argued that once it found itself to be cornered during the negotiations, the Government tried to strengthen its mandate, performing a political risk calculation similar to the one described above. The expected pay-off was a stronger mandate to negotiate more favourable terms with the Troika. The cost in case of a miscalculation could have been the resignation of the Government and possibly the end of Syriza as governing party. It should be noted however that there was another dimension to such a calculation, that is the (strong) assumption that the counterparts in the Greek bailout negotiations would interpret the referendum outcome as proof of the credibility of the Government's intention to refuse the deal proposed at any cost, an alternative that could have triggered the exit of Greece from the Eurozone. While the Government's calculation about the domestic dimension of the referendum was correct and the July 5<sup>th</sup> vote undeniably reinforced the Prime Minister in his anti-austerity stance,<sup>1</sup> the calculation about the 'external' effects of the referendum was not equally accurate. In fact, the position of the other negotiators was hardened rather than softened in the face of the Greek Government's tactic.

### THE JUNE 23<sup>RD</sup> 2016 REFERENDUM IN THE UK

In a speech delivered on January 23<sup>rd</sup> 2013, Prime Minister David Cameron officially announced his intentions to renegotiate the terms of the British membership in the EU, and subsequently to '[...] give the British people a referendum with a very simple in or out choice. To stay in the EU on these new terms, or come out altogether' (Cameron 2013). To understand better the political trajectory that culminated in the June 23<sup>rd</sup> 2016 referendum on EU membership, it is necessary quickly to recall the most salient features of a domestic debate hinging not only on the role and powers of the EU proper but also on the management of immigration in contemporary Britain.

Migration, a contested issue traditionally 'owned' by the Conservative party,<sup>2</sup> re-emerged as a key concern for British voters in the post-2010 years. In fact, the increasing salience of the migration issue played a major role in the electoral success of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), which in May 2015 won 12.9 per cent of the vote in the UK, turning into the main challenger party in the country. UKIP, a euro-sceptical party founded in 1993 by the Anti-Federalist League in the wake of the campaign against the Maastricht Treaty, fared well in the 2009 European Parliament (EP) election with a 16.5 per cent vote, reaching second position behind the Conservative Party which received 27.7 per cent of the preferences (BBC 2014). In the 2014 EP elections, UKIP outperformed both the Labour and the Conservative Party winning 27.49 per cent of the vote and 24 seats (BBC 2014). UKIP's identity as a single-issue party had traditionally hinged on the withdrawal of the UK from the EU. By 2009, it was clear that UKIP's candidates and supporters were closely aligned and their attitude leaned toward hard-core Euroscepticism, tighter immigration policies and distrust vis-à-vis mainstream political parties (Lynch, Whitaker and Loomes 2011).

Under the leadership of Nigel Farage, UKIP operated an electorally remunerative fusion of Britain's membership in the EU and immigration. Following this strategy, UKIP managed to secure 'ownership' of one of the most salient issues in the run-up to the 2015 general election (Dennison and Goodwin 2015). In fact, during the 2015 electoral campaign, the policy space covered by the immigration issue was by and large framed within the boundaries of a dominant discourse advocating for stricter border controls, with parties essentially 'positioning and defending their political identities within a populist mainstream' (Moore 2015: 20). The Labour party took a hard stance towards border control, embracing the notion that 'illegal immigration' should be stopped and making the strengthening of UK borders a top priority in its first 100 days action plan (The Guardian 2015). Nonetheless, Labour essentially rejected the linkage between immigration and EU membership, pledging to hold a EU in/out referendum only if further transfers of sovereignty to the EU should be envisaged (Labour Party 2015). In the face of increasing pressure from both UKIP and the most Eurosceptic fringe within the Conservative party, and in spite of his reluctance to give voters a direct say on Britain's EU membership (Goodlad 2016), the strategy chosen by Cameron went in the direction of an attempt to 're-appropriate' the immigration issue as such but also in connection with Britain's EU membership. During the campaign, the Conservative leader reaffirmed the party's commitment to introduce 'real change' by negotiating a new settlement for Britain in the EU and submitting it to an in/out referendum by the end of 2017 (Conservative Party 2015). In this sense, it can be posited that the calculation behind the incumbent Prime Minister's decision to sponsor a EU membership referendum was necessarily manifold. First and foremost, the promise of a EU in/out plebiscite was directly aimed at attracting the votes of UKIP supporters in view of the 2015 general election. This reasoning was clearly laid out in a speech delivered by Cameron a few weeks before the vote. Addressing prospective UKIP voters, Cameron (in Chapman 2015) stated:

If you're someone considering voting UKIP because you want a referendum on Europe and controlled immigration, remember that a vote for UKIP makes it harder for Conservatives to win ... Then you will get no referendum, and a return to uncontrolled immigration.

Once the Conservative party secured the mandate, in addition to the commitment made during the electoral campaign, the Government had further incentives to pursue a referendum.

A first aspect to consider is the obvious use of the looming referendum as a bargaining chip: Cameron tried to convey the message that he could in fact influence the outcome of Britain's in/out vote, and in so doing he tried to use the spectre of Brexit as a 'credible threat' to extract more concessions from his EU counterparts (Fairchild 2016). In fact, renewing his commitment to a new settlement with the EU, Cameron (2015) declared:

I will campaign to keep Britain inside a reformed European Union [...] with all my heart and all my soul, because that will be unambiguously in our national interest. But [...] if Britain's concerns were to be met with a deaf ear, which I do not believe will happen, then we will have to think again about whether this European Union is right for us. As I have said before – I rule nothing out.

Nonetheless, a second, more compelling objective that the Prime Minister tried to pursue by placing himself at the forefront of the 'Remain' campaign was to maintain his party's and cabinet's unity. The tensions and discontent within the Conservative party were epitomised by the defection of two Tory MPs to UKIP in 2014 (Parker, Warrell and Rigby 2014) and their subsequent confirmation in office following by-elections, as well as by backbench rebellions, such as the one on March 2016 which involved 27 Conservative MPs voting against a measure to extend Sunday trading hours (Goodlad 2016). In this respect, it should be noted that at the time of the 1975 referendum on Britain's membership in the EEC, the Labour cabinet then in office was also deeply divided, with sixteen members campaigning in favour and seven against, which clearly exposed the fact that 'the prime purpose of the referendum was to save the Labour party from tearing itself asunder while securing for the nation a firm and final verdict on EEC membership' (Butler 1978: 214).

Identifying the extent of the political costs that the Prime Minister could expect to incur in case of a negative outcome is relatively easy. Although Cameron had set out to avoid the EU membership issue defining his period in office, placing himself at the forefront of the 'Remain' campaign could not but lead to his resignation in case of a negative outcome (Goodlad 2016). Thus, while the probability of success for the 'Leave' campaign was surrounded by uncertainty, the nature of the political costs implied by failure for the 'Remain' campaign was easier to identify from the very beginning of the Brexit campaign. When on June 23<sup>rd</sup> 2016, 51.9 per cent of UK voters expressed their preference for the 'Leave' option,<sup>3</sup> it came as no surprise that Cameron resigned, to be replaced a few weeks later by former Home Secretary Theresa May, whose nomination as Prime Minister triggered further defections and confirmed the crisis of the Conservative party in the second half of 2016 (Parfitt 2016).

## THE OCTOBER 2<sup>ND</sup> 2016 REFERENDUM IN HUNGARY

In 2015, the EU was confronted with a fully fledged 'migrant crisis', with over a million migrants and asylum seekers arriving, chiefly from Syria, Africa and South Asia (International Organization for Migration – IOM 2015). In the attempt to provide a coordinated response to the crisis, the Council of the European Union approved by qualified majority a plan gradually to relocate 120,000 refugees from frontline member states Italy and Greece to other member states (Council of the European Union 2015). The Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia voted against this measure, with the Hungarian Government led by right-wing Prime Minister Viktor Orbán defiantly opposing the relocation plan and eventually succeeding in de facto removing itself from the scheme (Robinson and Spiegel 2015). Nonetheless, on February 24 2016, Orbán announced the adoption by the Hungarian Government of decision No. 2004/2016 calling a referendum on the compulsory resettlement of non-Hungarian citizens in Hungary.<sup>4</sup> The ostensible reason for calling the referendum was the need for a popular pronouncement on the principle that the EU '... may not adopt decisions – those which significantly change people's lives and also determine the lives of future generations – over the heads of the people, and against the will of the European people' (Hungarian Government 2016). While the exact legal consequences of the vote appeared to be unclear, a number of elements suggested that the government's primary goal was to strengthen its own position domestically and in the EU context by resorting to an 'official opinion poll'. First, following the announcement made by Chancellor Angela Merkel on August 24 2015 about

Germany's willingness to welcome asylum seekers (Merkel 2015), the number of asylum applicants in Hungary had decreased dramatically, falling from 46,720 in August to a mere 490 in October 2015 (Eurostat 2016). Second, by the time the Hungarian Government announced its intention to hold a referendum, it was already clear that the relocation plan approved by the Council of the European Union was not being enforced: as of January 13 2016, only 272 asylum seekers had effectively been relocated from Greece and Italy to other member states (European Commission 2016). Third, long before the controversial approval of the EU asylum-seekers relocation plan, the Hungarian Government had already taken measures aimed at directing the public's attention toward the immigration 'threat', a strategy that has been explained as an attempt to outflank its closest competitor, the radical right Jobbik party. In fact, the idea to launch a referendum on the asylum seekers relocation plan was originally put forward by Jobbik (Byrne and Robinson 2016). Since it came to power in 2010, the governing coalition formed by Fidesz and the Christian Democratic People's Party (Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt, KDNP) had progressively aligned its migration policies with those of Jobbik, in an attempt to win over its electorate (Juhász and Krekó 2015). In a public speech delivered on August 27 2014, Orbán reportedly said that Hungary would 'like to remain a homogenous culture' and 'illegal immigrants from outside Europe would endanger such a situation' (Tóth 2014), while in April 2015 the government initiated a public consultation concerning 'immigration, economic immigration and terrorism', asking questions such as '[t]here are some who think that mismanagement of the immigration question by Brussels may have something to do with increased terrorism. Do you agree with this view?' (Hungarian Government 2015).

From the Hungarian government's standpoint, considering the uncertainty surrounding the actual legal consequences of the vote, the obvious political gain hypothetically resulting from a favourable referendum outcome – that is, a victory of the 'No' vote with a turnout exceeding 50 per cent of the electorate – would have been a strengthening of the government's position both domestically and on the EU stage. On the other hand, the political risks taken by the Hungarian government in sponsoring the referendum were not particularly high. While the political costs of a negative outcome – that is a prevalence of the 'Yes' option with a turnout exceeding 50 per cent of the electorate – would have certainly weakened the governing coalition, the likelihood of such an outcome materialising was low considering the relatively high level of popular anti-immigration sentiment in Hungary (Juhász and Krekó 2015), the very framing of the referendum question, and the remarkable campaigning efforts put in place by the government. The most likely worst case scenario for the government was rather the possibility, which eventually became reality, that the minimum 50 per cent turnout threshold would not be reached. When the referendum finally took place, the turnout was 41.32 per cent, but the percentage of voters aligned with the government-sponsored 'No' option was 98.36 per cent (Hungarian National Election Office 2016). Thus, although in the wake of this result Jobbik urged Orbán to step down and Orbán's ambition 'to present himself as the poster-boy for refugee rejectionism' in the European arena was dampened (The Economist 2016), the extent of Fidesz's political setback was not so large as to prevent the Hungarian Prime Minister from presenting the referendum outcome as a vote against Brussels. Moreover, polls held in the immediate aftermath of the vote suggested that despite the referendum's formal failure, its results nonetheless paid off in terms of increased popularity of Fidesz at the expense of Jobbik (Adam 2016).

#### **THE DECEMBER 4<sup>TH</sup> 2016 REFERENDUM IN ITALY**

The 2013 general election in Italy produced a fragmented parliament, with the populist MoVimento 5 Stelle (M5S) winning 25.6 per cent of the vote at the expense of traditional parties such as centre-left Partito Democratico (PD) and Silvio Berlusconi's Popolo della Libertà (Pdl). The centre-left coalition led by PD's leader, Pierluigi Bersani, won 29.6 per cent of the vote but since he was unable

to secure an absolute majority in the Senate, the President of the Republic Giorgio Napolitano eventually appointed PD's deputy party leader Enrico Letta as the head of a unity government involving political personalities from PD, PdL and Scelta Civica (SC), a centrist party headed by the incumbent Prime Minister Mario Monti.<sup>5</sup> Letta's cabinet was nonetheless short-lived. After promoting an internal party vote that triggered Letta's resignation, in February 2014, former Florence Mayor Matteo Renzi was appointed Prime Minister and formed a new government whose agenda hinged on structural reforms, including a new electoral law, a new constitutional architecture and measures to speed up the country's sluggish civil justice system (The Economist 2014).

In order to secure consensus for its ambitious plan, Renzi struck an extra-parliamentary deal with Berlusconi, a move that cost the Prime Minister the support of the left of his own party. In contrast to a labour market reform and a new electoral law whose approval was relatively swift, the final text of the Government-sponsored constitutional reform bill was approved by both chambers only on April 12 2016, and it did not obtain the two-thirds majority necessary to avoid the possibility of a confirmatory referendum. It is important to stress that as per article 138 of the Italian constitution, confirmatory referendums are not automatic but *can* be called only when a) a constitutional revision law is approved by the Parliament without such a majority; and b) a request in this sense is made by a fifth of the members of one chamber or 500,000 voters or five regional councils. On the occasion of the closest precedent – the 2005 constitutional reform promoted by Berlusconi and subsequently dismissed by the majority of the voters in the confirmatory referendum on June 26 2006 – the request for a referendum was sponsored by the opposition and endorsed by 830,987 voters (Campana 2006: 172). Interestingly instead, a request to hold a confirmatory referendum in 2016 was filed not only by opposition MPs, but also by majority MPs, confirming Renzi's intention, expressed on multiple occasions, to submit the reform to a popular vote in any case (Corriere della Sera 2016). Moreover, in addition to the request filed by majority MPs, the 'Yes' coalition headed by Renzi collected the adhesion of 580,000 citizens. In the framework of a highly divisive campaign, the government invested considerable resources in sponsoring a 'Yes' vote, while a variegated cluster of political actors including the left wing of the premier's own party, the M5S, the Northern League and Forza Italia campaigned for a 'No' vote.

Adopting an attitude reminiscent of De Gaulle's plebiscitary understanding of referendums, throughout his time in office Renzi repeatedly vowed that he would resign and abandon politics for good in case of rejection of the constitutional reform, effectively turning the confirmatory referendum into a plebiscite on his administration as a whole, rather than on the contents of the reform. Moreover, the government adopted an anti-establishment rhetoric echoing the central messages of the M5S campaigns, insisting, for instance, that one major objective of the constitutional reform was to reduce the number of elected officials and so to attack the so-called 'caste' of corrupt politicians ruling the country. This narrative was somewhat present also in the formulation of the referendum question, which was criticised by members of the opposition as it allegedly tried to manipulate the vote by highlighting the positive aspects of the reform, such as the limitation of the operating costs of the institutions.<sup>6</sup> During the referendum campaign, leading exponents of the M5S attacked the EU for its austerity policies and called for a further referendum on Italy's Eurozone membership. In this sense, Renzi's attacks toward the EU (which he once compared to 'the orchestra playing on the Titanic', also referring to the Stability Pact as the 'Stupidity Pact' (Euractiv 2016)) can also be interpreted as an attempt to outflank criticism coming from Eurosceptic M5S. In light of the EU's desire not to damage Renzi in view of the referendum, this attitude was used to negotiate some additional flexibility for Italy's 2017 budget proposal (Politi and Brunsden 2016).

Trying to single out the calculation behind the Italian government's referendum gamble, it can be said that in spite of the difficulty assessing the odds of a successful outcome, the political gains associated with it were potentially remarkable: a victory of the 'Yes' vote would have consolidated Renzi's leadership of the divided Democratic Party and strengthened the incumbent government in view of the upcoming 2018 general election. At the same time, it would have represented a formidable political victory of the ruling coalition over the M5S, whose attacks against the 'establishment' embodied by the Renzi government typically hinged on the claim that it lacked popular legitimacy. On the other hand, it was clear from the beginning that a negative outcome would have cost Renzi his premiership, a scenario which eventually materialised after 59.1 per cent of the voters rejected the government-sponsored constitutional reform with a 68.5 per cent turnout.

### A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

The four cases discussed above offer several insights into the strategic use of government-sponsored referendums in contemporary Europe (see Table 1 below for a comparative overview). The first aspect that clearly emerges is the ubiquitous involvement of anti-establishment parties and the role of populism as a discursive frame. In Greece, the 2015 referendum was actually sponsored by the leader of the anti-establishment ruling party. In Britain, Hungary and Italy, the ruling mainstream parties basically adjusted their positions to cater to voters of anti-establishment parties: in Britain and in Hungary, the idea of calling a referendum was in fact originally proposed by an anti-establishment party and later incorporated in the programme of the governing coalition. In Italy, populism, meant as a 'speech-level phenomenon' (Bonikowski 2016: 14), was clearly at work during the 2016 referendum campaign. This was testified by the anti-establishment rhetoric adopted by the government in presenting the constitutional reform as the only way to overcome the immobilism of the 'old' political class (Bull 2016), coupled with the government's attempt to adopt policies distinctively owned by M5S, such as the proposal of reducing the costs of politics by cutting back on the number of lawmakers.

Table 1. The Four Government-Sponsored Referendums at a Glance

Country/date	Referendum Issue	Governing Party	Government-sponsored outcome	Actual outcome	Minimum turnout threshold	Actual turnout
<b>Greece, July 5<sup>th</sup> 2015</b>	Conditions for EU-backed bailout	Syriza	No	No	40%	62.5%
<b>United Kingdom, June 23<sup>rd</sup> 2016</b>	EU membership	Conservative Party	Remain	Leave	None	72.2%
<b>Hungary, October 2<sup>nd</sup> 2016</b>	EU-proposed relocation of asylum seekers	Fidész-led coalition	No	No	50%	41.32%
<b>Italy, December 4<sup>th</sup> 2016</b>	Constitutional reform	PD-led coalition	Yes	No	None	68.5%

Müller (2013: 29) suggests that from the viewpoint of populists, referendums have the function of ratifying what the leaders have already figured out to be the 'true' popular interest 'as a matter of identity, not as a matter of aggregating empirically verifiable interests'. A comparative analysis of the four cases considered resonates with this contention. In the case of the Brexit referendum, the complexity of the issues underlying the referendum question was such that it can be legitimately questioned whether it was indeed possible to achieve the aggregation of empirically verifiable interests without involving representative democratic institutions (Colignatus 2017). The same can be said about the Greek and the Hungarian referendums. In both cases, the intention to obtain a ratification of what the leader had already identified as the 'popular interest' surfaces clearly. Italy is another case in which the referendum was framed as a plebiscite on the government and its leader – thus, in fact, a matter of personality – rather than a vote on the contents of the constitutional reform.

Further analogies surface if one looks at the four cases discussed through the analytical lens of the crisis-solving – or crisis-worsening – potential of referendums as discussed by Milioni, Spyridou and Triga (2016). As already explained, referendums may be used as problem-solving devices by governments facing crises triggered by international pressure, citizens' requests or internal governing party/coalition tensions; nonetheless, referendums may also worsen, or even trigger, political crises. In this sense, elements of crisis-worsening can be traced in each of the referendums considered. In Greece, the decision to hold the July 5<sup>th</sup> 2015 referendum de facto further worsened the financial situation of the country with a sudden introduction of capital controls (Papadimas and Georgiopoulos 2015) without effectively improving the negotiating position of the government. While the long-term consequences of the Brexit referendum are still to be seen, it is undeniable that the decision to promote a popular vote on EU membership paved the way for the premature end of David Cameron's premiership, besides triggering a member state exit procedure for the first time in the history of EU integration. In the case of Hungary, the October 2<sup>nd</sup> 2016 referendum on asylum seekers quotas created a further obstacle to EU-coordinated efforts at tackling the 2015 migrant crisis. As for Italy, the perceived weakness of the country's banking system was amplified by Renzi's threats to resign based on the outcome of the December 4<sup>th</sup> 2016 vote (see for instance Dos Santos 2016; Sanderson 2016). Moreover, the electoral law sponsored by the Government was passed by the Parliament in 2015 under the assumption that the constitutional reform would be approved and the Senate's members would not be directly elected by citizens anymore (Pasquino and Capussela 2016). This circumstance had the obvious effect of magnifying political uncertainty in the aftermath of the referendum, making a revision of the electoral system indispensable for holding new elections.

Another feature shared by the cases analysed is the pronounced politicisation of the European Union in domestic discourse (Statham and Trenz 2012) during the referendum campaigns. In February 2016, European Council President Donald Tusk had already criticised the exploitation of anti-EU sentiment by European leaders contemplating or promoting plebiscites to achieve domestic goals (Barker 2016). In line with Tusk's concerns, in the run-ups to the referendums analysed above there were frequent attempts, by both governing and opposition parties, to channel popular discontent towards the EU, capitalising on the perceived legitimacy gap between the EU and its citizens. This happened even in the case of Italy, where the issue at stake had no direct linkages with EU membership or EU-sponsored policies.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

In concluding an in-depth analysis on the subject, Morel (2001: 63) observed that referendums had often put governing parties in awkward situations and suggested that it seemed unlikely that the use of government-initiated referendum would increase

because it does not appear to be in governments' interest to do so: simply because they initiate a referendum does not mean that they can control its outcome or effects, something which would make any government wary of pursuing that path.

Nonetheless, recent developments in contemporary Europe seem to contradict this prediction. Between 2015 and 2016, four governments attempted to use referendums strategically in order to resolve political issues that had become intractable due to populist pressures, and only in one case, the July 5<sup>th</sup> 2015 referendum in Greece, was the outcome fully in line with the government's preferences. Indeed, the caveat, implicit in Morel's remark, about the difficulty of controlling the outcome of referendums seems to have been overlooked.

As the four cases discussed above show, the use of government-sponsored referendums has significantly affected domestic as well as EU-level politics in the past few years. On the other hand, the cases also show that the functioning of referendums in contemporary Europe has been deeply affected by the rise of populism as a discursive practice adopted by both mainstream and anti-establishment parties. It is then safe to conclude that against the backdrop of increasing distrust of mainstream political parties and of the recent trend toward popular decision-making in EU member states (Leininger 2015), the interplay between anti-establishment politics and the resort to referendums in consolidated democracies deserves more attention by scholars and policymakers. In particular, as it cannot be excluded that more government-sponsored referendums will take place in the near future,<sup>7</sup> looking at this phenomenon through the analytical lens of political risk calculation may help shed further light on this trend and its implications.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> After the referendum of July 5<sup>th</sup> 2015, Tsipras negotiated a deal for a third bailout for Greece that cost him the support of almost one third of Syriza MPs. And yet, his popularity was confirmed by the results of new elections held in September 2015, from which the Prime Minister's party emerged with almost as many parliamentary seats as before.

<sup>2</sup> By 'issue ownership' here is meant 'the idea that voters consider specific parties to be better able to deal with some issues' (Lefevere, Tresch and Walgrave 2015: 755).

<sup>3</sup> The referendum question was: 'Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?'

<sup>4</sup> The referendum question was: 'Do you agree that the European Union should have the power to impose the compulsory settlement of non-Hungarian citizens in Hungary without the consent of the National Assembly of Hungary?'

<sup>5</sup> For an exhaustive discussion of the 2013 general election in Italy, see Garzia (2013).

<sup>6</sup> The referendum question was: 'Do you approve the text of the Constitutional Law concerning 'Provisions for overcoming equal bicameralism, reducing the number of Members of Parliament, limiting the operating costs of the institutions, the suppression of the CNEL and the revision of Title V of Part II of the Constitution' approved by Parliament and published in the Official Gazette no. 88 of April 15<sup>th</sup> 2016?'

<sup>7</sup> In the immediate aftermath of the Brexit vote, even France's then economy minister Emmanuel Macron conjured up the possibility of a 'EU-wide referendum' as a final step after the elaboration of a new 'road map' for the EU (Thomas and Melander 2016).

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