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Karv, Thomas; Strandberg, Kim

Published in:
Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties

DOI:
[10.1080/17457289.2023.2281381](https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2023.2281381)

Published: 12/11/2023

Document Version
Final published version

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Please cite the original version:
Karv, T., & Strandberg, K. (2023). Only losers use excuses? Exploring the association between the winner-loser gap and referendum attitudes following a local referendum. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 1-23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2023.2281381>

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To cite this article: Thomas Karv & Kim Strandberg (12 Nov 2023): Only losers use excuses? Exploring the association between the winner-loser gap and referendum attitudes following a local referendum, Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties, DOI: [10.1080/17457289.2023.2281381](https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2023.2281381)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2023.2281381>



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Only losers use excuses? Exploring the association between the winner-loser gap and referendum attitudes following a local referendum

Thomas Karv ^a and Kim Strandberg ^b

^aDepartment of Humanities and Social Sciences (HSV), Mid Sweden University, Sundsvall, Sweden; ^bDepartment of Political Science and Communication, Åbo Akademi University, Vasa, Finland

ABSTRACT


Consultative referendums are becoming more widely used as a way of responding to rising public discontent with the workings of representative democracy. Consequently, consultative referendums have become an integral part of democratic decision-making processes across the world. However, how the population reacts to the referendum outcome is expected to differ among the population as referendums, by design, divides the participants into winners and losers. In turn, creating a winner-loser gap with potentially polarizing societal consequences. This study therefore seeks to explore how this winner-loser gap is associated with several types of referendum attitudes following the outcome of a local referendum. Using survey data ($N = 3113$) gathered after a high stakes local referendum in Finland, the more explicit research purpose is therefore to analyze how individual-level opinions about referendums, turnout thresholds and margin of victory thresholds are related to the winner-loser gap. Additionally, we also control for whether these associations are moderated by external efficacy and political trust. The results clearly imply that the winner-loser gap have consequences for several types of referendum attitudes, contributing to scholarship about the effects derived from the winner-loser gap.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 19 February 2023; Accepted 17 September 2023

Introduction

Local referendums are an institutional arrangement for citizen participation where the options, and the consequences thereof, should be easier for members of the local community to comprehend in comparison with other

CONTACT Thomas Karv  thomas.karv@miun.se  Department of Humanities and Social Sciences (HSV), Mid Sweden University, Holmgatan 10, Sundsvall 852 30, Sweden

 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2023.2281381>.

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types of elections. For politicians, a referendum can also be perceived as an instrument for specifying their political mandates, providing them with “legitimacy to act in specific ways” (Accetti and Oskian 2022, 124). Nevertheless, one of the main problems with local referendums, as with all types of elections, is that they by design create losers, e.g. citizens ending up on the losing side of the referendum, within the local community. This inevitable outcome of a local referendum has the capacity to create a, potentially, polarizing winner-loser gap within the local community (Setälä et al. 2023). Especially given a situation when there is a large group of citizens on the losing side refusing to accept defeat, it could directly challenge the internal cohesion within the local community and contribute to long-term polarization (van der Eijk and Rose 2021, 105). More importantly, scholarship about effects derived from the winner/loser gap in elections have consistently found that the losers are more likely to question the electoral integrity (Anderson et al. 2005; Bowler et al. 2015; Fischer and Sällberg 2020; Flesken and Hartl 2018; Schnaudt 2023), and in turn being more likely to participate in electoral violence (Norris, Frank, and Martinez i Coma 2015; Piazza 2021).

In order to mitigate the risk of a winner-loser gap polarization following a referendum, the presence of the so-called losers’ consent, e.g. the willingness of the defeated to accept defeat and respect the outcome (Anderson et al. 2005), is considered essential (Nadeau and Blais 1993; Tilley and Hobolt 2023). Still, in a seemingly well-functioning local community, the potential risks associated with organizing a referendum are not always apparent. This is because in local communities characterized by strong internal cohesion and high levels of support for their local government the citizens ending up on the losing side of a referendum are broadly expected to be good losers, something Sabl (2005, 216) referred to as showing democratic sportsmanship. Nevertheless, a situation in which all citizens on the losing side after a referendum express democratic sportsmanship is probably rare and once defeated some citizens are thus likely to start searching for excuses (Esaïasson 2011).

Earlier studies have found opinions about referendums to be related to instrumental considerations, e.g. you support referendums if you *expect* to end up on the winning side (Werner 2020), and outcome favorability, e.g. you support referendums if you *ended up* on the winning side (Brummel 2020; Esaïasson et al. 2019). However, within the extensive, and growing, referendum literature there is an emerging interest in two elements of a referendum that could be used by the losers as a basis for challenging the legitimacy of a negative outcome: the margin of victory and turnout (Arnesen et al. 2019). From the perspective applied in this study, we therefore also expect opinions about margin of victory- and turnout thresholds to be related to the winner-loser gap. The main research question guiding this study is therefore how this winner-loser gap transforms into referendum attitudes. More

specifically, this study empirically explores to what extent outcome favorability, e.g. being on the winning or on the losing side of a referendum, predicts opinions about referendums in general and referendum thresholds concerning the margin of victory and turnout, specifically. Additionally, this study explores whether the association between the winner-loser gap and referendum attitudes is moderated by two other types of evaluative attitudes toward the political system, e.g. political trust and external efficacy, both being widely established as important indicators for assessing the stability of a political community (Easton 1975; Marien and Hooghe 2011; Norris 2011). The argument for their inclusion in this study is that we expect referendum attitudes among citizens with higher levels of political support to not be as easily affected by losing in comparison with citizens more critical toward the workings of the political system. As both political trust and external efficacy are considered as indicating a more diffuse kind of system support (Easton 1975; Iyengar 1980), while still being conceptually different and measuring different phenomena (Geurkink et al. 2020), we consequently explore whether high levels of political trust and external efficacy also mitigates the effect of losing in a referendum.

In order to answer our research question, this study uses survey data gathered at the local level in Finland ($N = 3113$) following a consultative referendum about a local high-stakes issue, e.g. a proposed municipal merger, in the municipality of Korsholm. Finland is, together with the rest of the Nordic countries, characterized by a strong degree of local democracy (Haveri 2015) and is often celebrated as a role model for its high levels of professionalism in government (Erlingsson and Kristinsson 2020) while also being regarded as a high-trusting country, with political trust levels among the highest in Europe (Söderlund 2019). Moreover, as most of the previous scholarship have used experimental, and especially conjoint, data for exploring effects on referendum attitudes derived from the winner-loser gap (Arnesen 2017; Arnesen et al. 2019; Esaiasson et al. 2019; Werner 2020), we believe that we are among the first to use survey data gathered at the local level following an actual local referendum for this type of research purpose (but see Marien and Kern 2018; Werner and Jacobs 2022). Next, we continue with discussing the relation between opinions on referendums and the winner-loser gap.

Opinions on referendums and outcome favorability

It is well established by earlier scholarship that most people value fair decision-making processes (Esaiasson 2011; Tyler 2006), and the perception that a decision-making process has been fairly conducted is subsequently expected to enhance legitimacy beliefs about the policy outcome (Doherty and Wolak 2012). However, according to Esaiasson et al. (2019), outcome

favorability constitutes the key determinant for acceptance of political decisions and the outcome of a process is thus expected to directly affect individual-level evaluations of the decision-making process in question (see here also Arnesen et al. 2019; Brummel 2020; Karv, Backström, and Strandberg 2023; Marien and Kern 2018; Schaffner 2021; van der Eijk and Rose 2021). Nevertheless, even if questions about the democratic legitimacy of a referendum outcome are seldom raised by citizens supporting the outcome, it should be easier for the defeated to accept defeat when the decision-making process is seen as unbiased, neutral and free from ideological considerations (Arnesen 2017; Doherty and Wolak 2012; Esaiasson 2011; Nadeau, Belanger, and Atikcan 2021). Consequently, for the members of the losing side to consider a referendum outcome as democratically legitimate, it “requires the recognition of the legitimacy of a procedure that has produced an outcome deemed to be undesirable” (Nadeau and Blais 1993, 553).

As could be expected, it has been repeatedly shown that the losers of referendums are more likely to consider the referendum outcome as being less legitimate (Marien and Kern 2018; van der Eijk and Rose 2021). A study by Nadeau, Belanger, and Atikcan (2021) on the winner-loser gap following the Brexit-referendum in 2016, showed that two-thirds of the citizens on the losing side refused to accept the outcome of the referendum, while it also had a significant negative effect on the losers’ subsequent levels of satisfaction with democracy. These findings were also partly supported by Arnesen et al. (2019), showing in their study that the losers in a referendum were less likely to accept the outcome as being legitimate. Findings by Brummel (2020) further showed that losing a referendum had clear negative effects on referendum support. In line with these findings, we subsequently expect winners and losers in a referendum to have different opinions about referendums in general based on the experience, with the referendum likely to constitute a positive experience if you win but a negative experience if you lose. We therefore present our first hypothesis accordingly:

H1a: Citizens on the losing side of a local referendum are less likely to have a positive view of referendums.

Next, we present two essential aspects of a referendum that are expected to influence the degree to which citizens on the losing side of a referendum can accept the referendum outcome: their perceptions about what constitutes a sufficient margin of victory and turnout.

Opinions on referendum thresholds and outcome favorability

It is popular to include pre-determined institutional requirements that needs to be fulfilled for a referendum outcome to be officially considered as legally

binding, with the most popular being to either have a turnout and/or a margin of victory threshold that must be surpassed (Hizen 2021, 19). The margin of victory constitutes an approval quorum while the turnout constitutes a participation quorum, and most European countries include some type of quorum rules when organizing a local referendum (Schiller 2011). The argument in favor is that it provides an electoral safeguard from minority rule and a way to avoid misinterpretations of what constitutes a valid expression of a majority opinion (Aguar-Conraria and Magalhaes 2010, 64). The argument against is that it might motivate opponents of the referendum, or those expecting to lose in the referendum, to abstain in order to hinder the referendum outcome to gain democratic legitimacy, a *modus operandi* referred to as practicing “strategic abstention” (Hizen 2021, 21). In a referendum context lacking quorum-rules, such as in the case used for this study, it remains up to the population and politicians alike to assess what they consider to be a sufficient margin of victory and turnout for the referendum outcome to be considered as “binding de facto” (Setälä 2006, 714).

Previous studies have suggested that the negative effects of losing in a referendum on legitimacy beliefs are conditional upon attributes of the referendum (Arnesen et al. 2019; Nadeau, Belanger, and Atikcan 2021). Hence, even if the referendum is merely consultative and lacks predetermined thresholds, the referendum outcome could still be considered as morally binding for the politicians by members of the public when their personal threshold requirements are being met. When citizens are being asked about how they believe the politicians should act in each situation, it thus reflects what Arnesen et al. (2019, 187) referred to as a “prospective measure of legitimacy.” For instance, a clear margin of victory should make the defeat easier to accept for the losing side but when the defeat is narrow it subsequently creates a situation where there is a lower threshold for the defeated side to start disputing the outcome. In turn making it harder for them to accept the outcome and perhaps even motivating them to start campaigning for another referendum (Nadeau, Belanger, and Atikcan 2021).

A contributing element concerns the role of social pressure (see e.g. Noelle-Neumann 1974). Hence, when the defeat becomes unquestionably clear, citizens on the losing side are more or less forced to accept an unfavorable outcome. Hence, as argued by Arnesen et al. (2019, 182),

[w]hen outcomes offend our sensibilities or harm our interests, our response is conditioned by the concern of whether they are consistent with the shared interests of our political community. The size of majority is in this context a measure of certainty of what these shared interests are.

A clear margin of victory also makes the task of the local politicians easier, as the cost of opposing a clear expression of public opinion could be

overwhelming and the larger the majority the more socially costly it should consequently be for the losing side to challenge the referendum outcome. In line with this reasoning, the findings presented by Arnesen et al. (2019) also showed that the winners of a referendum were more likely to accept a narrower margin of victory as being a legitimate expression of majority opinion. Thus, we expect outcome favorability to affect opinions about margin of victory thresholds accordingly:

H1b: Citizens on the losing side of a local referendum are less likely to consider a referendum outcome with a narrower margin of victory as being morally binding for the politicians.

A referendum with a higher turnout could be perceived as a more legitimate expression of the majority will in comparison with a referendum with a lower turnout, and especially when a high turnout coincides with a clear margin of victory (Arnesen et al. 2019). In those instances, the losers who are still complaining might quickly become perceived as “whiners” or “sore losers” as there are no clear grounds for questioning the referendum outcome (Nadeau, Belanger, and Atikcan 2021). Furthermore, a large margin of victory can also be argued to be invalid given a situation where only a small proportion of eligible voters decide to participate in the referendum. Members of the winning side are, nevertheless, expected to be more likely to still accept the referendum outcome as a valid expression of majority opinion irrespective of turnout, as they could argue that only those that care about the outcome turned out to vote. The findings presented by Arnesen et al. (2019, 190) also showed that the winners of a referendum were more likely to accept a lower turnout. Hence, we further expect outcome favorability to affect opinions about turnout thresholds accordingly:

H1c: Citizens on the losing side of a local referendum are less likely to consider a referendum outcome with a lower turnout as being morally binding for the politicians.

Next, we present how the effects of losing a referendum can potentially be mitigated by two similar but distinct types of political attitudes: political trust and external efficacy.

The moderating effects of political trust and external efficacy

Findings from previous studies suggests that winners and losers should not be treated as internally homogeneous groups (Anderson et al. 2005; Nadeau, Belanger, and Atikcan 2021) and that the negative effects of losing are conditional on personal characteristics and political attitudes, such as political trust and external efficacy, among the participants (Anderson et al. 2005; Karv, Backström, and Strandberg 2023; Marien and Kern 2018). Political trust, i.e. the “confidence that authorities will observe the rules of the game and

serve the general interest” (Citrin and Muste 1999, 465), is considered to constitute a relational evaluation of an object by a subject, with the most common objects being political authorities or various political institutions (Norris 2011). External efficacy refers to an assessment of how politicians and political institutions respond to the public demands, e.g. political responsiveness (Craig 1979; Iyengar 1980) and has been shown to be closely related to political trust while still being conceptually different (Geurkink et al. 2020; Wolak 2018).

According to the political dissatisfaction hypothesis, citizens with lower levels of trust in the political system and lower levels of external efficacy, a group we designate as critical citizens (see e.g. Norris 2011), are expected to be more prone to support alternative ways of decision-making (Bengtsson and Mattila 2009; Bessen 2020; Bowler and Donovan 2019; Werner 2020; Werner and Jacobs 2022) as well as being more prone to support antiestablishment parties (Krause and Wagner 2021; Rooduijn 2018). Still, disappointment from a negative referendum outcome might also affect how these critical citizens feel about referendums (see Brummel 2020). Without sufficient aggregate levels of political trust and external efficacy within a political community, it will subsequently be more challenging for the politicians to implement unpopular policies and thus more difficult to govern effectively (Marien and Hooghe 2011; van der Meer and Zmerli 2017). Nadeau, Belanger, and Atikcan (2021), explicitly argued that post-Brexit referendum reactions among the losers were moderated by political attitudes, and they further argued that these attitudes affect who becomes a “graceful loser” and who becomes a “sore loser.” Nadeau, Belanger, and Atikcan (2021, 91) defined the graceful losers as the citizens who accept a defeat as legitimate and describes them as being the “politically involved and principled citizens who are more inclined to judge the merits of democracy in procedural terms.” The sore losers, on the other hand, are described as those citizens who have a harder time to accept a defeat. In line with this reasoning, we expect political trust and external efficacy to moderate the expected negative effects of losing on referendum support and the following hypothesis is formulated accordingly:

H2: The effects of losing in a local referendum on referendum support are weaker among citizens with higher levels of political trust and external efficacy.

Given that we expect political trust and external efficacy to moderate the negative effects of losing on referendum support, we further expect political trust and external efficacy to also moderate the effects of losing on threshold opinions. Using the same logic as in relation to our H2, our expectation here is that if a citizen has low levels of political trust and external efficacy, and furthermore ends up on the losing side of a referendum, the citizen is more likely to start searching for excuses after a loss which in turn affects threshold

opinions. On the other hand, if a citizen is generally positive toward the workings of the political system, we expect that citizen to be more likely to accept a defeat as being democratically legitimate, and consequently more likely to accept the referendum outcomes irrespective of margin of victory and turnout. In short, we expect a critical citizen to be more likely to turn into a “sore loser” than a non-critical citizen (see e.g. Nadeau, Belanger, and Atikcan 2021). We formulate our final two hypotheses accordingly:

H3a: Citizens with higher levels of political trust and external efficacy who are on the losing side of a local referendum are more likely to consider a referendum outcome with a narrower margin of victory as being morally binding for the politicians.

H3b: Citizens with higher levels of political trust and external efficacy who are on the losing side of a local referendum are more likely to consider a referendum outcome with a lower turnout as being morally binding for the politicians.

Following this review of relevant scholarship, we present the research design, data and method guiding the empirical part of our study.

Research design, data and method

In order to explore attitudinal patterns derived from the winner-loser gap following a local referendum, we use survey data collected in the municipality of Korsholm, Finland, after a referendum on a highly contested issue: a proposed municipal merger (Setälä et al. 2023). The use of referendums at the municipal level has been allowed in Finland since the early 1990s, although they are still judicially limited to being of merely consultative character (Jäske 2017). Municipal mergers are also by far the most voted upon local issue in Finland, as 89% of local referendums have been about municipal mergers (Karv and Backström 2021, 9). In Finland, local referendums about municipal mergers have also been shown to attract a higher turnout than local referendums about other issues as well as a higher turnout in comparison with municipal elections (Backström, Karv, and Strandberg 2022, 15). Finally, as in other referendums on municipal mergers in Finland (Zimmerbauer and Paasi 2013), the public debate was very heated (see Setälä et al. 2021). Hence, we argue that our case can be considered representative for local referendums in Finland.

Korsholm is a predominantly rural municipality located in the bilingual part of Western Finland with around 19,500 citizens. The other partner of the proposed merger, the city of Vasa, is the 14th largest city in Finland, with a population close to 70,000 citizens. Besides the traditional urban-rural factor, another important aspect that differentiates these two municipal entities concerns the different language compositions among the respective population. Korsholm is predominately Swedish-speaking, as around 68% has

Swedish as their first language while in Vasa, on the other hand, around 68% has Finnish as their first language. Still, earlier studies have found that both Swedish-speaking and Finnish-speaking Finns are similar in terms of their referendum- and political attitudes (Bäck 2019; von Schoultz 2019). However, besides being a contested issue based on the urban-rural element, there were here apparent identity-based elements derived from the language-aspects included in the process of forming an opinion on the proposed merger, which also directly contributed to a polarizing public debate (Setälä et al. 2023; Strandberg and Lindell 2020).

The referendum was held on the 18th of March 2019 and the outcome was that 61.2% voted against the merger and 36.8% voted in favor of the merger (2.0% chose neither). Hence, the subsequent margin of victory was 24.4 percentage points, placing the margin in between a clear majority (55%) and a super-majority (70%), in accordance with the thresholds proposed by Arnesen et al. (2019, 187). The referendum attracted a significant turnout (76.4%), which is in line with earlier studies that have shown that referendums that are considered important attract a higher level of turnout (Aguar-Conraria and Magalhaes 2010) as well as being above the mean value of turnout during local referendums in Finland (Backström, Karv, and Strandberg 2022). The decision to eventually reject the proposed merger was reached after a vote in the municipal council of Korsholm on April 2nd 2019. Still, during the vote, 19 out of 43 elected representatives chose to act against the majority will and vote in favor of a merger. The outcome here was also in line with earlier studies that have shown that local politicians in the Nordic countries are mostly willing to act in accordance with the outcome of consultative referendums (Backström, Karv, and Strandberg 2022; Folkstad et al. 2021).

The survey was conducted in November 2020, approximately 18 months after the referendum. The survey was distributed by mail, and the respondents were given the option to return the survey by mail or digitally (using a personal reference number in order to control for dualities). A website was created for this purpose, with additional information about the purpose of the study. This survey had a strictly academic purpose as the merger issue at this point had already been settled in the municipal council. The main rationale for conducting a survey 18 months after the referendum was that we expected that the local population might have become polarized to such an extent that time would not have healed all the wounds, as this was clearly a contested issue (Setälä et al. 2023). Earlier studies have also found effects derived from the winner-loser gap to be surprisingly stable over time (Dahlberg and Linde 2017; Hansen, Klemmensen, and Serritzlew 2019; van der Eijk and Rose 2021). Hence, this research design still provides us with a possibility to explore the longevity of a winner/loser gap and whether it is associated with referendum attitudes

within a local community. The sampling frame for the survey was all citizens aged 16 or older living in the municipality, in total 15,411 citizens, and in total of 3133 survey responses were submitted, yielding a response rate of 21.5%. Young people, men, Finnish speakers and people living in the municipal center were underrepresented among the respondents (see Appendix Table A1), and to account for this in our analyses we apply a combined post-stratification rake weight for gender, age, mother tongue and location in our analyses.

Variables

Our dependent variable, referendum attitudes, is operationalized by using three different survey items (see Appendix for survey items). The opinion on referendums in general variable measures opinions toward referendums as an institution, while the opinion on margin of victory and turnout threshold variables measures citizens' opinions about what the respective thresholds should at least be for a referendum outcome to be perceived as morally binding. These variables are thus used to measure different but related referendum attitudes. To measure referendum support we use the following survey item: *What is your opinion about referendums in general?* Response options were very negative, slightly negative, neutral, slightly positive, very positive. To measure people's opinions on acceptable margin of victory thresholds we use the following survey item: *How large share of the votes in a referendum do you think that at least should support the winning side for the result of a referendum to be considered as morally binding for the elected politicians?* Response options were never morally binding, over 70%, over 60%, over 50% and always morally binding. The response options for the margin of victory thresholds are broadly based on the thresholds used by Arnesen et al. (2019), in their study differing between majorities of 51, 55 and 70. Still, we argue that the four-point margin differing between 51 and 55 used by Arnesen et al. (2019) is too low of a margin to be relevant in a survey study, and we, therefore, decided to use 50, 60 and 70 as response options in order to have more clear-cut alternatives separating between a majority, a clear majority and a supermajority, while also further including two response options signaling a more ideologically based position toward referendum outcomes. It should be noted that the survey item does not per se ask about the opinion on margin of victory (e.g. five points, ten points, etc.), but about how large the share of the votes that should support the winning alternative. Even though there is a clear conceptual difference here we argue that this survey item is still sufficient for our research purpose, as it implies an assessment about different victory thresholds in a referendum.

To measure people's opinions on acceptable turnout thresholds, we used the following survey item: *How large do you think that the turnout should at*

least be for the result of a referendum to be considered as morally binding for the elected politicians? Response options were: never morally binding, 75–100%, 50–74%, 25–49% and always morally binding. In their conjoint study, Arnesen et al. (2019) used turnout rates of 33%, 47%, 53% and 85% as treatments to account for the effects of turnout in a fictional referendum, which shows the importance of differing between a wide range of turnout alternatives. The specific turnout threshold alternatives used in this survey were also inspired by the overview presented by Hizen (2021, 20), showing that the threshold for local referendums globally varies between 10% to 70%, with 50% being the far most widely used turnout threshold in Europe. Therefore, to differ between turnouts ranging from low to very high we decided to use three broad turnout spectrums, together with two response options signaling a more ideologically based position toward referendum outcomes. We also decided to omit a response option of 0–25% turnout, as we did not consider it to be a meaningful response option to be included in a survey conducted in a Finnish context, as local level referendums in Finland rarely attracts turnout below 50% and never below 25% (Karv and Backström 2021). Both items have been operationalized so that a higher value reflects a lower threshold for the outcome to be considered as morally binding on a standardized five-point scale between 0 and 1. We also tested the internal correlation between the three dependent variables, with the results showing that even though they are internally correlated they do reflect opinions about different aspects of a referendum (see Appendix Table A2).

Our main independent variable is whether the respondent was on the winning or on the losing side of the referendum. For this, we use the following survey item: *How did you vote in the referendum about a merger with Vasa?* Response options were in favor, against, did not vote, don't want to say and did not have the right to vote. As those voting against a merger ended up on the winning side, they are here assigned as winners. Consequently, citizens voting in favor of the merger are here assigned as losers. Moreover, we include separate variables for political trust and external efficacy to account for potential moderating effects. For political trust, we constructed an index composed of two standard survey items measuring trust in politicians and trust in political parties (Cronbach's alpha: 0.91), with responses operationalized on an 11-point scale between 0 and 1, with higher values indicating higher trust (see e.g. Geurkink et al. 2020; Marien and Werner 2019). For external efficacy, we used the following item: *Politicians do not care about the opinions of ordinary citizens.* Response options were: disagree entirely, somewhat disagree, somewhat agree and completely agree. The responses have been operationalized so that a higher value reflects the more efficacious answer on a four-point scale between 0 and 1 (see e.g. Niemi, Craig, and Mattei 1991). As trust and efficacy are measured only once (in the same survey as the other variables), they are by necessity treated as static in our analyses. Furthermore, to

control for other individual-level characteristics, we include covariates for age, gender, education and mother tongue (Swedish/Finnish) in our statistical analyses. Next, we start presenting the results from our analyses.

Analysis

We begin with presenting how referendum attitudes vary based on being on the winning or losing side. The results here clearly show that there is a winner-loser gap, with the winners being more positive toward referendums as well as being more acceptable of a lower margin of victory and lower turnout (see Appendix Tables A3–A6). Further post-hoc analyses using matching of respondents on demographic variables (not reported in detail here) also confirm the same findings. This adds initial support for our H1a, H1b and H1c. In order to further explore these initial descriptive findings from our dataset, we apply four multivariate linear regression models (OLS) for each of our three dependent variables. Model 1 includes solely a variable indicating whether the respondents were on the winning or on the losing side in the referendum, in practice constituting a winner/loser-variable (Referendum winner). In Model 2 we further added the two main moderating variables: political trust and external efficacy. Model 3 further includes two variables controlling for interaction effects between winning/losing and political trust/external efficacy and our final Model 4 includes the sociodemographic control variables. Before proceeding with the regressions, we begin by controlling for the risk of multicollinearity between variables. The risk for multicollinearity is obvious, as political trust and external efficacy has been repeatedly shown to be associated. However, the tests conducted to see if these variables met the assumption of collinearity indicated that multicollinearity should not be an issue with these variables (Referendum winner, Tolerance = 0.790, variance inflation factor (VIF) = 1.266; Political trust, Tolerance = 0.810, VIF = 1.234; External efficacy, Tolerance = 0.801, VIF = 1.249).

Starting with the results for the effects on opinions on referendums, the findings show that being a winner clearly predicts higher levels of referendum support (see Table 1). Adding support to our H1a. Moreover, higher political trust (albeit not significant in Model 2) and lower external efficacy both predict higher levels of referendum support. The interaction-term for political trust * referendum winner is statistically significant, showing that the effects on opinions on referendums of winning or losing were weaker among citizens with higher levels of political trust. Moreover, the interaction-term for external efficacy * referendum winner was also significant. The visualizations of these interactions (see Appendix Figures A1 and A2) show that the interactions are contrary to our H2 in as much as losers with higher level of trust or external efficacy are moderately but significantly less supportive of referendums in general. We shall return to discussing these findings later.

Table 1. Opinions on referendums in general.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Referendum winner	0.282*** (0.01 0)	0.275*** (0.01 0)	0.297*** (0.028)	0.378*** (0.028)
Political trust		0.039 (0.026)	0.091** (0.038)	0.117*** (0.038)
External efficacy		-0.063** (0.020)	-0.120*** (0.029)	-0.108*** (0.029)
Interaction: Political trust* referendum winner			-0.131* (0.052)	-0.152* (0.052)
Interaction: External efficacy* referendum winner			0.116* (0.040)	0.101* (0.040)
Gender				0.045* (0.010)
Education				-0.044* (0.018)
Age				-0.120*** (0.019)
Language				-0.145*** (0.012)
Constant	0.641	0.650	0.644	0.753
N	2461	2275	2275	2268
Adj R ²	0.079	0.079	0.081	0.111

Note: Linear regression (OLS): standardized beta-coefficients. Standard errors are shown in parentheses: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$. Dependent variable is on a scale with five-steps between 0 and 1 (0 = very negative, 0.25 = slightly negative, 0.5 = neutral, 0.75 = slightly positive, 1 = very positive). Predictors: Referendum winner: Binary (0 = loser; 1 = winner). Political trust: index between 0 and 1 (0 = low trust; 1 = high trust). External efficacy: scale with four steps between 0 and 1 (0 = low efficacy; 1 = high efficacy). Age: scale with five steps between 0 and 1 (0 = 16–24; 1 = 65+). Education: scale with three steps between 0 and 1 (0 = primary education; 1 = tertiary education). Gender: Binary (0 = male; 1 = female). Language: Binary (0 = Finnish; 1 = Swedish).

Continuing with the results regarding the effects on opinions on margin of victory thresholds, the findings show that being a winner clearly predicts a higher willingness to accept a narrower margin of victory (see Table 2). Adding support to our H1b. Moreover, higher political trust (albeit not significant in Model 2 and Model 3) and lower external efficacy (albeit not significant in Model 4) both predict higher acceptance for a narrower margin of victory. The interaction term for political trust * referendum winner is significant in Model 4, implying that the effects on opinions on margin of victory thresholds of winning or losing were weaker among citizens with higher levels of political trust. This is contrary to our H3a (the statistically significant interaction term in Model 4 is visualized in Appendix Figure A3).

Finally, we turn to exploring the effects on opinions on turnout thresholds. The findings show that being a winner clearly predicts a higher willingness to accept a lower turnout (see Table 3). Adding support to our H1c. Moreover, political trust had no significant effect and external efficacy was only significant in Model 2. None of the interaction terms had any significant effects on opinions on turnout thresholds.

Table 2. Opinions on margin of victory thresholds.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Referendum winner	0.302*** (0.012)	0.305*** (0.013)	0.366*** (0.034)	0.436*** (0.036)
Political trust		0.014 (0.032)	0.056 (0.048)	0.075* (0.048)
External efficacy		-0.062** (0.025)	-0.081* (0.037)	-0.061 (0.037)
Interaction: Political trust* referendum winner			-0.104 (0.064)	-0.122* (0.064)
Interaction: External efficacy* referendum winner			0.037 (0.050)	0.025 (0.050)
Gender				0.007 (0.013)
Education				-0.033 (0.022)
Age				-0.007 (0.024)
Language				-0.112*** (0.015)
Constant	0.497	0.519	0.498	0.536
N	2332	2157	2157	2149
Adj R ²	0.91	0.097	0.097	0.108

Note: Linear regression (OLS); standardized beta-coefficients. Standard errors are shown in parentheses: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$. Dependent variable is on a scale with five-steps between 0 and 1 (0 = result is never morally binding, 0.25 = over 70%, 0.5 = over 60%, 0.75 = over 50%, 1 = result is always morally binding). Predictors: Referendum winner: Binary (0 = loser; 1 = winner). Political trust: index between 0 and 1 (0 = low trust; 1 = high trust). External efficacy: scale with four steps between 0 and 1 (0 = low efficacy; 1 = high efficacy). Age: scale with five steps between 0 and 1 (0 = 16–24; 1 = 65+). Education: scale with three steps between 0 and 1 (0 = primary education; 1 = tertiary education). Gender: Binary (0 = male; 1 = female). Language: Binary (0 = Finnish; 1 = Swedish).

In summary, the analyses presented in Tables 1–3 provide strong support for H1a (being a winner predicts higher levels of referendum support), H1b (being a winner predicts accepting a narrower margin of victory) and H1c (being a winner predicts accepting a lower turnout). H2 was partly supported, as the results showed that the effects of losing on opinions on referendums among citizens with higher levels of political trust were weaker. However, external efficacy had a reversed effect compared to what we hypothesized, showing that the effects of losing were stronger among citizens with higher levels of external efficacy. Finally, we found no evidence supporting H3a nor H3b.

Discussion

Our results show that losing in a referendum was associated with lower levels of general referendum support whereas winning in a referendum was associated with higher levels of support. This is also in line with earlier scholarship (Brummel 2020; Werner 2020). Moreover, given that the survey data used was collected 18 months after the referendum it clearly suggests that the winner-

Table 3. Opinions on turnout thresholds.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Referendum winner	0.297*** (0.012)	0.298*** (0.013)	0.361*** (0.034)	0.393*** (0.035)
Political trust		-0.006 (0.032)	0.036 (0.047)	0.045 (0.047)
External efficacy		-0.046* (0.024)	-0.063 (0.036)	-0.039 (0.036)
Interaction: Political trust* referendum winner			-0.104 (0.064)	-0.112 (0.063)
Interaction: External efficacy* referendum winner			0.034 (0.049)	0.023 (0.049)
Gender				0.041* (0.013)
Education				-0.076*** (0.022)
Age				0.014 (0.024)
Language				-0.067** (0.015)
Constant	0.429	0.457	0.436	0.472
N	2368	2193	2193	2186
Adj R ²	0.088	0.092	0.093	0.103

Note: Linear regression (OLS): standardized beta-coefficients. Standard errors are shown in parentheses: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$. Dependent variable is on a scale with five-steps between 0 and 1 (0 = result is never morally binding, 0.25 = 75–100%, 0.5 = 50–74%, 0.75 = 25–49%, 1 = result is always morally binding). Predictors: Referendum winner: Binary (0 = loser; 1 = winner). Political trust: index between 0 and 1 (0 = low trust; 1 = high trust). External efficacy: scale with four steps between 0 and 1 (0 = low efficacy; 1 = high efficacy). Age: scale with five steps between 0 and 1 (0 = 16–24; 1 = 65+). Education: scale with three steps between 0 and 1 (0 = primary education; 1 = tertiary education). Gender: Binary (0 = male; 1 = female). Language: Binary (0 = Finnish; 1 = Swedish).

loser gap in referendum support seems quite persistent over time. This is also in line with earlier findings (see Dahlberg and Linde 2017; Hansen, Klemmensen, and Serritzlew 2019). Furthermore, opinions about when the margin of victory and turnout should be considered as morally binding for the politicians also differs between winners and losers, which is also in line with earlier findings (Arnesen et al. 2019). Hence, even though losing hurts, our results suggest that the losers still expect the politicians to act according to the referendum outcome when specific referendum thresholds are being met. This is clearly shown by our descriptive findings, showing that among the losers only 15.8% (margin of victory) and 15.4% (turnout) answered that the elected representatives should never perceive the referendum outcome as morally binding. Hence, an overwhelming majority of the losers take these elements of the referendum into account when forming referendum attitudes. Accordingly, in our dataset there is around 15% of the losers which we label as constituting “sore losers” (Nadeau, Belanger, and Atikcan 2021). Moreover, interpreted into the specific context of our case, over 40.2% of the citizens on the losing side do not consider the actual referendum outcome as morally binding for the politicians (among

the losers, 24.4% considered 70% as the lower threshold while 15.8% stated that they never think the elected politicians should perceive a referendum outcome as morally binding).

A noteworthy finding was that the moderating effects of political trust and external efficacy differed even though they have earlier been regarded as being closely related (see Geurkink et al. 2020; Wolak 2018). Our analyses further yielded rather surprising results that ran contrary to our hypotheses. In short, we found that the higher the level of political trust and external efficacy, the less likely a citizen on the losing side was to express referendum support and to accept even narrow margins of victory as morally binding for the politicians. Upon closer contemplation, these findings might still be logical as citizens who express high levels of political trust and who have a strong belief in the responsiveness of the system may regard a referendum as a challenge to the system (see Bengtsson and Mattila 2009; Schuck and de Vreese 2015). Conversely, citizens who do not trust politics nor see the system as responsive might have been the ones wanting a referendum in the first place, as they saw what was about to happen if the issue was left to the politicians because the early public debate had indicated that there was a political majority in favor of merger (see Setälä et al. 2021). In other words, in this specific context, the low-politically trusting and low-external efficacy citizens used the referendum as their way to get their will across. Moreover, that higher political trust was associated with stronger support for referendums was a bit surprising given that the bulk of previous literature has argued that support for referendums is associated with lower levels of political trust (Bessen 2020; Bowler and Donovan 2019; Werner 2020). This could also be a consequence of the specific context where our survey data was gathered, as those winning in the referendum received evidence that the majority will can shape political decisions as the subsequent political decision went in the same direction as the referendum outcome, subsequently contributing to higher levels of political trust. Earlier findings have shown political trust to increase among the winners in a referendum (Karv, Backström, and Strandberg 2023; Marien and Kern 2018), which could therefore potentially explain this association.

Given the specific context in which our survey was conducted, and the lack of similar studies from other national contexts, the generalisability of our findings is at this stage somewhat limited outside of a Nordic context. Finland is a high-trusting country with strong local governments, lacking institutional thresholds for local referendums that are by law restricted to be of merely consultative character, which is also the case with the other Nordic countries (Schiller 2011). The only previous study that, to our knowledge, has explored the association between the winner-loser gap and threshold opinions in a referendum was also conducted in a Nordic country (see Arnesen et al. 2019), and it is therefore challenging to assess

whether our findings are specific for a Nordic context or transferable to other national contexts. However, as studies have shown (e.g. Bergholz and Bischoff 2019; Lapointe, Saarimaa, and Tukiainen 2018; Soguel and Beutler 2008), the issue of the referendum – a municipal merger – tends to stir up similar emotions in different contexts. Thus, we believe that some transferability concerning referendums on similar issues is at hand from the present study. Moreover, Finnish municipalities, similar to municipalities in the other Nordic countries, also has a long tradition of using consultative referendums when local territorial changes are on the agenda (Schiller 2011, 14), and at least in Norway and Finland it has become the norm that municipal councils decide in accordance with the referendum outcome, with the referendums usually also attracting a high turnout (Backström, Karv, and Strandberg 2022; Folkestad et al. 2021). This tradition might potentially influence perceptions about referendum thresholds.

Limitations

This study faces several noteworthy limitations. First, as our findings are based solely on a post referendum survey, we cannot be certain regarding to what extent the experience of winning or losing affected our findings as we do not know for certain whether the opinions changed from before to after the referendum albeit that all our analyses and robustness checks indicate that winning or losing makes a big difference. Similarly, our two moderators were measured only once, and we are therefore unable to know whether these had changed compared to before the referendum. Hence, we cannot make statistically robust causal inferences from our data, as we would need access to pre- and post-referendum panel data for the same individuals in order to do just that. Second, as the survey data was collected 18 months after the referendum some might have forgotten how they voted in the referendum. Nevertheless, as the referendum issue was extremely contentious (Setälä et al. 2023; Strandberg and Lindell 2020), we consider the risk in our case to be negligible. Third, as the language aspect of the referendum issue was very prominent, with Finnish-speaking and Swedish-speaking on different sides (Karv, Backström, and Strandberg 2023), the results might be context dependent to a problematic degree. Still, as referendum support turned out to be high within both language groups, this do not appear to be a problem.

Conclusions

This study has explored the association between the winner-loser gap and attitudes toward referendums and threshold opinions in a local setting, thus contributing to the growing scholarship focusing on various effects

derived from the winner-loser gap (see here Folkestad et al. 2021; Karv, Backström, and Strandberg 2023). Losing remains part of the democratic game irrespective of institutional level, but elements of the game clearly affect perceptions about the outcome. Arnesen et al. (2019, 191) suggested that when the margin of victory is narrow and turnout is low the political mandate for action becomes weak. In light of our study of citizens' referendum attitudes, we suggest that when the margin of victory is narrow or turnout is low it also becomes harder for the losing side to accept defeat, potentially increasing the risk for long-term polarization within the local community. Using referendums therefore inevitably creates another arena, besides the electoral, where the population becomes divided into winners and losers. In this ongoing populist political era, characterized by increasing levels of polarization (Norris and Inglehart 2019), the more widespread use of local referendums over high-stakes issues such as municipal mergers could thus potentially contribute to more polarization. We argue that the long-term risks associated with the more widespread use of local referendums deserves more scholarly attention (but see Schiller 2017).

Importantly, even when quorum rules are included in the referendum it still remains open for interpretation how the outcome of a consultative referendum should be assessed by the public, although possibly a little less polarizing as there is at least some agreed upon benchmarks for when the outcome should be considered as being democratically legitimate by the politicians. Taking away some of the elements of conflict. As also argued by Accetti and Oskian (2022, 123), "[t]he democratically legitimate political outcome of a consultative referendum cannot be determined objectively on the basis of its results alone but is rather a matter of interpretation." As our findings has shown, how a referendum outcome is subsequently interpreted clearly differs between the winners and the losers, and when the outcome is tight it has the potential to create a polarizing societal gap (Nadeau, Belanger, and Atikcan 2021).

Whether this is a risk worth taking remains open for debate. The consultative character of referendums sometimes directly shows the discrepancy between majority will and political outcomes first-hand in a situation where politicians decide against the outcome of the referendum, adding support to a populist-narrative of the political elites as non-responsive to majority opinion (Werner and Jacobs 2022). The solution for this potential problem is to make referendum outcomes legally binding, which has been proposed by scholars (see Cheneval and el-Wakil 2018). However, this would probably lessen the attractiveness of using referendums among politicians and contribute to politicians instead using other ways for consulting public opinion.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank the participants at the Annual Conference of the Swedish Political Science Association (SWEPSA) 2022 and the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments on an earlier draft of our article. The authors also thank doctoral student Kim Backström for helping with *post hoc* analyses and post-stratified matching.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by Högskolestiftelsen in Ostrobothnia, Finland.

ORCID

Thomas Karv  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5222-9558>

Kim Strandberg  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6357-5643>

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