

The key to winning referendums

Explaining Charles de Gaulle's referendum successes and failures



Fig. 1: Charles de Gaulle, initiator and first president of the Fifth French Republic. Source: German Federal Archives, <https://bit.ly/3NJq5Qk>.

Jelle Lammerts van Bueren

In this article, Jelle Lammerts van Bueren investigates why an incumbent might succeed or fail in a referendum. To do this, he applies a comparative analysis of two different referendums in the French Fifth Republic under president Charles de Gaulle. Four variables will be researched to show why the different outcomes could have happened. Lammerts van Bueren concludes that the position and popularity of De Gaulle, the position of the electorate and the possible support of De Gaulle's own party were the most influential factors.

In the last few years, a resurgent call for referendums has entered the political sphere of Western Europe. Populist parties like Forum voor Democratie (Netherlands), Alternative für Deutschland (Germany) and the Rassemblement National (France) have voiced their support for this direct form of political participation.¹ The political idea of direct participation of the electorate via a national referendum is, however, by no means a new one. One example of a country where national referendums have a long history is France. Several French leaders even made the referendum one of their political trademarks, most notably the first president of the Fifth Republic, Charles de Gaulle (1890-1970).²

De Gaulle and his supporters truly believed that direct political participation could help a nation advance to the stage of true democracy. According to these Gaullists, the ideal way to implement direct political participation was by holding a referendum.³ When designing the constitution of the Fifth

Republic in 1958, De Gaulle and his supporters took great care to implement the referendum as an important aspect of the new republic. This aspect was also brought into practice. During De Gaulle's reign (1958-1969), five national referendums were organized on a variety of political issues.⁴

A resurgent call for referendums has entered the political sphere of Western Europe

In this article, I will investigate the question of why in some referendums, the incumbent power succeeds, and in others, the incumbent has to forfeit. To come to an answer to this broader research question, I will apply a comparative analysis of the outcomes of two specific constitutional referendums that were held in the formative years of the Fifth French Republic. In the following section, I will further address the methodological choices of the paper and elaborate on the selection of my case studies. Then, the historical contextualization of both referendums will be presented and subsequently compared to answer the research question.

Finding Comparable Cases and Variables

To answer the question of why in some referendums, the incumbent power succeeds Pepijn Corduwener, *The Problem of Democracy in Postwar Europe*. Po-

1 Liubomir Topaloff, "The Rise of Referendums: Elite Strategy or Populist Weapon?," *Journal of Democracy*, 28 (2017) 3, 127-140, here: 128.

2 Laurence Morel, "France: Towards a less Controversial Use of the Referendum," in *The Referendum Experience in Europe*, ed. Michael Gallagher and Pier Vincenzo Uleri (London: Macmillan, 1996), 67-72; René Capitant, "La force du Gaullisme," in *Écrits politiques 1960-1970*, ed. René Capitant (Paris: Flammarion, 1971), 9-10, here: 10.

3 Pepijn Corduwener, *The Problem of Democracy in Postwar Europe. Political Actors and the Formation of the Postwar Model of Democracy in France, West Germany, and Italy* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 80.

4 Morel, "France," 70-71.

litical Actors and the Formation of the Postwar Model of Democracy in France, West Germany, and Italy (New York: Routledge, 2017), 80. in implementing its plans, and in others, it has to forfeit, I will present a comparison between a selected number of case studies.⁵ Although De Gaulle and his supporters organized five national referendums, investigating every single one of them would be impossible given the scope of this article. I will, therefore, focus my attention on two referendums that dealt with smaller constitutional adjustments, one in which president De Gaulle managed to win the referendum and one in which he failed to

obtain this goal.⁶ This leaves the investigation with the constitutional referendum of 1962, in which the incumbent government succeeded in implementing its plans, and the constitutional referendum of 1969, in which the incumbents did not get their preferred result.⁷

The other three successful national referendums, although interesting and most certainly worth investigating, are left out of this analysis. These referendums all dealt with larger issues that were not confined to constitutional adjustments, namely the adoption of the entire constitution in 1958, and the independence of the French Algerian departments in 1961 and 1962.⁸ They are,

5 Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 75.

6 Morel, "France," 72-73.

7 *Ibid.*, 73.

8 *Ibid.*, 72-73.



Fig. 2: The Algerian War of Independence resulted in much political turmoil. Its resolve via a referendum in 1962 gave De Gaulle great popularity. Source: Michel Marcheux, <https://bit.ly/380OuoR>.

therefore, not likely to be successfully compared with the failed constitutional referendum of 1969.

With the selected case studies in place, I will now present four variables that I will investigate in both cases to find out how they contributed to the success or the failure of the referendums.⁹ First of all, there is the persona and reputation of the instigator of the referendum. How are they perceived by the electorate? If the incumbent actor is perceived positively, there might be a bigger chance that the referendum succeeds.¹⁰ Secondly, the position of the electorate itself needs to be considered. Does the electorate have the possibility to go against the wishes of the government or is the referendum merely a means to legitimize the actions of the executive branch of government?¹¹ Thirdly, the positioning of oppositional parties needs to be investigated. How do these parties look at the referendum and do they give their supporters any advice on how to vote on it?¹² Lastly, the positioning of the parties

9 These factors are based on the historiography within the study of referendums.

10 The importance of this factor, particularly in France and Chile, has been investigated by Walker in his work *The Strategic Use of Referendums: Power, Legitimacy, and Democracy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 92-93.

11 As Qvortup has suggested, there are many types of referendums. In some of them citizens have real influence, in others they are merely a means of legitimizing already made decisions. See Matt Qvortup, "Power to the People! But how? The Different Uses of Referendums around the World," *Political Studies Review* 13 (2015) 1, 37-45, here: 38.

12 The importance of this factor has been mentioned by American political scientists C.H. De Vreese and Holli A. Semetko in their work

supporting the government may be of influence. Do these parties follow suit and accept the referendum for what it is, or do they resist the government, and are they temporarily campaigning for the other side?¹³ In the following sections, I will present a historical overview of the two referendums as well as a comparison between them, focused around the four factors mentioned above.

The Electoral Success of the 1962 Referendum

Even before the Algerian Crisis had been solved through an independence referendum, De Gaulle was already a very popular politician within the Fifth French Republic.¹⁴ He had built up the reputation of liberator of France during the Second World War and averted the threat of civil war after an uprising within the military in Algeria. The economy was growing and after the successful referendum on Algerian independence, the colonial conflict in Algeria had come to an end.¹⁵ Nevertheless, a very small element of the French military, gathered in the Organisation Armée Secrète (OAS), was so displeased with De Gaulle's decision to leave the Algerian colony, that they resorted to violent resistance against the incumbent regime.¹⁶ On August 22,

Political Campaigning in Referendums: Framing the Referendum Issue (London: Routledge, 2004), 3-4.

13 Ibidem, 3-4.

14 Morel, "France," 73.

15 Philip Thody, *The Fifth French Republic: Presidents, Politics and Personalities: A Study of French Political Culture* (Milton Park: Taylor and Francis Group, 1998), 23-25.

16 Ibidem, 23.

1962, OAS members even attempted to assassinate president De Gaulle. The attempt failed.¹⁷

There was a clear parliamentary protest against the constitutionality of the referendum itself

It was within a month after the assassination attempt that the immensely popular De Gaulle called for a constitutional referendum that was to change the procedure with which the president would be elected.¹⁸ Until then, an electoral college, based on French parliamentary representation, had decided on the choice of president. De Gaulle wanted to make this choice a matter of the people and proposed a referendum on the direct election of the president.¹⁹ The president added that he would resign from his post if his ideas were not implemented.²⁰

Despite De Gaulle's massive popularity, there was a clear parliamentary protest against the constitutionality of the referendum itself. De Gaulle had asked his prime minister, Georges Pompidou, to base the referendum on Article 11 of the constitution. However, the opposi-

on argued that this article could not be used to make alterations to the constitution itself.²¹ Every single opposition party in the French parliament, therefore, refused to support the government, and Pompidou was even forced to resign. As a reaction, De Gaulle suspended parliament and, after his victory in the legislative elections later that year, reinstalled Pompidou as prime minister, showing De Gaulle's tendency to circumvent parliamentary obstructionism.²² A notable exception to the parliamentary obstruction to the referendum was the UNR-UDV. This Gaullist party, made up of De Gaulle's supporters from all sides of the political spectrum, supported the president relentlessly. Eventually, the referendum was won by the incumbent De Gaulle and the direct election of the president was adopted in the French constitution.²³ In 1965, De Gaulle was re-elected as president of the republic, this time by direct, universal suffrage.²⁴

Failure of an Old General: the 1969 Referendum

In 1969, De Gaulle proposed a second constitutional referendum to the French electorate. This time the referendum concerned two constitutional elements, namely the position of the president of the Senate and a large regionalization of government. The first element proposed that the president would, from that moment onwards, be replaced by the

17 Ibidem, 26.

18 Ibidem, 26-27.

19 Ibidem, 26.

20 Steven Davis, "Charles de Gaulle: The Leader as an Embodiment of the Nation," in *Leadership in Conflict*, ed. Steven Davis (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996), 48-52; Morel, "France," 77.

21 Morel, "France," 71-72.

22 Ibidem, 74.

23 Ibidem, 74.

24 Michael Steed and Nermin Abadan, "Four Elections of 1965," *Government and Opposition* 1 (1965) 3, 297-344, here: 325.

prime minister instead of the president of the Senate in case of death, sickness, or abdication. Effectively this meant that a supporter of the president would take over the presidential duties, instead of a potential critic from parliament. The decentralization of government was another restriction on the power of parliament, since it took away a part of the decision-making process and placed it into the hands of local government.²⁵

De Gaulle's position in 1969 was compromised. The president had made some unfortunate public mistakes and the public had not taken these mistakes lightly. Most of these mistakes can be traced back to the famous May Crisis of 1968. That month, a wave of popular protests had roamed the French cities and thousands of people had peacefully taken to the streets.²⁶ De Gaulle, fearing that he would be forced out of power by the popular protest, traveled to Germany in secret to meet with French Army General Jacques Massu and his troops. Although Massu stated that it was merely an encounter between two army friends, to the public, this journey had seemed like an effort to acquire military support from the French Army to counter the protests.²⁷ The May Crisis was eventually resolved by Georges Pompidou and Charles Pasqua, who organized a gigantic counter demonstration in support of De Gaulle.²⁸ Yet it was clear that protesting against the old war hero was

25 Morel, "France," 74; Thody, *The Fifth French Republic*, 34.

26 Corduwener, *The Problem of Democracy in Postwar Europe*, 107-108.

27 Thody, *The Fifth French Republic*, 34.

28 Ibidem, 33; 55.

no longer an issue for the French population. De Gaulle's call for the second referendum was perceived by many as a desperate call for approval after the unfortunate events of May 1968.²⁹

In the meantime, the star of Pompidou, who had suffered a motion of no-confidence as prime minister in 1962, had almost instantly returned and had solved the crisis of 1968, was rising prior to the second referendum. Interestingly, De Gaulle's protégé thereby created an issue for him in the sense that the threat to resign from his post seemed a lot less dreadful, now that there was a new father figure for the French people, ready in the wings. Why should the French feel obliged to vote for the old, desperate General, when a new, fresh, less-authoritarian politician was ready to take care of them?³⁰ Douglas Johnson, a contemporary political scientist, even stated that a 'Yes' vote was generally perceived as a vote in favor of De Gaulle, and a 'No' vote as a vote against De Gaulle and in favor of Pompidou.³¹

De Gaulle's call for the second referendum was perceived by many as a desperate call for approval

Besides those Gaullists who preferred

29 Ibidem, 34-35.

30 David R. Cameron and Richard I. Hofferbert, "Continuity and Change in Gaullism: The General's Legacy," *American Journal of Political Science*, 17 (1973) 1, 77-98.

31 Douglas Johnson, "The Gaullist Phenomenon," *International Affairs* 48 (1972) 1, 110.

Pompidou over De Gaulle, the different opposition parties were also very much against the president. They disliked his effort to take away even more power from the parliamentary institutions and campaigned actively for the ‘No’ vote.³² The Gaullist UDR, the successor to the UNR-UDV, was only reluctantly campaigning in favor of De Gaulle.³³ As was stated before, the Gaullist movement was divided between the old-wingers of De Gaulle and the new-wingers of Pompidou. Although 48% of the electorate eventually voted with him on his proposal, it was not enough for the old General to carry the vote. De Gaulle had to keep his promise and was forced to leave the office of President of the French Republic.³⁴

Comparing Referendums

So what to make of these two case studies? In what respects do their trajectories differ concerning the four variables mentioned above? The first variable, the persona of De Gaulle, shows two different images in the referendums of 1962 and 1969. In 1962, De Gaulle was still very loved and he was perceived as the man who had saved France from even longer involvement in Algeria. The attacks of the OAS on his life could only count on very little support, while the main part of the population condemned the attacks.³⁵ However, in the next seven years, De Gaulle’s reputation took a hit because of his inadequate behavior du-

ring the Crisis of 1968 and his desperate call for the referendum of 1969. The second variable equally shows an interesting difference. In 1962, De Gaulle had convincingly threatened the people with his resignation in case he would be outvoted. This threat was an influential factor in determining the referendum outcome. In 1969, the situation was completely different. With Georges Pompidou standing ready in the wings, the old ‘vote with me, or I will leave you’ argument was a lot less effective.

When it comes to the third variable, in both referendums, all opposition parties voted against the Gaullist position, both times advocating for the ‘No’. In 1962, the opposition deemed the referendum unconstitutional, and in 1969, they once again asked their voters to oppose the Gaullist stance. They were strengthened by the May Crisis of the year before and were very happy to see De Gaulle step down after eleven years in power.³⁶ The fourth variable, the position of the Gaullist parties, was more ambiguous. In 1962, the UNR-UDV enthusiastically supported De Gaulle’s ‘Yes’, while in 1969, the UDR’s support was far less obvious. A reason for this diminished support might be linked to the presence of Pompidou within the Gaullist movement as an alternative to De Gaulle.

Conclusion

So what can be concluded from the comparison between these two similar referendums? Which factors influenced the different outcomes and which factors were less relevant in explaining why

32 Morel, “France,” 73-74.

33 Ibidem, 74.

34 Ibidem; Corduener, *The Problem of Democracy in Postwar Europe*, 108.

35 Thody, *The Fifth French Republic*, 23.

36 Morel, “France,” 73-74.

the incumbent won one referendum, yet failed in the other? In this paper, I have examined four different variables, some of which proved to influence the outcome, others proving less influential. It became apparent that the absence of support from oppositional parties is not a very interesting variable. Of course, this conclusion might be different in cases where the oppositional parties suddenly support the incumbent government, but for this consideration, other examples will have to be found. In the cases of 1962 and 1969, the absence of support from oppositional parties was not an influential factor, since in both cases the opposition objected to the incumbent stance.

More important in explaining the different outcomes of the referendums are the other three variables. First of all, the position and popularity of De Gaulle changed drastically between 1962 and 1969. The old president lost much of his support, and the rise of Georges Pompidou as a contender to the Gaullist throne further weakened De Gaulle's position. Secondly, the position of the French electorate was much freer in 1969 than it had been in 1962. Du-

ring the first referendum, De Gaulle had been able to threaten the people with his resignation, while in 1969, this threat had been very unimpressive. Once again the rise of a political heir proved to be a decisive factor in weakening the position of the incumbent leader. Thirdly, De Gaulle's position was undermined by the diminished support from his own political party, the UDR.

Altogether, I believe that the comparison between the two cases gives us an insight into the origins of the different outcomes of the two particular referendums that were investigated in this article. However, in a future, larger paper, I would like to investigate other elements as well, to gain further insight into the key to winning referendums. More external factors like international pressure, Cold War dynamics, and the position of the extra-parliamentary opposition have probably influenced the outcomes of these referendums in an equally important manner. When more variables are added, the puzzle becomes more complex. However, in a time where referendums are gaining a more prominent place in the political discourse, solving this puzzle becomes ever more vital.



Fig. 3: Graffiti sprayings with anti-De Gaulle slogans on the walls of the University of Lyon in the wake of the May Crisis of 1968. Source: George Louis, <https://bit.ly/3lZZimF>.

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