Turkey in the EU?: How cultural and economic frames affect support for Turkish accession

Claes H. de Vreesea,*, Wouter van der Brugb and Sara Hoboltc

aThe Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR), University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands.
bDepartment of Political Science, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands.
cDepartment of Politics and International Relations, Oxford University, Oxford, England, UK.

*Corresponding author.

Abstract  Turkey’s bid to join the European Union (EU) is more contentious than any previous enlargement of the EU. With the prospect of a predominantly Muslim country joining the Union, religious differences are often argued to be at the heart of public opposition to Turkish membership, whereas economic reasoning seems to dominate arguments in favour. Yet, public opinion on this issue is also highly volatile. This raises the question of the extent to which elite framing of the debate on Turkish accession can shape public opinion. Using a survey-embedded experimental study, we examine the differences in support between people exposed to – positive and negative – cultural and economic arguments. Our results show that the economic frames are persuasive across the board, whereas cultural (religious) frames are strongly conditioned by individual predispositions on religious diversity.


Keywords: Turkey; EU enlargement; Muslim; religious diversity; survey experiment; framing

Introduction

The accession negotiations with Turkey, which commenced in 2005, have been more contentious and hotly debated than any of the European Union’s (EU) previous 21 enlargements. Several leaders of existing member states have publicly stated their doubts about full Turkish membership and expressed their preference instead for a ‘privileged partnership’ (Euroactiv, 2009). This is
perhaps unsurprising given public reluctance to embrace Turkey as an EU member state. Public opinion surveys have shown that opposition to Turkish membership is widespread (see AUTHORS, this issue). Given that both French and Austrian leaders have, at some point in time, pledged a referendum on Turkish accession, the level of public opposition could be decisive. Public support is thus of key importance for the legitimacy of any decision on the Turkey issue, either indirectly by holding national governments accountable or directly through possible referendums on the issue announced by national governments.

Commentators and scholars alike have argued that cultural differences are at the heart of opposition to Turkish accession, or more specifically opposition to welcoming a country where population is largely Muslim into the predominantly Christian European Union (Sjursen, 2002; McLaren, 2007; Kentmen, 2008; Pop, 2010; Tocci, 2011). Yet, whereas cultural concerns may explain opposition to Turkish membership, rational economic self-interest has been seen to provide a powerful explanation for why many, particularly political and economic elites, favour Turkish membership (McLaren, 2007). A large literature has shown that attitudes towards the EU are shaped by both cultural and economic considerations (for example, Gabel, 1998; Hooghe and Marks, 2005; McLaren, 2006). In recent years there has been increased attention to the impact of identity and immigration issues (Hooghe and Marks, 2007; McLaren, 2007; de Vreese et al, 2008; Azrout et al, forthcoming). But research has also demonstrated that public opinion on European integration is highly volatile and that attitudes towards EU matters can be shaped by new information and elite cues (de Vreese and Semetko, 2004; de Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2006; Hobolt, 2009). This makes it relevant to study how new information can lead to changes in attitudes towards Turkey’s membership and for whom this might be the case. More specifically, this study examines how framing of cultural (particularly religious) and economic arguments for and against Turkish membership affects public support for such an enlargement of the EU.

This article is concerned with the mechanism through which information can affect public opinion on the issue of Turkey. Building on the theoretical framework of framing research, we adopt a micro-perspective and ask how different frames can affect opinions (for example, Sniderman and Theriault, 2004; Chong and Druckman, 2007). Framing research is particularly useful for understanding how differences in the presentation of an issue can affect subsequent opinions (for example, Slothuus and de Vreese, 2010). This article builds on classical research on public opinion dynamics and recent research emphasizing the importance of moderators of framing effects, as many framing effects are not equal across individuals (Entman et al, 2009). This article singles out prior dispositions – in this case, attitudes towards religious
diversity – as in important moderator of the impact of frames. Religious intolerance has recently been demonstrated to affect EU attitudes (Hobolt et al, 2011) and we examine the impact of attitudes towards religious diversity as a moderator of framing effects. The current study thus adds to extant literature by examining the effect of different religious frames and their valence, as moderated by religious attitudes, on support for Turkish membership in the EU.

Public Support for Turkey

There is an extensive literature on support for or aversion towards European integration and the EU (see Hooghe and Marks (2005) and Boomgaarden et al (2011) for overviews). Determinants of public opinion specifically regarding Turkey’s EU access have, however, remained relatively uncharted territory thus far, with notable exceptions. As discussed in the Introduction to this Special Issue (Minkenberg et al, 2012) and as highlighted by Sjursen (2002), the Turkish case is a special one among the EU enlargement cases. In her important study, McLaren (2007) shows that individual economic self-interest does not predict support for new EU memberships very well. Her analyses show instead that perceived group threats play a role: both threats to economic group resources and threats to cultural resources. The more citizens fear economic malaise as a result of immigration, the more they oppose enlargement of the EU. Opposition to EU expansion also increases as perceived threats to EU citizens’ culture and way of life intensify. Interestingly, although opposition towards Turkey’s membership is higher compared to other applicant countries, McLaren finds very similar effects of these threat perceptions not only for Turkey, but for all applicant countries.

Focusing just on the case of Turkey, de Vreese et al (2008) and Kentmen (2008) similarly find that support for Turkey’s accession to the EU is more a function of ‘soft factors’, such as identity and attitudes towards immigrants, than of ‘hard factors’, such as economics and politics. Anti-immigrant attitudes are strongly related to a lack of support for Turkey’s EU entry. Findings by Azrout et al (2011) corroborate this conclusion. Azrout et al explain the effect of immigrant attitudes on support for Turkey’s membership by making a two-step argument. First, attitudes towards immigrants are a result of the degree to which people are inclined to categorize. Second, citizens who categorize tend to show a negative bias towards out-groups. So, defining Turks as ‘others’ drives these effects.

Looking at both EU support in general and Turkish membership in particular, Hobolt et al (2011) point out that religion has been a largely overlooked factor in the study of EU attitudes. There is some evidence suggesting that devout Catholics are more likely to support the integration
project than Protestants and non-believers. However, when considering the role that religion plays in shaping attitudes towards the EU, Hobolt et al. (2011) point out a potentially more important question, namely how people’s negative attitudes towards other religions influence such opinions. Using data from Ireland and the Netherlands, they show that religious intolerance is indeed a powerful determinant of attitudes towards the EU and that it particularly shapes people’s attitudes towards a future Turkish enlargement.

When examining public support for enlargement and Turkish membership in the EU, it is important to keep in mind that such attitudes are unlikely to be very stable. Past research has shown that public opinion on complex topics – such as Turkish accession – is volatile (Page and Shapiro, 1992; Lecheler and de Vreese, 2010). Specifically, it has been demonstrated that opinions on EU matters are easily influenced by (new) information (de Vreese and Semetko, 2004; de Vreese and Boomgaard, 2006; Maier and Rittberger, 2008; Lecheler and de Vreese, 2010). Accordingly, citizens’ attitudes with respect to Turkish membership are likely to develop in part as a function of the success of the negotiations with the EU, the perception of change in Turkey, developments in current EU member states and the framing of the issue by political elites and news media across Europe. Building on recent research on public opinion on Turkish accession, this study examines how frames – both economic and religious – shape support for enlargement, and how this is moderated by predispositions, particularly attitudes towards religious diversity.

Framing Turkey

Framing theory can help us to understand how citizens make sense of political, social and economic issues (Sniderman and Theriault, 2004; Chong and Druckman, 2007). In broad terms, a frame is ‘an emphasis in salience of certain aspects of a topic’ (de Vreese, 2002, p. 27) and it provides – in a positively, negatively or neutrally valenced manner – an organizing principle to the structure of a topical discussion and therefore potentially to citizens’ understanding of and thinking about political, economic and social topics. Framing takes place in both the political realm and in the media. Political actors frame issues in accordance with their ideological programmes and in response to political opportunities. Though journalists may construct news in a variety of ways, scholars identify a number of features that journalists resort to when covering issues and events. A distinction is made between ‘issue-specific news frames’ and ‘generic news frames’ (de Vreese et al., 2001). Generic frames, such as the game and the strategy frame (Patterson, 1993; Cappella and Jamieson, 1997), thematic and episodic frames (Iyengar, 1991), and the conflict frame (Price and Tewksbury, 1997; Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000) transcend...
thematic boundaries and are typically applied across a range of topics. Issue-specific frames are intrinsically related to certain topics or news events (for example, Terkildsen and Schnell, 1997), and they are the type of frames used in our study.

Knowledge about elite or news media coverage of European integration in general is accumulating (for example, Boomgaarden et al., 2010), but there is relatively scant evidence about the news coverage and framing of previous enlargements of the EU. Schuck and de Vreese (2006) found that the Eastern enlargement in 2004 was primarily framed in terms of opportunities for the new member states, and they demonstrated in an experiment that such framing can also affect support for the membership of new countries.

In a study specifically on Turkish EU membership, de Vreese et al. (2011) showed how news framing exerts a sizable influence on public opinion. Following a media content analysis, that study investigated the effects of news framing on support for membership of Turkey in the EU. A first experimental study showed a significant difference in the level of support for Turkish membership between respondents who were exposed to a positively valenced news frame and respondents who had received a negative frame. The results of a second survey-embedded experimental study corroborated the first study, and tested the hypothesis that frames affect the importance of certain considerations and that the valence of the news frames also directly affects opinion. Negative news frames yielded stronger effects than positive news frames, and high political sophisticates were more affected by positive framing. The study demonstrated that (change in) public approval of Turkish EU membership is contingent on the elites’ messages and the media’s coverage of the issue in interaction with individual characteristics.

In the current article, we extend previous research by estimating not only the effects of economic and cultural frames, but also by distinguishing between frames that are valenced negatively, positively or neutrally. Furthermore, we tie the analyses of frames directly to the public opinion literature on public support for EU enlargements and Turkish membership. As pointed out above, economic and cultural considerations are particularly pertinent and they will be pursued in this study.

**How Religious Predispositions Moderate Framing Effects**

The effects of frames are unequivocal. This observation corroborates classical research on public opinion (Hovland, 1951), and indeed framing research is currently very focused on specifying the mechanisms underlying framing effects and on identifying important moderators that negate or contribute to a framing effect (Lecheler and de Vreese, 2011). Typically, framing research has
been concerned with the moderating impact of political knowledge, sophistication and interest, but recent work, inspired by classical persuasion work, has also pointed to existing opinions and predispositions as important moderators (for example, Slothuus and de Vreese, 2010).

In the case of Turkish membership, we focus on the role of attitudes towards religious diversity as an important moderator of framing effects. More specifically, we examine how attitudes towards religious diversity may moderate the effects of elite framing on arguments for or against enlargement with Turkey. In spite of the salience of religion and religious differences in the debate on Turkish enlargement, this has not been central in the scholarly debate on public support for accession.

In our study, we examine whether attitudes towards religious diversity condition the effect of new arguments, economic and religious, on Turkish enlargement. Opposition to religious diversity is closely connected to the notions of intolerance and prejudice, that is, stereotyped and negative beliefs about an out-group (Jackman, 1977; Sullivan et al, 1993). Prejudices and stereotypes have been studied from the perspective of social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Turner, 1999), group conflict theory (Blumer, 1958; Quillian, 1995; McLaren, 2006), and integrated threat theory (Stephan and Stephan, 1993, 1996). Common to these approaches is the notion that negative out-group evaluations under certain circumstances aid the establishment of a strong in-group identity, and thus a positive sense of ‘social self’. Such prejudiced evaluations of out-groups may be a function of, for example, ‘economic threats’ to in-group interests (competition over material interests between in-groups and out-groups); ‘symbolic threats’ based on perceived group differences in values, norms and beliefs; ‘negative stereotyping’ of an out-group (for example, as being violent, greedy or hostile); and ‘intergroup anxiety’, which refers to personal experiences of feeling threatened by members of the out-group. All of these factors may shape negative evaluations of religious groups.

Why would one expect that negative attitudes towards religious diversity contribute to hostility towards Turkish enlargement? Research has shown that the strength of positive in-group evaluations and negative out-group evaluations can explain a whole range of attitudes and behaviours, including euroscepticism. In his study of attitudes towards the EU, Carey (2002) has shown that people with strong national identity and pride are less supportive of European integration (see also Bruter, 2003). Similarly, Hooghe and Marks (2004, 2005) have demonstrated that individuals who conceive of their national identity as exclusive of other territorial identities are likely to be considerably more eurosceptic than those who have multiple nested identities.

McLaren’s (2002, 2004, 2006) work on support for the EU provides the most direct test of the link between intolerance and EU attitudes. She has shown that euroscepticism is closely related to a general hostility towards other cultures,
such as negative attitudes towards minority groups and immigrants (see also de Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2005). The findings in these studies thus suggest that negative evaluations of out-groups may be a powerful predictor of euroscepticism, but none of these extant studies has focused explicitly on the effect of evaluations of religious groups on attitudes towards European integration in general or enlargement with Turkey in particular. This is surprising as people’s perceptions of other religious groups are likely to be closely tied to their views on the integration project. Given the fact that both the idea and practice of European integration is based on the willingness to ‘put up with’ religious, cultural and ethnic diversity, through a closer economic and political cooperation of nations and peoples in Europe, it seems reasonable to assume that people who are opposed to this type of diversity are also likely to be less favourably disposed towards an enterprise that seeks to promote ‘unity in diversity’. Enlargement with Turkey is perhaps the most clear signal that the Union promotes religious heterogeneity considering bringing a predominantly Muslim country into the fold of Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox countries. Consequently, it seems likely that the proposed Turkish accession would be opposed by people who are negatively disposed towards religious diversity, particularly when the debate is framed in terms of religious differences.

This leads us to our hypotheses. First, building on the framing literature we expect that exposure to issue-specific frames will influence how people think about Turkish accession. Yet, as frames primarily operate by shaping belief importance, that is, altering the perceived importance of some aspect of an issue, we are not expecting a direct effect on accession support of neutral issue-specific frames (Nelson et al, 1997). Rather, we expect that only valenced frames will have a direct impact on support for Turkish accession. Valenced frames indicate inherent good and positive or bad and negative aspects about an issue (Shah et al, 2004; Schuck and de Vreese, 2006). We expect that negative evaluations contained in the frame will lead some people to be less favourably disposed towards enlargement, whereas positive evaluations will lead them to be more in favour of Turkish membership. Neutral frames will have no direct effect on support (although it might alter the belief importance associated with attitudes towards enlargement).

Second, we expect the content of the frame to have asymmetric effects on support. Given the recent literature that shows that identity and group-level interests play a greater role in explaining variation in support for integration than rational economic self-interest (Carey, 2002; Hooghe and Marks, 2004, 2005; McLaren, 2006, 2007), we expect that frames emphasizing the cultural (religious) aspects of the arguments for or against Turkish enlargement will have a greater impact on support than arguments emphasizing the economic aspects.

Finally, we do not expect all individuals to react identically to the same message contained in a frame. The literature on opinion formation has shown
that when people are exposed to new information they not only seek to form opinions that are accurate, but often also strive to defend and maintain their existing values, identities and attitudes (Chaiken et al., 1989; Slothuus and de Vreese, 2010). As such, if information about the accession of Turkey is framed in a certain manner, citizens are likely to pay closer attention to the frame’s content. Specifically, we examine religious diversity as a moderating predisposition. So, we expect the effect of attitudes towards religious diversity to be stronger as a result of being exposed to cultural frames, whether these are positive, negative or neutral, compared to exposure to economic frames.

Hypotheses

**Hypothesis 1 (H1):** Exposure to valenced frames affects support for Turkish accession; with negatively valenced frames reducing support and positively valenced frames increasing support, whereas neutral frames have no direct effect on support.

**Hypothesis 2 (H2):** The impact of cultural (religious) frames is larger than the impact of economic frames on support for Turkish accession.

**Hypothesis 3 (H3):** The impact of attitudes towards religious diversity is moderated by exposure to cultural frames (whether negative, positive or neutral): exposure to cultural frames increases the effect of attitudes towards religious diversity on support for Turkish accession.

**Methods**

In order to test our hypotheses, we designed an experiment that was embedded in the questionnaire of a survey. An experimental study has the advantage that it enables us to manipulate the frames that respondents are exposed to and to rule out possible alternative explanations for differences between experimental groups. By embedding the experiment in a representative survey, we are able to draw inferences to the wider population. The introduction of a question about the accession of Turkey to the EU was manipulated in such a way that we obtained systematic variation across the two independent variables: frames and valence of frames. Each of these two frames has three valence types: positive, negative or neutral, thus yielding six experimental conditions. Participants in the experiment were randomly assigned to one of the six experimental groups or to the control group. The control group did not get an introductory text.
Participants in all conditions read a factual introduction text (‘The European Union has expanded from 6 to currently 27 European countries. Currently membership negotiations are taking place with a number of countries, including Turkey’). Participants in the six experimental groups then read a text in which either economic or cultural consequences from the Turkish accession to the EU are discussed, either in abstract terms or as argued by experts; see Appendix for further details.

Participants in this experiment were sampled from a database of the Netherlands Institute of Public Opinion, one of the largest polling institutes in the Netherlands. The database contains a sampling frame of Dutch citizens aged 18 years and older, which is representative of the population on a number of background statistics such as age, gender, education and voting behaviour. As the experiment aims at detecting causal relationships, representativeness is not of primary importance to our study and the Dutch context of the study is therefore not central. Yet, for the generalizability of the results it is important that the sample contains variation in different types of participants. The participants were approached by e-mail and were invited to fill in the questionnaire online. In this way 743 participants were recruited, each of whom were randomly assigned to one of the seven conditions. The number of respondents per condition ranges between 81 (control group) and 126. The response rate was 73 per cent. A comparison of the composition of the different groups on non-treatment indicators showed that randomization was successful.

The dependent variable is the attitude towards Turkey’s possible accession to the EU. This was measured by one survey question: ‘What is your opinion on the possibility that Turkey would become a member of the EU?’ Participants were asked to respond by means of an 11-point scale, running from 0 (‘very negative’) to 10 (‘very positive’).

The key moderating variable is the attitude towards religious diversity. This variable was operationalized by means of the following question: ‘The next question concerns the number of different religions in the Netherlands. Which position describes your view on this matter? A 1 means that you feel that having many different religions is detrimental to the quality of life in a country, whereas 5 means that you feel that having many different religions enrich the quality of life in a country’. Participants were then offered a 5-point scale of which the extremes were labelled.

The main independent variables are the frames and the valences attached to these frames. In addition, we included a number of control variables (religiosity, age, gender, income and education), only one of which turned out to have a significant effect on support for Turkish membership: age. This variable is included in the models presented. As the participants were randomly assigned to the conditions, the inclusion of control variables should not, and did not, affect the main results.
Results

We tested our hypotheses by means of a number of regression analyses. The dependent variable in these regressions is the attitude towards Turkey’s possible accession to the EU. We first assessed whether the control variables (religiosity, age, gender, income and education) exerted significant effects on the dependent variable. As mentioned above, this turned out only to be the case for age. A model with only the control variable age and the main effect of attitudes towards religious diversity explains 14.8 per cent of the variance (adjusted $R^2$).

We estimated two models, which are presented in Table 1. The first model only includes the main effects of the two independent variables, frames and valence of frames. The effects of these were tested by means of six dummy variables, which contrast the specific experimental conditions against the control group. Model A shows that economic frames have a clear and direct effect on support for Turkey’s accession of moderate magnitude. Participants in the experiment who read that, according to economists, Turkey’s accession would have positive economic consequences were significantly more in favour of Turkey’s accession than the control group. Those who read that, according to economists, Turkey’s accession would have negative economic consequences were significantly less in favour of Turkey’s accession than the control group. So, as far as economic frames are concerned, these results support H1: negative frames decrease public support, whereas positive frames increase support. However, Model A does not provide support for H1 in the case of cultural (religious) frames. This also means that in this study there is no support for H2 (cultural frames have a stronger effect than economic frames). The findings show the reverse.

Model B adds to the model the interactions between experimental conditions and attitudes towards religious diversity. The results for the six main effects of experimental conditions are not affected by adding these interactions to the model. Two of the interactions with attitudes towards religious diversity are significant, the cultural frame with a positive and the one with a negative valence. Interestingly, there is no interaction when culture is framed neutrally. In the negative and positive cultural conditions, participants are told that accession of Turkey will lead to more religious diversity in Europe and that this is, according to experts, positive or negative. As a result, attitudes towards religious diversity play a more important role in their evaluation of Turkey’s accession: both interactions are positive. However, in the culturally neutral framing condition, the effect of religious diversity does not increase in strength. The results thus provide partial support for H3 (the impact of attitudes towards religious diversity is moderated by cultural frames). Only when the frames are positively or negatively valenced (when the surveys mentioned ‘experts’ who express an opinion on the consequences of Turkey’s accession to the EU) are attitudes towards religious diversity more activated.
Table 1: Results of regression analyses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Control variables</th>
<th>Model A</th>
<th>Model B</th>
<th>Model A</th>
<th>Model B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-0.014 (0.005)</td>
<td>-0.096***</td>
<td>-0.014 (0.005)</td>
<td>-0.099***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes towards religious diversity</td>
<td>0.938 (0.082)</td>
<td>0.382***</td>
<td>0.585 (0.217)</td>
<td>0.238***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Experimental conditions
(base category = control group)

| Economic frame positive | 0.828 (0.299) | 0.127*** | 0.817 (0.299) | 0.125*** |
| Economic frame negative | -0.615 (0.306) | -0.090** | -0.641 (0.306) | -0.094** |
| Economic frame neutral | 0.189 (0.335) | 0.024 | 0.171 (0.334) | 0.022 |
| Cultural frame positive | 0.396 (0.306) | 0.058 | 0.414 (0.305) | 0.061 |
| Cultural frame negative | 0.336 (0.314) | 0.047 | 0.306 (0.313) | 0.043 |
| Cultural frame neutral | 0.148 (0.314) | 0.021 | 0.108 (0.314) | 0.015 |

Interactions

| Econ. frame pos. x attitude religious diversity | — | — | 0.067 (0.289) | 0.012 |
| Econ. frame neg. x attitude religious diversity | — | — | 0.295 (0.301) | 0.047 |
| Econ. frame neutral x attitude religious diversity | — | — | 0.540 (0.336) | 0.070 |
| Cult. frame pos. x attitude religious diversity | — | — | 0.924 (0.316) | 0.134*** |
| Cult. frame neg. x attitude religious diversity | — | — | 0.552 (0.302) | 0.087* |
| Cult. frame neutral x attitude religious diversity | — | — | 0.285 (0.310) | 0.043 |

R² adjusted | 0.172 | 0.179 |
N | 743 | 743 |

***P<0.01; **P<0.05; *P<0.10. All significance tests are two-tailed.

Conclusions

The membership of Turkey in the EU is a contentious issue, and the outcome of ongoing negotiations and political debates is uncertain (see also Tocci, 2011). As highlighted in the Introduction to this Special Issue, the issue is multifaceted and public support for Turkish membership is declining (Minkenberg et al, 2012). It is also clear that public support fluctuates and that new information, such as that provided by the most important source of information for most citizens across Europe, the media, can affect the future development of public opinion (de Vreese et al, 2008, 2011; Minkenberg et al, 2012).

This study set out to disentangle the mechanism of changes in public opinion as a function of exposure to different information. The study deliberately takes a micro-perspective in order to, within framing theory, test the effects of small alterations in the way an issue is defined and which topics are highlighted. Building on a burgeoning body of literature with respect to public attitudes towards European integration (for example, Hooghe and Marks, 2004; McLaren, 2007; de Vreese et al, 2008; Boomgaarden et al, 2011;
Hobolt et al., 2011), we focus in particular on the effect of an economic and a cultural frame. For each of these we test for differential effects of a positive, neutral or negative frame. We find evidence that both the economic and cultural frames matter, but, in particular, the economic frame yields a between-condition difference in our experimental set-up. This was contrary to our expectations which stipulated that the cultural frame should be more effective, in line with recent research emphasizing the soft factors in explaining public opinion. What may explain this strong effect of the economic frame?

First, we should acknowledge that utilitarian considerations have not been replaced but in fact complemented by soft considerations evolving around identity, immigration attitudes and religious tolerance (de Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2005). It is therefore not surprising to find robust effects of exposure to an economic frame, but the unexpected lies in the relative superiority of this frame vis-à-vis the cultural frame for causing an effect. Second, it is quite possible that the economic frame has made somewhat of a ‘comeback’ in terms of its relative impact. The context of this study, carried out in 2010, was one of an economic crisis across Europe and an instable single European currency. Such a situational factor should not be neglected. Third and finally, we point to a specific feature of the experimental manipulation applied in this study in understanding the differences between the effects of economic and cultural frames. Unlike economic frames, attitudes towards Turkey’s accession do not become more positive or negative as a result of the opinions of so-called ‘experts’ in the cultural frame. Apparently, people are likely to follow the expertise of economists when economic issues are discussed, but they attach less relevance or credibility to the opinions of ‘experts’ when cultural issues are at stake.

Our study advanced recent developments in framing research by investigating the impact of individual moderators. In this case, we looked specifically at the attitudes towards religious diversity, building on the study by Hobolt et al. (2011) showing how religious intolerance (above and beyond religiosity itself) matters for EU attitudes. In the case of the cultural frame, we find, for both the positive and the negative frame, a significant interaction in the effect of attitudes towards religious diversity on support for Turkish accession. This is particularly important because of the absence of a main effect for the cultural frame. So, the cultural frames do not lead to an across-the-board shift in public opinion, but they do change the effect of attitudes towards religious diversity on support for accession. Those who are negatively predisposed to religious diversity will, as a result of being exposed to a cultural frame, become more negative towards Turkey’s accession. Conversely, those who are positively predisposed to religious diversity will, as a result of being exposed to a cultural frame, become more positive towards Turkey’s accession. This effect is the same in both the positive and the negative cultural frame conditions.
With this interaction, the study contributes to the framing literature suggesting that not all individuals are affected equally by frames. In substantive terms, the study provides evidence to suggest that existing religious attitudes are of great importance for understanding how individuals respond to a cultural frame.

With this study, we bring experimentally based evidence of the importance of framing of the Turkey issue for public opinion. The pros of the study include the experimental set-up, the focus on conditional effects and the corroborating evidence with other studies in terms of the importance of religious attitudes. The cons include the fact that single frames – such as those tested in this study – tend to be part of either repetitive or competitive framing flow (Druckman, 2001, Lecheler and de Vreese, 2011), which we do not assess here. This forces us to exert caution when extrapolating from these findings. Moreover, with the experimental set-up, we are in less of a strong position to show if our results are confined to or affected by the Dutch context of the study. We believe this not to be the case. The context may affect the absolute level of support, but it is much less likely to affect the underlying mechanism that is central to us.

Our study contributes to the understanding of how frames can affect public opinion and that such effects are not equal for all. The importance of the cultural frame is conditioned by existing attitudes towards religious diversity, whereas the importance of the economic frame applies across-the-board. These findings on the micro-level can, in broader terms, be seen as a mixed message with respect to the Turkish bid for EU membership. Citizens with a positive attitude towards religious diversity are more likely to support Turkish membership – all other things being equal. These citizens also respond most positively to a cultural framing of the issue. However, opinions of citizens are likely to fluctuate and economic framing can affect the attitudes of all citizens, in a positive or in a negative direction. This suggests that the framing of and the subsequent perceptions of economic factors should not be underestimated when trying to understand the framing of Turkish membership of the EU.

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About the Authors

Claes H. de Vreese is a Professor of Political Communication at the Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR) at the University
of Amsterdam. His research interests focus on media effects, European integration, election campaigns and journalism. He has published dozens of articles on these topics. His research is supported by national science foundations. More information can be found at http://www.claesdevreese.com.

Wouter van der Brug is a Professor of Political Science at the University of Amsterdam. His research interests focus on comparative research in collective political behaviour, in particular electoral behaviour, right-wing populism, political communication, political trust and support, and political parties. He publishes regularly on these topics in various international academic journals. In 2007, he published a monograph with Cambridge University Press called ‘The Economy and the Vote’ (co-authored by Cees van der Eijk and Mark Franklin).

Sara B. Hobolt is a University Lecturer in Comparative European Politics at the University of Oxford and Fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford. She has published extensively on public opinion, voting behaviour and determinants of support for European integration. Her book ‘Europe in Question: Referendums on European Integration’ (Oxford University Press, 2009) was awarded the Best Book prize by the European Union Studies Association in 2010.

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Appendix

Table A1: Stimulus material per condition

1. [CONTROL]: NO TEXT
2. The European Union has expanded from 6 to currently 27 European countries. Currently, membership negotiations are taking place with a number of countries, including Turkey. The Turkish economy is one of the largest in Europe. The Turkish economy is growing harder than expected and economists expect that Turkish membership to the EU will be a positive contribution to the economy in the EU.
3. The European Union has expanded from 6 to currently 27 European countries. Currently, membership negotiations are taking place with a number of countries, including Turkey. The Turkish economy is one of the largest in Europe. The Turkish economy is growing less hard than expected and economists expect that Turkish membership to the EU will be a negative contribution to the economy in the EU.
4. The European Union has expanded from 6 to currently 27 European countries. Currently, membership negotiations are taking place with a number of countries, including Turkey. The Turkish economy is one of the largest in Europe.
5. The European Union has expanded from 6 to currently 27 European countries. Currently membership negotiations are taking place with a number of countries, including Turkey. Turkey is a country with many religious people. Due to the Muslims in Turkey, the religious diversity in Europe will increase and experts expect this to be a positive development for the EU.
6. The European Union has expanded from 6 to currently 27 European countries. Currently, membership negotiations are taking place with a number of countries, including Turkey. Turkey is a country with many religious people. Due to the Muslims in Turkey, the religious diversity in Europe will increase and experts expect this to be a negative development for the EU.
7. The European Union has expanded from 6 to currently 27 European countries. Currently, membership negotiations are taking place with a number of countries, including Turkey. Turkey is a country with many religious people.